Smoking in Pregnancy and Parenting Stress

Smoking in pregnancy has been related to many negative outcomes for children, including behavior problems. It is not clear, however, that the behavior problems are related directly to the physical exposure to tobacco before birth. It is possible that certain maternal characteristics or behaviors also are related to the mother’s smoking in pregnancy and that these, in turn, affect child behaviors. In a study at the Emory Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development (MSACD) laboratory, we wanted to look at the relationship between smoking in pregnancy and how much parenting stress the mothers experienced when their children were infants. The mother’s report of stress related to parenting provides some information on how the mother views herself as a parent and how she feels about her relationship with her child.

We thought that mothers who smoked cigarettes during pregnancy would experience higher levels of parenting stress. We also wanted to examine whether some factors such as the mother’s mental health or the socioeconomic status of the family might affect the relationship between smoking in pregnancy and parenting stress six months after the birth.

Mothers who smoked during pregnancy and mothers who did not were recruited from postpartum units in Atlanta hospitals. The mothers who smoked were asked about how much they smoked before and during pregnancy. All mothers were interviewed about background variables such as income and educational level achieved. When the infants were six months old, over 200 mothers and their infants visited the MSACD lab.
The mothers completed questionnaires on parenting stress and a checklist for symptoms of mental health problems such as depression, hostility, or anxiety.

Results showed that smoking in pregnancy was positively related to the level of parenting stress experienced by the mother. The mother’s report of mental health symptoms mediated the relationship between smoking in pregnancy and parenting stress. Mothers who smoked in pregnancy and had more mental health symptoms were likely to experience more stress related to being a parent. It is possible that children of mothers who smoke cigarettes during pregnancy and have high levels of mental health symptoms may be at risk for later problems with behavior. Increased parenting stress is likely to affect the childrearing practices of the mother and the mother-child relationship.

Reference:


For further information regarding this article, please contact Mary Ellen Lynch, Ph.D., at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., 320W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9800 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD.

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