

Parenting Challenges Among Families Experiencing Homelessness



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BACKGROUND

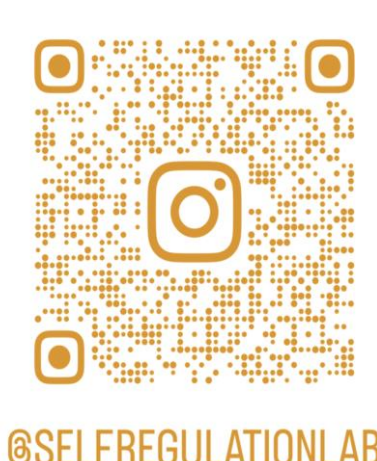
- One in every 30 children in the U.S., or 2.5 million, experience homelessness (Bassuk et al., 2014).
- Children experiencing homelessness are at a higher risk for developing early-onset (Koblinsky et al., 2000) and more severe presentations of externalizing behavior problems (EBP; Bassuk et al., 1997) than their non-homeless peers. Given that over half of all homeless children in the U.S. are under the age of 6 (Samuels et al., 2010), it is important to investigate malleable parenting factors (e.g., parenting stress, quality of parent-child interactions) that may exacerbate or attenuate children's behavioral functioning.
- Limited research has examined parenting stress among families experiencing homelessness. The few studies that exist suggest that homelessness is associated with increased parental frustration (Lee et al., 2010). Higher levels of overall stress (not necessarily parenting related) are also found among mothers experiencing homelessness relative to housed low-income mothers (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998). Within a homeless shelter sample, Wu, Slesnick, & Murnan (2018) highlighted parenting stress as a key mechanism linking maternal mental health to child EBP.
- The quality of the parent-child relationship may also be impacted by the experience of homelessness as children can be affected by stressful events in the family environment (Deater-Deckard, 1998).
- However, almost all of these aforementioned studies are over 20 years old, utilize small sample sizes, and rely primarily on self-report. Understanding if there are any observable differences in parent-child interactions among families experiencing homelessness versus those with stable housing would inform intervention efforts within a shelter environment.
- As part of a community-university partnership, the current study examined differences in parent-child interactions and parenting stress within a sample of young children (age range 2 to 7 yrs.) and mothers experiencing homelessness versus a community sample of children and families in a non-homeless setting. Both samples consisted of typically developing children (TD) along with children with elevated EBP.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Are there differences in parenting stress among families experiencing homelessness versus families in a non-homeless setting? How does having a child with elevated externalizing behavior problems (EBP) impact such differences?
- 2) Are there differences in the quality of parent-child interactions among families experiencing homelessness versus families in a non-homeless setting? How does having a child with elevated externalizing behavior problems (EBP) impact such differences?

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METHOD

Participants

• 914 children (59% boys; Mean age = 4.64 yrs. *SD* = 1.45 yrs.)

• **Ethnicity:** 54% Black/African-American, 47% Hispanic/Latino

• **Setting:** 638 children and mothers were living in a homeless shelter while the remaining 276 were part of a large ongoing longitudinal study in a non-homeless setting

• **Diagnosis:** 41.2% of the sample were deemed to have clinically elevated levels of behavior problems (EBP) as measured by either a diagnosis of ADHD or elevated levels on the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI; Eyberg & Ross, 1978).

Measures

Parenting Stress

• *Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI; Abidin, 1985)*

- The PSI-SF is a widely used 36-item self-report instrument for parents of children ages 1 month to 12 years measuring parental stress (Abidin, 1983). All scales derived from the PSI-SF have demonstrated strong test-retest reliability in previous studies (Barroso et al., 2016). The PSI-SF total raw score along with the Difficult Child, Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, and Parental Distress subtests were examined (α 's = .87-.95).

Quality of Parent-Child Interactions

• *Dyadic Parent-Child Interaction Coding System-4th Edition (DPICS-IV, Eyberg et al., 2013)*

- The DPICS-IV, an established behavioral coding system, was used to measure the quality of parent-child interactions during a 5-minute child-led play session.

- Consistent with prior parenting research, we coded and created a composite of:

Positive parenting verbalizations

- behavior descriptions
- reflections, &
- praises



Negative parenting verbalizations

- questions,
- commands, &
- negative talk used during child-led play.



- To account for mothers' total verbalizations, including neutral verbalizations, the current study used a proportion score ranging from 0 to 1 for both positive and negative verbalizations (e.g., the total number of positive verbalizations was divided by the total number of positive, negative, and neutral verbalizations; Bagner et al., 2016).

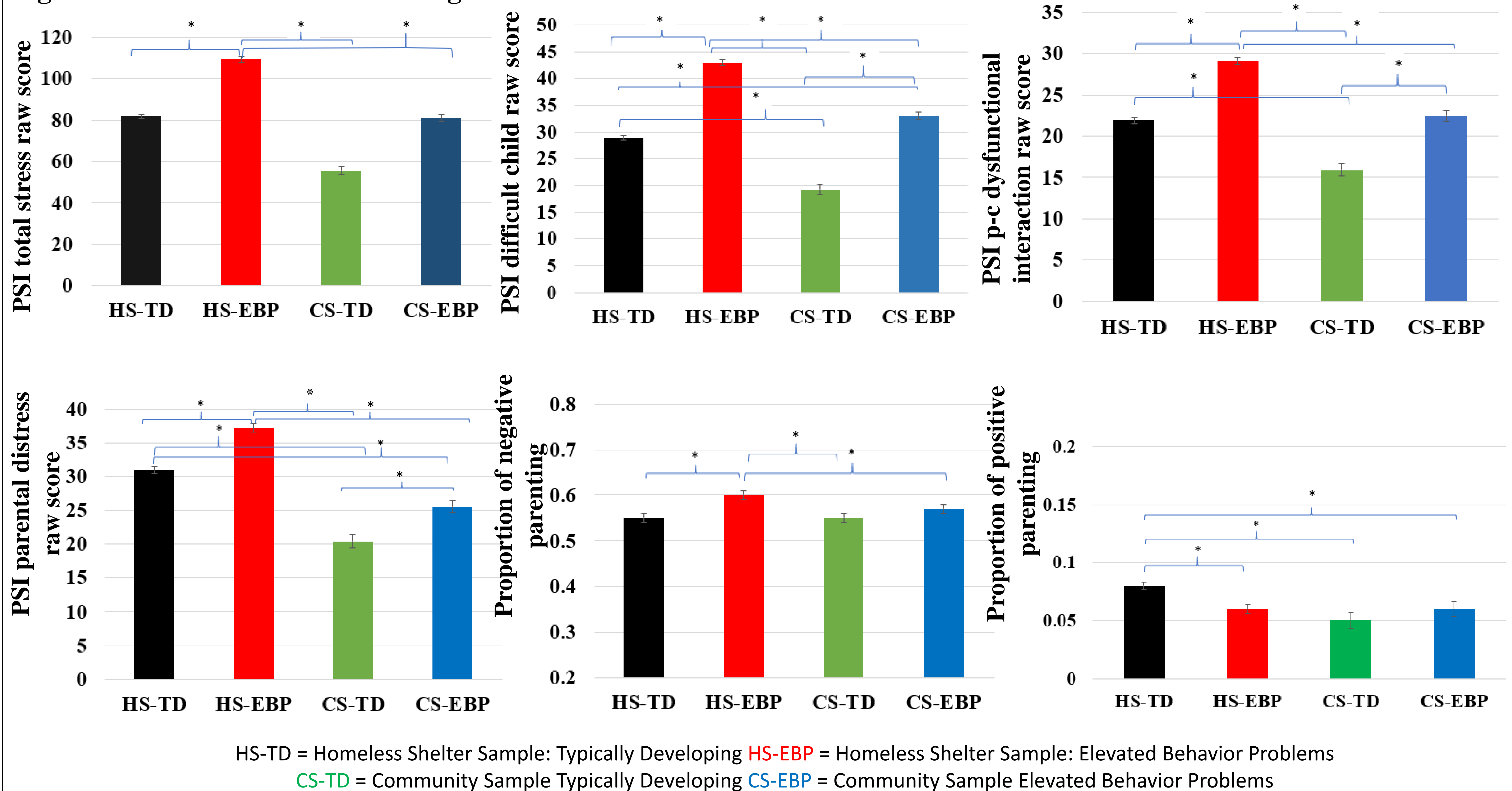
RESULTS

Table 1. Main Results of Parenting Outcomes

| | Homeless Shelter-TD (<i>n</i> = 426) <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>) | Homeless Shelter-EBP (<i>n</i> = 202) <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>) | Community Sample TD (<i>n</i> = 100) <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>) | Community Sample EBP (<i>n</i> = 175) <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>) | F score |
|---|--|---|--|---|------------------|
| Parenting Stress | | | | | |
| PSI total stress raw score (P) | 81.75 (1.04) ^b | 109.29 (1.35) ^a | 55.63 (2.15) ^c | 80.97 (1.84) ^b | 179.34*** |
| PSI difficult child (P) | 28.94 (.44) ^a | 42.92 (.57) ^b | 19.20 (.90) ^c | 32.98 (.77) ^d | 244.32*** |
| PSI parent-child dysfunctional interaction (P) | 21.88 (.36) ^b | 29.13 (.46) ^a | 15.99 (.74) ^c | 22.43 (.63) ^b | 99.41*** |
| PSI parental distress (P) | 30.93 (.50) ^a | 37.24 (.65) ^b | 20.44 (1.03) ^c | 25.55 (.88) ^d | 61.25*** |
| Parent-Child Interactions | | | | | |
| Proportion of Negative Parenting Verbalizations (O) | .55 (.01) ^b | .60 (.01) ^a | .55 (.01) ^b | .57 (.01) ^b | 10.48** |
| Proportion of Positive Parenting Verbalizations (O) | .08 (.00) ^a | .06 (.00) ^b | .05 (.01) ^b | .06 (.01) ^b | 5.13** |

Note. Means and SEs are marginal estimates after controlling for child sex, race, age, and maternal education and single status. P = Parent report, O = Observation, ****p* < .001, ***p* < .01. Subscripts that are not shared across rows indicates a significant difference among groups at *p* < .05.

Figure 1. Main Results of Parenting Outcomes



DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- This study adds to the limited literature documenting parenting challenges associated with homelessness. Overall parenting stress levels were higher among mothers in the shelter setting relative to parents in the community sample while also higher among parents who had children with EBP vs. parents who had TD children.
- In fact, the high parenting stress levels present in the community sample of parents who had children with EBP were comparable to parents in the shelter setting who had TD children. While mothers in the shelter setting with TD children reported viewing their child as less difficult than the community sample of parents who had children with EBP, they did report greater levels of parental distress.
- As it relates to observed parent-child interactions, mothers in the shelter setting who had children with elevated EBP were observed to engage in more negative verbalizations during the child-led play session relative to all other comparison groups. On the other hand, mothers in the shelter setting who had TD children were observed to engage in more positive verbalizations relative to all other comparison groups.
- These results point to the importance of providing evidence-based parenting programs in the shelter setting for all mothers regardless of the child's behavioral status.