The importance of early parenting for later child outcomes: A study with Spanish families with children with disabilities

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Introduction

Children with different disability conditions have varied developmental trajectories, which perhaps influences parent-child interaction. For these and all infants, an optimal home environment that includes good parenting and positive parent-child interactions predicts better developmental outcomes (Spiker et al., 2005). Interventions using a family-centered, parenting-focused approach result in better parenting behavior that contributes to improve early child development (Avellar & Supplee, 2013; Roggman & Cardia, 2016). Information on parent-child interaction patterns is needed to guide intervention in natural contexts of families (Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn, 2013).

Aims

- To study parenting and its relation to children’s developmental outcomes in mothers and fathers of the same family unit with a child with a disability.

Method

Participants:

- The sample was 44 families with a child with Intellectual Disability (ID) or with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The mothers (N = 44) were 27 to 45 years old (M = 37.2, SD = 4.2). 16% of the mothers had received only elementary schooling, 44.5% had completed high school, and 39.5% had university degree. The fathers (N = 35) were 27 to 60 years old (M = 39.4, SD = 5.6). 25% of the fathers had received only elementary schooling, 37.5% had completed high school, and 37.5% had an university degree. All families were urban and mostly were middle SES. The children (34 boys and 10 girls), aged between 23 to 47 months (M = 33.6, SD = 6.3), were recruited from eight Early Intervention Centers (EIC) in Spain. Their cognitive development age was measured with Bayley’s Scales of Infant Development (BSID-III) (M = 22.11, SD = 7.53). The children degree of disability was mild (59.5%), moderate (38.1%) or severe (2.5%).

Instruments:

- The PICCOLO is a checklist of 29 observable behaviours that assess parent-child interactions with children across four domains: affection, responsiveness, encouragement, and teaching (Roggman et al., 2013). Each domain includes 7-8 items, and each item is coded on a 3-point scale. We used the Spanish version of the PICCOLO (Vilaseca et al., in developing).

Procedure:

- Children’s development was assessed with the BSID-III scales (Bayley, 2015).

Results

- Mothers scored slightly higher than fathers but no statistically significant differences were found in any of the PICCOLO domains scores and total score between mothers and fathers. Scores varied by PICCOLO domains but were consistent with other PICCOLO studies of typical developing children (Roggman et al., 2013). Mothers and father’s scores correlated indicating that the higher the scores of mothers in any dimension, the higher were those of the parents combined. Mothers and fathers scored highest on the affection domain, and lowest on the teaching domain. Therefore, mothers and fathers showed a similar pattern of scores in the different domains of parenting.

- Positive significant Pearson correlations were found between parenting and child’s development with different patterns of father and mother domains predicting better language and cognitive outcomes.

Conclusions

- Mothers and fathers of children with disabilities engage in more types of affection behaviors (warmth, closeness….) and fewer teaching behaviors (conversation, play, cognitive stimulation…), similar to younger normally developing children (Peterson et al., 2014; Roggman et al., 2013) with similar patterns in mothers and fathers.

- Most of the children have Bailey scores below their chronological age, so developmental delays may be making a difference in parenting since optimal parenting behaviors could sometimes be a challenge for families with children with disabilities (Innocenti et al., 2013).

- Positive significant Pearson correlations were found between parenting and the child’s development. Our results suggest that early parenting intervention can improve developmental outcomes for children with a disability (Spiker, Hebbeler, & Malik, 2005).

- The PICCOLO can be a useful tool to support optimal parenting in families with children with disabilities. PICCOLO behaviors could help early intervention practitioners that work in collaboration with mothers and fathers, as this measure focus on parental behaviors that can be easily recognized and incorporated in intervention plans (Roggman & Cardia, 2016).

- Further analyses with larger samples of mothers and fathers are needed to determine the consistency of our findings.

References


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