Page 2 of 21

Title: How much do parental ACEs tell us about child behaviour? Findings from the All Our Families longitudinal cohort

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Abstract:

Background: Growing interest in the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has led to research on understanding if ACEs experienced by parents may influence child behaviour. The objective of this study was to examine the association between maternal ACEs and child behaviour (internalizing and externalizing) at age 5 in the context of other factors.

Methods: Data from 1682 mothers and child dyads participating in the All Our Families cohort were used. Data were collected on factors related to the individual child (sex, age, temperament and behaviour), the mother (mental health, personality and parenting) and socio-demographics (family income, ethnicity and family structure) when children were ages 3 and 5. Logistic regression models estimated crude and adjusted associations between maternal ACEs and child externalizing and internalizing behaviours.

Results: In crude models, maternal ACEs (4+) were associated with child externalizing and internalizing behaviours at age 5. However, when adjusted for other proximal factors, these associations decreased and other proximal risk factors had stronger associations with outcomes. Persistent maternal mental health symptoms were associated with both externalizing and internalizing behaviours at age 5 (AOR: 4.14, 95% CI 2.46, 6.96, AOR: 2.49, 95% CI 1.64, 3.77). High levels of ineffective parenting behaviours were associated with both child behaviour outcomes (AOR: 6.33, 95% CI 4.34, 9.24; AOR: 1.42, 95% CI 1.02, 1.97).

Interpretation: Focusing on more proximal factors, such as parental mental health and parenting behaviours may be a more influential and less stigmatizing way of identifying children at risk of behavioural problems at age 5.

Since the publication of the landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study in 1998 by Felitti and colleagues, there has been growing evidence about how experiences of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction in childhood relate to health outcomes over the life course.(1-5) Recently, researchers have begun to investigate whether ACEs may have intergenerational effects. For example, a retrospective study of 500 families in Oregon found that parental ACEs were associated with increased risk for suspected developmental delay in 2 year old children.(5) Additional evidence from larger studies suggests that maternal adversity is associated with children's increased behavioural challenges including hyperactivity and conduct problems. (6, 7) Given the demonstrated influence of parental adversity on child outcomes, the practice of screening for parental ACEs by pediatricians has gained momentum in order to identify children who may be at risk for poor developmental outcomes.(8) However, the intergenerational influence of parental ACEs on child behaviour and development is complex, and research to date has not adequately addressed whether asking about other psychosocial risk factors may be a more effective and potentially less stigmatizing approach to identifying families at risk. (9, 10) For example, parent mental health and parenting behaviours are more proximal to the child than the parent's past childhood experiences, and therefore, they may have a more substantial association on child functioning. Thus, understanding the association between parental ACEs and child behaviour in the context of other individual, family, and community factors, is important in order to provide clarity on where physicians should focus their efforts in the context of pediatric visits.

Ecological systems theory suggests that child development is influenced by factors at various levels, including those unique to the child, to the family, and to the broader socio-environmental context.(11) At the child level, male sex has been consistently associated with externalizing behaviours in children, including hyperactivity and physical aggression.(12-14) Conversely, internalizing behaviours, including anxiety and depression, are more commonly found in females.(15, 16) Child temperament, particularly

negative affect, has been associated with both externalizing and internalizing behaviours in young children.(17-19) At the family level maternal mental health and personality (particularly neuroticism) and parenting have been consistently linked to child behaviour. (13, 14, 20-23) At the broader social level, children from families with higher levels of chaos, or lower levels of income, tend to exhibit more behavioural challenges.(24-27) The objective of this study is to examine the association between maternal ACEs and child behaviour difficulties in the context of individual, family, and community risk factors including child sex and temperament, maternal mental health and affect, parenting style, family income and composition. Specifically, we examined the role of these factors on child internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing difficulties (e.g., aggression and hyperactivity) problems at age 5, which tend to be precursors for psychopathology in later childhood.(27) This study received ethical approval from the University of Calgary.

Methods:

Participants: Data from women and children who participated the All Our Families Cohort were used, details are described elsewhere. (28, 29) Briefly, women were recruited from a community sample during pregnancy between 2008 and 2010 and followed longitudinally. To be eligible, women had to be 18 or older, understand English, and live in Calgary. At each data collection timepoint, eligible women mailed a questionnaire with a prepaid return envelope and were contacted by telephone and email to provide additional opportunities to respond or resolve unclear responses. Data was collected on a wide variety of socio-demographic, maternal mental and physical health and child development. To be eligible for the current analysis, women had to have completed the child behaviour questions at the 5year follow-up (1992/2845=71% response rate) and completed information on maternal ACEs at the 3 year follow-up (1994/2909=69% response rate), resulting in a sample size of 1682.

Page 6 of 21

Outcome variables: Child externalizing and internalizing behaviours at 5 years were measured using the Behavioral Assessment System for Children -2 (BASC-2).(30) Parents are asked 124 questions about their child's behaviour on a 4-point Likert scale. Scores are standardized (mean 50, sd. 10) and compared to a normed reference population. Children who score 60 or above are considered to be at risk for the outcome. The BASC-2 contains a wide number of subscales including two composite scales for measuring internalizing behaviours (anxiety, depression and somatization) and externalizing behaviours (hyperactivity and aggression).

Primary exposure variable: Maternal ACEs were measured by asking 11 questions modified from the original ACE checklist.(31) Mothers were asked about childhood experiences of physical, verbal and sexual abuse as household disfunction. See supplementary file 2 for specific questions. Women who experienced 4 or more ACEs were considered to have a "high ACE score" compared to 3 or fewer, consistent with previous studies.(1)

Other variables: Other factors known to be associated with child behavioural outcomes were included based on the literature, and on ecological systems theory described above. In the current study, factors unique to the child included child age, sex and temperament. Questionnaires were provided to mothers shortly after their child's 5th birthday, and age at survey completion was measured in months. Child temperament was measured at age 3 using the negative affect subscale of the Rothbart Child Temperament Scale Very Short Form. Parents rate their child's reactions to 12 situations about anger, sadness and fear on a 7 point Likert scale, Cronbach's alpha for this sample is 0.69.(32)

At the family level, variables included maternal mental health, maternal neuroticism and parenting behaviour. As mental health conditions are often comorbid, and can be either persistent or periodic, mental health was operationalized as having depressive or anxiety symptoms when the child was 3 years of age, 5 years of age, both or neither.(33) Anxiety was measured using the Spielberger State

Anxiety Inventory (SSAI)(34). The 20 item-version of the scale was used at 3 years, and a score of 40 or higher is considered to be clinically significant. A shortened 6-item version was used at 5 years, which has been shown to have good validity and reliability in our sample.(35) Depressive symptoms were measured using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies – Depression Scale (CES-D), with a score of 16 or above considered clinically significant.(36)

Maternal neuroticism was measured using the 12-item Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised Short Scale (EPQR).(37) Higher scores correspond to higher levels of neuroticism and lower emotional stability with a Cronbach's alpha in this sample of 0.81. Parenting behaviour was measured using the ineffective/hostile parenting subscale of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth when children where 5 years of age (see supplementary file for a list of questions).(38) On a 5 point Likert scale, parents are asked questions about the frequency of a set of parenting behaviours including negative reinforcement, repeated discipline for the same issue, and disciplining a child when angry. The Cronbach's alpha in this sample of 0.78.

Factors at the broader social level included family income, ethnicity, and family composition. Family income was reported in Canadian Dollars in 10,000 increments starting at 30,000 CAD and in 25,000 CAD over 100,000 CAD to 200,000 CAD. Because cultural background may impact parenting styles and reporting around child behaviour, ethnicity was categorized as self-reported white and self-reported minority. Finally, family composition was reported as "two parent family with both biological parents", "two parent family with one biological parent", "single parent", or "other". These were collapsed to "two parent family with both biological parents" and "single or blended family" to capture family structure. Families who chose "other" (n=27) were categorized into the two categories according to the description they provided.

Analysis:

Page 8 of 21

Logistic regression models were run to estimate the association between maternal ACEs and child externalizing and internalizing behaviours. Models estimate crude associations, and associations adjusted for all other variables described. Among those with completed questionnaires (n=1682), there were fewer than 2% missing data on any given variable, so complete case analysis was used. For consistency and ease of interpretation, all scales without clinical cut points were dichotomized at 1 standard deviation above or below the mean as appropriate. To confirm that dichotomization of covariates did not oversimplify associations, all models were confirmed with continuous variables in supplementary sensitivity analysis. All analyses were carried out using STATA IC v.15.

Results

Sample characteristics can be found in Table 1. Approximately 10% of children had elevated or clinical levels of externalizing behaviours, and 16% for internalizing behaviours (score of 60 or above). Fourteen percent of mothers in the sample reported 4 or more ACEs. Children had a mean age of 61 months (5 years), and slightly over half were boys. Approximately 70% of mothers had no mental health symptoms at 3 or 5 years, and between 8 and 12 percent had depression and/or anxiety symptoms at 3 years, 5 years, or both. Just under 20% of mothers reported using high levels of ineffective/hostile parenting practices. Of the families included, 17.5% self-identified as minority ethnicity, and 6% were single parent or blended family home.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Unadjusted (crude) and adjusted odds ratios for the association between maternal ACEs and externalizing and internalizing behaviours at age 5 are shown in Table 2. Crude models show a statistically significant association between maternal ACEs and child behaviour at age 5. However, in the

adjusted models, the association with maternal ACEs decreases, and becomes non-significant at the 0.05 level for internalizing behaviour.

Among other child level covariates, high levels of negative child affect is associated with a two fold increased odds of both externalizing and internalizing behaviours(AOR: 2.42 95% CI 1.59, 3.67 & AOR 2.44 95% CI 1.77, 3.36), and male sex is associated with an almost 3 times increased odds of externalizing behaviours only (AOR 2.89 95% CI 1.92, 4.34). Among maternal covariates, current or persistent mental health symptoms is associated with both externalizing and internalizing behaviours at age 5, while high levels of maternal neuroticism is associated with internalizing only (AOR 2.22, 95% CI 1.54, 3.20). High levels of ineffective/hostile parenting behaviours is associated with a 6.33 increased odds of externalizing behaviours (95% CI 4.34, 9.24). These parenting behaviours are also associated with internalizing behaviours in children at age 5, but at a lower level (AOR: 1.42, 95% CI 1.02, 1.97). Other social variables have marginal associations on child behaviour at age 5. Sensitivity analysis showing these associations using variables as continuous measures are consistent with these findings and can be seen in the supplementary file 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Interpretation

The results from this analysis show a modest association between maternal ACEs and child behaviour at 5 years, which is reduced when adjusting for other factors at the child, family and community levels. Specifically, proximal factors including child affect in early childhood, parenting practices, and parent mental health are more strongly associated with the children's risk of externalizing and/or internalizing behaviours at age 5. Routine screening of parental ACEs without consideration for other psychosocial risk factors may provide an incomplete understanding of children who are at risk of behaviour difficulties. Assessment and identification of proximal factors, namely those specific to the individual

Page 10 of 21

child and their parents' current well-being, may more accurately characterize families most in need of support.

Our results showed that there was no association between maternal ACEs and child internalizing behaviours at age 5 when other known risk factors were adjusted for. However, the adjusted association between maternal ACEs and externalizing behaviours was statistically significant (AOR 1.96, 95%Cl, 1.24, 3.10). Our results are consistent with other findings that the influence of maternal ACEs on child outcomes is relatively small compared to other factors.(39, 40) For example, research from the AVON longitudinal study of parents and children suggested that the association between maternal ACEs and conduct problems, hyperactivity and other child behaviour was fully mediated by more proximal influences of child trauma and changes in family structure.(6)

Our study is consistent with longitudinal and cross-sectional research that shows that high levels of ineffective/hostile parenting practices are associated with child behaviour problems.(23, 41) In this study, high levels of ineffective/hostile parenting was associated with a 6.33 increased odds of externalizing behaviours at age 5 (95% Cl 4.34, 9.24). We cannot infer causality from these observational data, however, this association is robust, and suggests that parenting, particularly hostile parenting behaviour, is a strong indicator of child behaviour problems. There are many low cost, effective, community based interventions to improve parenting practices, parental mental health, and child behaviour.(42, 43) Given the magnitude of this association compared to the association with parental ACEs, physicians may find it more efficient to discuss parenting strategies than parental ACEs, which can be found in a recent CPS statement.(44)

In our study, maternal mental health, both current and persistent, was associated with up to 4.14 increased odds in externalizing behaviours at age 5 (95% CI 2.46, 6.96), and a 2.49 increased odds of internalizing behaviours at age 5 (95% CI 1.64, 3.77). This is consistent with other research suggesting

maternal depression is associated with increased hyperactive behaviours at age 6, and a recent metaanalysis which found that both parental depression and anxiety were associated with social-emotional problems in children.(13, 21) Screening tools for depression and anxiety are widely available, and can result in more efficiencies in service utilization.(45-47) Thus, assessment of parent mental health may be more informative than asking about parent childhood trauma. Furthermore, the acceptability and appropriateness of the ACEs questionnaire as a screening tool remains controversial.(48, 49) Pilot studies for ACEs screening have low participation rates of 50% or less, and consequently should be interpreted with caution.(8, 50-52) Furthermore, work by Cronholm et al. and Finkelhor et al. suggests that the original ACE questions miss important types of adversity including peer isolation/victimization, exposure to community violence, living in foster care and/or poverty, all of which have important physical and mental health consequences.(53, 54) Given the relative magnitude of the association between maternal mental health and child behaviour compared to that of maternal ACES and child behaviour, physicians may wish to focus on parental mental health as a better indicator of risk for poor child behaviour outcomes.

This study has several limitations, including the absence of measures of fathers' mental health, personality or parenting. In addition, mothers reported their own mental health, personality and parenting as well as the behaviour and temperament of their children. This could lead to reporting bias, for example mothers with mental health challenges may be more likely to report child behavioural problems.(55) Our study is strengthened by the large sample size, and high response rates over time. Some differential attrition has occurred among specific groups (lower income, and minority ethnicity) which might minimally bias associations towards the null.(29) These results may be considered broadly generalizable to a typical pediatric or family medicine setting, but may not be applicable to higher risk groups.

The aim of our study was to understand whether parental ACEs were associated with child behaviour difficulties when individual, parent, and social factors were considered. Our results indicate that parent mental health and parenting behaviour may be more optimal targets for assessment and intervention within the pediatric setting than parent ACEs. Physicians are a respected source of information on child development and may be the first source of contact for concerns around child behaviour difficulties.(56) Considering the busy nature of pediatric visits, physicians can be reassured that information on the proximal and relevant risk factors, such as child affect, parent mental health and parenting practices, will identify those most at risk for child behaviour problems.

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Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	n	% *
Externalizing Behaviours	158	9.5%
Internalizing Behaviours	273	16.4%
Maternal ACEs (4+)	231	13.7%
Child covariates		
Child age in months (mean, sd)	61.6	3.1
Male sex	886	52.9%
Negative affect (≥1sd RCBQ)	277	16.5%
Maternal Covariates		
No mental health symptoms	1142	69.4%
Depression or anxiety at 3 years only	136	8.3%
Depression or anxiety at 5 years only	200	12.2%
Depression or anxiety at 3 & 5 years	168	10.2%
High maternal neuroticism (≥1sd EPQR)	260	15.5%
High ineffective/hostile parenting (≥1sd NLSCY) @ 5 yrs	311	18.8%
Socio-demographic covariates		
Family income		
≤ 60,000 CAD	142	8.6%
60,000 - ≤ 100,000 CAD	376	22.7%
100,0005 -≤ 150,000 CAD	506	30.6%
150,000 CAD +	631	38.1%
Minority ethnicity	295	17.5%
Single parent or blended family	107	6.4%

*Some variation in the denominator due to minimal missing data (less than 3% missing data on any given variable)

ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences, EPQR: Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised, NLSCY: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and YOUTH, CAD: Canadian Dollar

				Internalizing Behaviour @			
	Externa	Externalizing Behaviour @ 5 yrs			yrs		
Crude model	OR	95% CI	p-value	OR	95% CI	p-value	
Maternal ACEs (4+)	2.59	(1.63, 3.23)	<0.001	1.58	(1.12, 2.23)	0.009	
Adjusted model	AOR	95% CI	p-value	AOR	95% CI	p-value	
Maternal ACEs (4+)	1.96	(1.24, 3.10)	0.004	1.19	(0.81, 1.73)	0.372	
Child covariates							
Child age in months (mean, sd)	1.02	(0.96, 1.08)	0.514	1.02	(0.98, 1.07)	0.287	
Male sex	2.89	(1.92, 4.34)	< 0.001	0.83	(0.63, 1.10)	0.190	
Negative affect (≥1sd RCBQ)	2.42	(1.59, 3.67)	< 0.001	2.44	(1.77, 3.36)	<0.001	
Maternal Covariates							
No mental health symptoms (baseline)							
Depression or anxiety at 3 years only	1.54	(0.78, 3.05)	0.212	0.97	(0.57, 1.65)	0.902	
Depression or anxiety at 5 years only	2.13	(1.27, 3.57)	0.004	1.87	(1.26, 2.78)	0.002	
Depression or anxiety at 3 & 5 years	4.14	(2.46, 6.96)	< 0.001	2.49	(1.64, 3.77)	<0.001	
High maternal neuroticism (≥1sd EPQR)	0.97	(0.60, 1.58)	0.902	2.22	(1.54, 3.20)	< 0.001	
High ineffective/hostile parenting (≥1sd							
NLSCY) @ 5 yrs	6.33	(4.34, 9.24)	<0.001	1.42	(1.02, 1.97)	0.039	
Socio-demographic covariates							
Family income (increasing)	0.94	(0.87, 1.00)	0.061	0.97	(0.92, 1.03)	0.335	
Minority ethnicity	0.86	(0.52, 1.40)	0.539	1.55	(1.10, 2.18)	0.012	
Single parent or blended home	1.09	(0.54, 2.20)	0.811	1.15	(0.66, 2.00)	0.619	

Table 2: Crude and adjusted Odds Ratios for the association between maternal ACEs and externalizing and internalizing behaviour at age 5

ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; AOR: Adjusted Odds Ratio; CI: Confidence Interval; EPQR: Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised; OR: Odds Ratio; NLSCY: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and YOUTH, CAD: Canadian Dollar

Supplementary file 1:

Adverse Childhood Experiences Questions

The following questions are about events that happened during YOUR childhood; that is, <u>before 18</u> years of age.

This widely used tool asks about sensitive topics. Some people may feel uncomfortable with these questions.

	Yes	No
Did you live with anyone who was depressed, mentally ill, or suicidal?	0	0
Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic?	0	0
Did you live with anyone who used illegal street drugs or who abused prescription medications?	0	0
Did you live with anyone who served time or was sentenced to serve time in prison, jail or other correctional facility?	0	0
Were your parents separated or divorced?	0	0

	Never	Once	More
			than once
How often did your parents or adults in your household ever slap,	0	0	0
hit, kick, punch or beat each other up?			
Before age 18, how often did a parent or adult in your home ever	0	0	0
hit, beat, kick, or physically hurt you in any way? (Please do not			
include spanking)			
How often did a parent or adult in your home ever swear at you,	0	0	0
insult you, or put you down?			
How often did anyone at least 5 years older than you or an adult	0	0	0
ever touch you sexually?			
How often did anyone at least 5 years older than you or an adult try	0	0	0
to make you touch them sexually?			
How often did anyone at least 5 years older than you or an adult	0	0	0
force you to have sex?			

Ineffective/hostile parenting questions

The following questions have to do with things that your child does and ways that you, as a parent, react to him/her.

	Never	About once a week or less	A few times a week	One or two times a day	Many times each day
How often do you get annoyed with this child for saying or doing something he/she is not supposed to do?	0	0	0	0	0
	Never	Less than half the time	About half the time	More than half the time	All the time
Of all the times that you talk to him/her about his/her behaviour, what proportion is praise?	0	0	0	0	0
Of all the times that you talk to him/her about his/her behaviour, what proportion is disapproval?	0	0	0	0	0
How often do you get angry when you punish him/her?	0	0	0	0	0
How often do you think that the kind of punishment you give him/her depends on your mood?	0	0	0	0	0
How often do you feel you are having problems with managing him/her in general?	0	0	0	0	Ο
How often do you have to discipline him/her repeatedly for the same thing?	0	0	0	0	0

Supplementary file 2: Logistic regression with ACEs and other covariates measured continuously.

	Externalizing Behavior			Internalizing Behavior			
	AOR	95% CI	p-value	AOR	95% CI	p-value	
Maternal ACEs (+1 ACE)	1.19	(1.08, 1.32)	0.001	1.02	(0.94, 1.10)	0.68	
Child factors							
Child age in months	1.02	(0.96, 1.09)	0.576	1.03	(0.98, 1.08)	0.242	
Male sex	2.80	(1.84, 4.27)	0.000	0.82	(0.62, 1.09)	0.177	
Negative affect (RCBQ)	1.54	(1.21, 1.97)	0.001	2.04	(1.67, 2.48)	0	
Maternal factors							
Anxiety symptoms at 5 years	1.10	(1.02, 1.18)	0.012	1.02	(0.96, 1.07)	0.589	
Depression symptoms at 5 years	1.01	(0.97, 1.04)	0.589	1.03	(1.01, 1.05)	0.005	
Maternal neuroticism (EPQR)	1.00	(0.93, 1.07)	0.998	1.10	(1.05, 1.16)	0	
Ineffective/hostile parenting (NLSCY)	1.32	(1.25, 1.39)	0.000	1.07	(1.03, 1.11)	0.001	
Socio-environmental factors							
Family income (increasing)	0.92	(0.86, 0.99)	0.035	0.98	(0.92, 1.03)	0.525	
Minority ethnicity	0.89	(0.53, 1.51)	0.674	1.54	(1.08, 2.19)	0.017	
Two biological parent home							
Single parent home	0.55	(0.44, 5. 57)	0.314	0.73	(0.58, 4.52)	0.455	
Blended home	1.57	(0.17, 1.77)	0.488	1.63	(0.31, 1.68)	0.348	
Other	2.66	(0.84, 8.31)	0.093	2.37	(0.97, 5.81)	0.059	

ACEs: Adverse Childhood Experiences; AOR: Adjusted Odds Ratio; CI: Confidence Interval; EPQR: Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised;; NLSCY: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth