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Parenting stress could lead to poor mother-child relationships, shows study by Singapore's NTU

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Researchers studying the impact of parental stress analysed 31 pairs of mother and child who watched animation clips together. Their brain activities were monitored using functional near-infrared spectroscopy caps — a common neuroimaging technique. — TODAY pic

SINGAPORE, Aug 30 — When parents are constantly stressed about raising their little ones, it could impair their parent-child relationship in the long run. Mothers who reported higher levels of parenting stress, for example, had a weaker connection with their child.

These were some of the key findings of a new study done by researchers from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

By assessing the level of stress among mothers, and then monitoring their brain activity and that of their children while they were watching short animation clips, the researchers observed that mothers who posted higher levels of parenting stress had less synchrony in brain activity with their child.

The brain region monitored during the study was the mother and child's prefrontal cortex, which is associated with the ability to understand other people's opinions, emotions and values.

Assistant Professor Gianluca Esposito from NTU's School of Social Sciences, the principal investigator of the study, said that a mother who is stressed is likely to have a "reduced ability" to share her child's viewpoint may reduce the quality of parental engagement and undermine the mother-child relationship in the long run."

A mother's psychological well-being is "fundamental" to the quality of mother-child relationships and for the child's development in his or her early process of social interaction, he added.

The paper's first author, Atiqah Azhari, a PhD candidate at San-Lab, said: "If you look at (what constitutes) parenting stress a lot it (comes from) just wanting to be a better mum.

"What our study shows is that sometimes, that stress itself is counterproductive to what you're trying to achieve."

The researchers hope that the findings could bring about more awareness among mothers, and "even in therapeutic contexts" relating to mothers.

"To be a better mum, you don't have to be so stressed about it Perhaps lowering your stress and managing it better will help in creating a better relationship with (your child)," Atiqah advised.

Charting brain activities

For six months from August last year, the researchers analysed the brain activity of 31 Singaporean mothers and their child after they responded to a call to take part in the experiment.

The mothers first completed a questionnaire containing some 36 questions which surveyed them on their level of parental stress ranked on a scale.

Among other questions, the mothers were quizzed on how difficult they felt it was to raise their child, and what they perceived their relationship with their child to be like.

Then, each pair watched a series of different animation clips together, while their brain activities were monitored through a neuroimaging technique.

The results were then compared to calculate brain-to-brain synchrony.

The study, done in collaboration with researchers from the United States' National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, as well as Italy's University of Trento and University of Padova, was published in the Nature Scientific Reports earlier this month.

Atiqah said: "We did not expect to find a clear relationship between parenting stress and brain synchrony when the mother and child did something as simple as watching animation (clips) together.

"This suggests that the mother's mental wellbeing is important for optimal mother-child engagement at the cognitive level."

Raene Lim, 36, who took part in the study, said that the demands of work and the pressure of dealing with her son, especially when he throws a tantrum, can be stressful.

"Once we talk in a negative way, I see that my child will react in a similarly negative way to us," the part-time chemistry teacher said, adding that when she raises her voice, for instance, her child would also match her. When she is not so ruffled and speaks calmly, her child would "copy" the behaviour and speak calmly.

Social media fuels comparisons among mums

Sher-Li Torrey, founder of Mums@Work Singapore, which supports mothers looking to rejoin the workforce, said that the pressure women put on themselves to be good mothers is increasing and it is not helpful.

While the most tangible areas of stress mostly relate to a child's education and the workload that mothers have to juggle, these women are also facing stress "intrinsically", Torrey said, referring to "the pressure women put on themselves to be good mothers".

She said that social media potentially exacerbates the pressure women feel to excel at motherhood.

“There are a lot more platforms that allow mothers to subconsciously compete nowadays. Even on Facebook, mothers would post about how much breast milk they are able to express and yet, how much milk one is able to produce is something that is personal and varies according to the individual.”

Torrey finds that mothers who have a “support group” and a community of other mothers or friends are better able to handle the stresses of parenthood, adding that it is “crucial to have a group that encourages and supports mothers, especially when they make parenting errors”.

Judith Alagirisamy, head of research and development at Focus on the Family Singapore, said: “With mothers having many responsibilities and high social expectations of them, we observe that mums question their ability to be successful in the workplace and at home.”

In a recent survey of 829 mothers done by the non-profit group which advocates for strong family ties, most respondents (79 per cent) said that they experienced some form of “mum guilt”.

The mothers surveyed said that they care about what their family and friends think about how they perform as a mother, while almost half of them also compare themselves with other mothers whom they know in person or on social media, Alagirisamy said.

To better help mothers, she said that society needs to be “intentional” in affirming and encouraging mothers.

“This helps to nurture and strengthen the inner core and identity of a mum,” she said. “When mums experience wholeness, not just physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually, she would be able to parent positively and have greater emotional connection with her children.”

Race, income levels and gender

Of the 31 mothers who took part in the study, the youngest was aged 24 while the oldest was 34.

Asst Prof Esposito said that they were from middle— to upper-income households, with a mix of working and stay-at-home mothers.

He noted that the race, age and socio-economic status did not have a significant impact on the results of the study.

The children — 18 girls and 13 boys — were all around three years old. The gender of the children did not influence the findings, he added.

In the next stage of the research, Asst Prof Esposito said that the team will be investigating the brain synchrony between fathers and their children. — TODAY