

PARENTING STRESS AND HEIGHTENED RISK OF CHILD MALTREATMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC

STRESS GENITORIALE E AUMENTO DEL RISCHIO DI MALTRATTAMENTO DEI MINORI NEL CONTESTO DELLA PANDEMIA COVID-19

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Introduction

It is almost two years since the world was struck by Covid-19, affecting every aspect of daily life across the globe. The Coronavirus pandemic can be described as a transition period marked by social disruptions leading to an imbalance of the emotional states of individuals as well as interpersonal relationships. The Covid-19 context places children and their caregivers in a situation of uncertainty and in a process of transition for an indefinite time. This implies several unexpected changes for children such as: intense emotions within the family, worries about the future, new ways of interacting with others and new educational demands among others. Even if the true extent of the effects of Covid-19 are largely unknown, it seems there are likely to be long term health, economic, developmental and social consequences.²

Historically, in times of natural calamities, economic downturns and

epidemics, violence against children seems to heighten, as well as widespread disruptions to child welfare structures and child protection responses. Although evidence of the impacts on violence against children during previous health crises is scarce, a study conducted during Ebola outbreaks in West and Central Africa found increased reporting of physical violence by children and community members, due to children's increased presence at home and high levels of parental stress and tension.³ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Emergencies reported increased risk of sexual violence among girls during the 2017 cholera outbreak in Yemen since children with sick caregivers were unsupervised.⁴

The Covid-19 crisis does not affect all societies, communities and families equally. In fact, some families are ravaged by its adverse economic and psycho-social impact, while for others, the pandemic is disrupting and troubling but not a true existential threat.

Financial hardship, parental stress and poor mental health are linked with inappropriate parenting behaviours and child maltreatment. Many factors associated with violence against children have been exacerbated by Covid-19. For instance, parenting practices may have been disrupted by changes in daily routines, enhanced hygiene and infection control, school closure and remote education as well as erosion of social support systems.⁵

Other than the workload on parents, another important risk factor for child maltreatment remains intimate partner violence since both forms of family violence are known to co-occur and overlap.⁶ Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted many aspects of children's lives and there is a growing concern that vulnerable children around the world are at a greater risk of maltreatment.⁷

The World Health Organization identifies six types of violence against children: physical maltreatment and neglect, bullying, youth violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and emotional or psychological violence.⁸ Children's increased presence online may be tied to other forms of violence such as online abuse and cyberbullying. This is worrying given that early life exposure to the various forms of child maltreatment can trigger pervasive consequences for children's neural development. Existing evidence suggests that functional responses to threatening experiences include increased amygdala reactivity to threat

cues and a heightened activation in the anterior insula as well as other areas of the salience network. This leads to emotional dysregulation and a hostile attribution bias.⁹

Therefore, child maltreatment is a significant public health concern associated with impairments in psychological, behavioural and physiological functioning across the lifespan. In the long run, children who are exposed to various forms of maltreatment are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence in the future. It is therefore important to understand how the prolonged health crisis is affecting parental functioning and children's exposure to maltreatment.¹⁰ This article describes how parenting stress induced by Covid-19 related stressors may put children at risk for maltreatment.

Guided by the family stress conceptual framework, the author assumes that social disruptions from the global pandemic will generate parenting stress, impacting the quality of relationship between caregivers and their children and, subsequently place children at risk for maltreatment. Following is a review on how the Covid-19 related stressors affect family functioning through their detrimental impact on parenting. After defining parenting stress, the article illustrates key family stress processes that can give rise to or modify risk for child maltreatment. Finally, psychoeducative and research implications are indicated.

RIASSUNTO

The Covid-19 context places children and their caregivers in a situation of uncertainty and a process of transition for an indefinite time. Even if the true extent of the effects of Covid-19 are largely unknown, it seems there are likely to be long term health, economic, developmental and social consequences. The risk of child maltreatment is increased in the global pandemic context due to challenges related to social disruptions and the connected multi-layer stressors. This article examines how Covid-19 related stressors affect family functioning and impact caregiving via parenting stress, thus heightening the risk of child maltreatment. Drawing from the family stress model, the review is based on the assumption that social disruptions from the Covid-19 pandemic will generate parenting stress, placing children at the risk of maltreatment. The study describes the effects of the Coronavirus-induced stressors on the quality of parent-child relationship.

1. Understanding parenting stress and child maltreatment in the light of family stress theory

The global Covid-19 pandemic is a stressor external to the family system, but given the novelty and uncertainty associated with this disease, many

An illustration of key family stress processes that can result in or modify the risk of child maltreatment is provided and psychoeducative and research implications are indicated.

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic, Parenting stress, Child maltreatment.

SUMMARY

Il contesto della pandemia da Covid-19 pone i bambini e i loro caregiver in una situazione di incertezza e in un processo di transizione a tempo indeterminato. Anche se la portata degli effetti del Covid-19 è in gran parte sconosciuta, sembra che ci siano conseguenze a lungo termine sulla salute, sull'economia e sullo sviluppo sociale. Infatti, è aumentato il rischio di maltrattamento sui minori a motivo delle sfide legate al disagio sociale e ai fattori stressanti associati alla pandemia globale. Questo articolo esamina come tali fattori di stress incidono sul funzionamento della famiglia e sullo stress genitoriale, aumentando così il rischio di maltrattamento sui minori. La rassegna, attingendo al modello dello stress

parents and children may perceive it as a significant stressor. Exposure to multi-layer and accumulated stress can bring about emotional, cognitive and physical fatigue, which may in turn lead to undue strain on the parent-child relationship. Social dis-

familiare, si basa sul presupposto che le interruzioni sociali provocate dalla pandemia da Covid-19 generino lo stress genitoriale esponendo i bambini al rischio di maltrattamento. Lo studio descrive quindi gli effetti dello stress indotto dal Coronavirus sulla qualità della relazione genitore-figlio. Viene fornita un'illustrazione dei processi di stress familiare che possono modulare il rischio di maltrattamento sui soggetti in crescita e vengono indicate le implicazioni psicoeducative e di ricerca.

Parole chiave

Pandemia da Covid-19, stress genitoriale, maltrattamento dei minori.

RESUMEN

El contexto de la pandemia de la Covid-19 pone a los niños y a sus cuidadores en una situación de incertidumbre y en un proceso de transición de tiempo indeterminado. Aunque el alcance de los efectos de la Covid-19 es en gran parte desconocida, parece que tendrán consecuencias a largo plazo sobre la salud, sobre la economía y sobre

el desarrollo social. De hecho, ha aumentado el riesgo de maltrato a los menores con motivo de los desafíos unidos al malestar social y a los factores estresantes asociados a la pandemia global. Este artículo examina cómo dichos factores de estrés inciden sobre el funcionamiento de la familia y sobre el estrés parental, aumentando, por tanto, el riesgo de maltrato a los menores. El análisis, acudiendo al modelo del estrés familiar, se basa en el presupuesto de que las interrupciones sociales provocadas por la pandemia de la Covid-19 generarán el estrés parental exponiendo a los niños al riesgo de maltrato. El estudio describe, por tanto, los efectos del estrés provocado por el Coronavirus sobre la cualidad de la relación padres-hijos. Se provee una ilustración de los procesos de estrés familiar que pueden modular el riesgo de maltrato sobre los sujetos en crecimiento y se indican las implicaciones psicoeducativas y de investigación.

Palabras clave

Pandemia de la Covid-19, estrés parental, maltrato de los menores.

ruptions and stressors from the prolonged pandemic are infiltrating family processes and may have a negative impact across several domains of parenting. Emerging research shows that parents' perceived impact of Covid-19 is associated with increased

parenting stress as well as heightened risk of child maltreatment. Family stress theory helps to explain stress processes in families.

1.1. Family stress theory

Initially the family stress theory was

used to study how families dealt with stress associated with household financial crisis. After World War II, Rueben Hill developed the family stress theory when he studied the impact of family separations and reunions. According to Hill's ABCX model, the formation of a family crisis is a result of interactions of three variables, that is: a stressing event (factor A) interacts with the family's resources (factor B) and with the family's perception and definition of the event (factor C) causing the crisis (X outcome).¹¹

Wesley Burr made important additions to the ABCX model considering two critical aspects in a family's reaction to crisis: vulnerability or the family's ability to withstand the initial impact of a stressor and regenerative power or the family's ability to recover following a crisis.¹² In the revised family stress model, Wesley Burr and Shirley Klein focused more on resources within the family and the use of different coping strategies in specific phases of the stress process. Subsequently, the authors addressed other aspects of family stress such as the amount of crisis and the variation degree of disruption resulting from a family's inability to prevent disorganization of the family's equilibrium.¹³

Hamilton McCubbin and Joan Patterson built on the ABCX family stress theory and developed an approach known as the Double ABCX which considers family stress a dynamic process of adjustment. The approach redefines precrisis variables and adds

four postcrisis factors namely: accumulation of stressors, family efforts to acquire new resources in response to this pile-up of demands and the intervening factors that shape the course of adaptation such as, family definition and meaning as well as the related coping patterns.

The Double ABCX model conceptualizes family stress as an imbalance in demands (*aA factor*) caused by a stressor event, associated hardships as well as prior strains and the family adaptive resources (*bB factor*) which include personal resources, family system resources and social support. The family's perception and definition (*cC factor*) of the imbalance shapes the meaning the family gives to the total crisis, which in turn influences its impact. If families define the imbalance as an opportunity for growth they experience eustress, but when they interpret the situation as unpleasant they experience distress. When confronted with stressors a family may use coping strategies to resist the stressor and enhance its adaptive power, but its inability to balance demands and capabilities produces a crisis. Following a crisis, new coping strategies need to be employed to enable the family to reorganize and consolidate new roles, rules, modes of interactions and communication patterns.

The family adaptation (*xX factor*) is the outcome of family efforts to achieve a new equilibrium and it varies along a continuum from bon-

adaptation to maladaptation, depending on the balance between resources and demands at the individual, family and community levels. Bonadaptation is defined as minimal discrepancy between the pile-up of demands and the family's capabilities, so as to achieve a balance in family functioning. It is characterized by maintaining and strengthening of family integrity and by the sense of well-being of the family. Maladaptation is defined as continued imbalance between the accumulation of demands and the family resources marked by deterioration of family integrity, of its members' sense of well-being and of their physical or psychological health.¹⁴

In the Covid-19 context families across the world are experiencing a range of stressors that threaten their health, safety, economic, social and relational well-being due to the prolonged pandemic. The increased and changing demands on parental resources, accompanied by significant adversities, place caregivers at a heightened risk of the psychological state termed as parenting stress.¹⁵ Indeed, parenting stress represents an important psychosocial variable to child maltreatment, but it is often unrecognised and underestimated.

1.2. Parenting stress

Parenting stress is a normal part of the parenting experience. Even when the world was not experiencing the pandemic, many parents were exposed to stress related to their roles

as parents. For many parents, concerns about their children's behaviour or health issues, educational difficulties and everyday tasks can lead to transient stress, but for many others it may be overwhelming and result in significant life impact.¹⁶

Kirby Deater-Deckard defines parenting stress as «a set of processes that lead to aversive psychological and physiological reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood».¹⁷

A core feature in any theory of parenting stress is the idea of maintaining a balance between the parents' perceptions of parenting demands and access to available resources for meeting these demands. Accordingly, parental stress ensues when there is a substantial imbalance between the parent-related demands, including the parents' expectations and perception of themselves and their responsibilities, and the availability of resources to meet the pile-up of demands. Though parenting stress is experienced as negative feelings and beliefs towards and about self and the child, it involves a broad set of complex, dynamic processes linking the child and her/his behaviours, perceived demands of parenting, parenting resources, qualities of the parents' relationships with the child and other family members as well as links with other people and institutions outside the household.¹⁸

Therefore, parenting and the parent-child relationship do not exist in a

vacuum; rather, they operate within certain family, community and cultural contexts that also influence parenting stress, parental behaviour and child functioning. In the Covid-19 global crisis, caregivers are faced with increased levels of stress, making the task of positive leadership characterized by nurturance, guidance and protection tenuous and highly challenging. Elevated levels of parenting stress impair warm, responsive parenting and pose the risk of the parent relying on problematic leadership styles and less effective parenting approaches.¹⁹

One of the ways external stress may undermine effective parent-child relationship is by depleting self-regulatory resources causing reactive caregiving such that some parents tend to be more irritable, critical, and punitive. Such behaviours increase the likelihood that children develop conduct problems, setting in motion a cycle of negative parent-child interactions generating further stress on the parents.

Over time, such a caregiving environment may become a breeding ground for coercive cycles and eventually abuse.²⁰ Parenting stress may adversely affect the parent's well-being, relationship quality and parent-child interactions. In fact, findings of research indicate that the risk for abusive behaviour increases as levels of parental stress increase.²¹ Research examining the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on

the domain of parenting suggest several factors linked with poor parenting and child maltreatment.

2. Covid-19 related stressors associated with parental stress and to the risk for child maltreatment

Emerging research notes that, in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic, families experience several stressors related to the biomedical and social consequences of Covid-19.²² Some families have experienced psychological distress due to a Covid-19 diagnosis in one or more family members or even unexpected loss and grief. In such a setting of distress, caregivers may be unable to provide attentive care to their children due to illness, death, or other reasons. In some contexts, caregivers send their children away to non-affected extended family members or friends in the hope of keeping them safe. Reduced parental supervision can leave children more vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse.²³

The rapid transmission of the virus and its serious health implications poses fears for one's own and/or loved ones' health and mortality as well as concerns about transmitting the virus to others.²⁴ Parents that work in health care services or essential services may feel even more stress due to concerns related to contamination from the work place.²⁵ Furthermore, in certain countries children displaying symptoms of the

infectious disease may also be abandoned by their caregivers and families for fear of social stigma or because they are unable to afford the cost of treatment.²⁶ Neglect or persistent absence of responsive care, can disrupt the development of children's brain architecture with long-term consequences.²⁷

In the context of Covid-19, unprecedented rates of unemployment, the collapse of economic markets, inadequate financial relief packages from some governments have left some families in financial turmoil. The widespread economic upheaval has affected families directly by limiting sources of income of family members due to job loss, illness, increased household expenditure for healthcare, as well as indirectly through uncertainty about the national economy and the future. The acute financial strain has immediate and longer-term consequences on family members, including children, to access adequate nutritious food, health care and other basic needs. Economic stress in the family is related to greater parental psychological distress and harsh parenting and subsequently to an increased risk of child maltreatment.²⁸ Although research has indicated that policies related to physical distancing, lockdowns and self-quarantine are effective in reducing the spread of the virus, they may have unintended consequences that could further impact parent-perceived stress and poor parenting.²⁹ As a result of the

policy measures enforced, families cut off from extrafamilial social support systems experienced decreased social connections, increased social isolation and inability to access supportive services which may exacerbate stress in many households. For instance, many parents often rely on support from grandparents or other family members for help with parenting-related activities.³⁰ This possibility, however, is limited since many grandparents fall under the category of being at "high risk" for Covid-19-related illnesses, or even death, due to their age or the presence of underlying health conditions.³¹ Although some relations can be maintained through digital connections, others cannot. In fact, reduced social contact and support increases susceptibility to stress and may have harmful effects on both mental and physical health.³² Relatedly, during lockdowns and quarantines, children are out of school or childcare, with no access to group activities and team sports. If parents work from home the parent-child relationship is intensified. As a result, some parents have difficulties managing work from home with the added burden of meeting all the social and developmental needs of their children.³³ Caregivers have difficulty making time for themselves and finding a balance between their personal, professional, and parental responsibilities which may lead to an acute level of stress that may be damaging both to the caregivers themselves

and to their relationship with their children. Research shows that continual close contact under stress is a risk factor for aggressive behaviours and violence. The situation may be worse for children who already had a poor relationship with their parents, behaviour problems, mental illness and other special needs even before the pandemic. Caregivers with poor parenting skills, faced with the competing demands of limiting social interactions and remaining at home with their children may be particularly vulnerable to cycles of interpersonal violence with their children during this prolonged pandemic.³⁴

In the global pandemic context, there has been a dramatic shift in family organizational processes such as routines, rituals and rules. For caregivers and children, daily life patterns and scripts carry emotional significance and serve to strengthen the family unit and its shared values. Disruptions have affected family rules and routines related to illness, usual bereavement processes in the case of lost family members, as well as community gatherings and the rituals of life cycle transitions. Such pandemic-induced alterations on daily family life have increased demands on caregivers to maintain some semblance of normality or flexibly to develop a “new normal” surrounding family organizational processes.³⁵

The novelty and uncertainty of the virus is associated with poor information and misinformation creating fears,

anxiety and confusion. It also has fallen on the parents' shoulders to inform and explain to children about the Covid-19 pandemic, and to handle fear and anxiety accompanying these uncertain times.³⁶ On top of this, there are increased demands on the parent-child dyad to negotiate on topics related to parameters to uphold physical distancing, use of shared spaces, changes to family routines and rituals. This can result in enormous stress and psychological distress for parents.³⁷

Research suggests that the unpredictability and uncertainty of the current situation as well as other Covid-19 related stressors have led to serious mental health burden characterised by high levels of fear, anxiety, depression, panic, sleep problems and post-traumatic stress.³⁸ Caregivers with elevated stress and co-occurring anxiety and depressive symptoms have been shown to be less responsive to their children's needs, which in turn is a strong predictor of the potential for child abuse. Indeed, children in families with mental health issues associated with the Covid-19 health crisis may be more vulnerable to child maltreatment.³⁹

Heightened mental health difficulties in the context of long term and chronic stressors may threaten the integrity of the marital dyad with detrimental effects on child well-being. Significant life events can worsen pre-existing marital problems or create new dif-

facilities especially when accompanied by accumulated stress related to illness, parenting concern, financial strains and accumulated workload.⁴⁰ When external social support is disrupted during prolonged crisis or disasters, partners need to rely even more on one another, yet adverse life events can create a context in which it is more difficult for partners to be responsive to each other because they are distracted, fatigued or overwhelmed, thus interfering with the capacity to both request and provide support. Moreover, everyday stressors may weaken feelings of togetherness, increase withdrawal behaviours, reduce emotional sharing and dyadic coping, compromising the quality of communication. The multi-layer stressors families are experiencing in today's global pandemic context can spill over to affect the quality of couples' interactions and perceptions of the relationship.⁴¹ In the current Covid-19 crisis the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, has appealed to stop the "horrifying global surge" in domestic violence.⁴² There has been a rise in intimate partner violence worldwide during the period of pandemic lockdown. In fact, domestic violence is reported to have tripled in China; France indicated a 30 % increase; Brazil estimates a 40–50 % rise, and Spain reports horrific homicides. According to Andrew Campbell, the growing global trend of domestic violence is

likely to continue throughout the pandemic and may only represent a "tip of the iceberg" as many victims still find themselves unable to report the abuse. Unfortunately, the increased intimate partner violence rate is also accompanied by increased substance abuse,⁴³ which increases the risk for child maltreatment. Furthermore, the current reduced societal supervision and the limited access to child protection services is an additional burden.⁴⁴ The impact of pandemic-induced stressors on marital relationship and parenting behaviour may spill over into the sibling subsystem creating a family setting of distress, which in turn become a fertile seedbed for child maltreatment.⁴⁵ Caregiver well-being or distress may serve as a channel through which social stressors and disruptions induced by Covid-19 infiltrate family functioning through shifts in marital and parent-child relationships. However, some families may be more vulnerable to the pandemic related stressors than others, based on the pre-existing strains. Other families may experience a post-traumatic growth or thrive in the face of adversities. The extent to which Covid-19 induced stressors will impact on caregiver's propensity for child maltreatment depends on other related factors such as the family's adaptive resources, definition of the situation and coping strategies.

2.1. Family adaptative resources, perceptions and coping strategies

Fortunately, there are available resources that may mitigate the threat of pre-existing and Covid-19 related risk factors on child maltreatment. Consistent with the family stress theory these resources can reduce the impact of the demands on the family and/or help the family adapt to the required changes. The resources can be family systems capabilities such as cohesion, adaptability and communication, social support of people, institutions or any network to which the family belongs and is cared for, as well as personal resources of individual family members such as knowledge and skills which are available to the family in times of need.⁴⁶ Guided by Froma Walsh's family resilience framework, promoting and maintaining supportive family relationships is a key pathway to support family adjustment in the face of adversity and to mitigate the current socio-contextual risks of child abuse.⁴⁷ It is important to note that the protective effects of family relationships extend beyond the parent-child relationship and the immediate family. Professional opinions suggest that children exposed to parental psychological distress and unfavourable circumstances within the family system are better adjusted if they have positive relationships with their siblings.⁴⁸ Moreover, children exposed to harsh parenting are less likely to

demonstrate behavioural difficulties when their grandmothers are highly involved in caregiving duties.⁴⁹ Though physical distancing represents a significant disruption of social supports outside the households, maintaining possible contacts with family members and friends, even virtually, may mitigate caregiver distress and its impact on parenting behaviours. This indicates that a single supportive relationship may be sufficient to offset the negative effects of stressors on child maltreatment.

The way a family perceives, ascribes meaning and responds to related hardships will mediate the bonadjustment or maladjustment to the current pandemic context. Families will foster resilience if they are able to incorporate the pandemic-related experiences into their existing views of reality and "make sense" of these experiences. In fact, literature suggests that the capacity to coherently view the Covid-19 crisis in a shared family sense of meaning will likely result in adequate levels of adaptation. In this regard, families may need to view themselves as being in the crisis together, minimize catastrophic thinking, resist forecasting the worst-case scenario and consider the plight as specific, time-limited and manageable.⁵⁰

In other words, during this unprecedented time, families who can maintain closeness despite the heightened family stress and those who build relationships through the help of social and professional supports may present better

coping and resilience. Building and preserving a supportive social-affective network gives children the opportunity to connect with others and benefit from regular emotional support from their parents. In this regard, parental resources, perceptions and coping strategies are fundamental to mediate the pandemic-related accumulation of demands and family adaptation.

2.2. Parental resources, perceptions and coping strategies

A family under stress can benefit from the caregiver's internal and external resources which act as a buffer against the negative effects of the disruptions taking place. The parent's internal resources comprise: personal traits, life experiences, knowledge of parenting health, dispositional coping strategies and sense of meaning ascribed to the pandemic-related experiences.⁵¹ Caregivers' external resources can be: formal support received from their community, children's schools and teachers, work colleagues and government services as well as informal support provided by extended family members and friends. Despite the erosion of social support systems amid multiple stressors and difficulties in parenting, obtaining resources and advice from others can help parents overcome challenges and effectively nurture their children. Social support has three components: emotional support which makes the parent feel cared for and loved; es-

teem support that makes a caregiver feel valued, and network support which consists of a defined position in a complexity of communication and mutual obligations.

Parents' perception of the stressful event is another important aspect for the family's adaptation. In fact, Sarah Miragoli et al, proposed that parents' social-cognitive capacities are basic building blocks underlying their parenting practices.

Before taking any parenting action, caregivers first perceive what has happened or is happening in the family. Secondly, they interpret the situation they are facing and lastly, they develop certain coping strategies based on their social support, resources and perceptions.⁵² Parents' social-cognitive capacities and the impacts of the current global pandemic are affected by their personal characteristics, living and health conditions, previous life experiences, uncertainty about the future and the level of perceived social support.

For instance, a parent with a good health condition and a positive life attitude may treat lockdown moments as a good opportunity to spend more time with the child and may not be seriously impacted by the pandemic compared to a parent with poor health and negative life attitude. In fact, research has shown that a positive attitude towards certain experiences of Covid-19 and confidence in epidemic control are associated with lower levels of depression and higher

levels of happiness. In this case, the probability for child maltreatment will be less and caregivers may have effective parenting behaviour.⁵³

Given that individual families cannot objectively change certain stressors related to the pandemic, positive coping strategies may buffer children against the risk of maltreatment. Use of positive coping strategies can help caregivers build distress tolerance, increase social support, make positive meanings and take goal-directed and value-driven actions during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵⁴ Parents may use cognitive or appraisal-focused coping strategies to change their thinking about the Coronavirus disease and re-assess its impacts on their family life and parenthood. The use of problem-focused coping strategies may help them find ways to deal with the challenges that the current crisis poses to their family. Emotion-focused coping strategies will help parents regulate emotional responses and reactivity to Covid-19 related stressors by seeking emotional support when they experience negative emotions. Given the complex and increased stress in this critical period, parents with few appropriate coping strategies may be more likely to maltreat a child.⁵⁵

3. Psychoeducative and research implications

The global pandemic brings with it a host of issues that are having profound effects on family processes.

To address the physical health concerns, parents and children need to be educated on effective measures to protect themselves in a way that they feel actively involved in dealing with the emergency. To address challenges related to Covid-19 in family settings and protect children, there is a need to promote effective parenting practices by reinforcing family and parental adaptive resources and supports, making meaning of the pandemic experiences and encouraging appropriate coping strategies. Offering socio-affective support through multiple sources such as peer support groups and telemental health services⁵⁶ can enhance external parenting resources and decrease parenting stress.

Parents support groups could be safe spaces where parents would be encouraged to share emotions associated with Covid-19 related experiences as well as innovative tips and ideas about effective parenting during the pandemic. Other than support groups, social support between neighbours could be strengthened to create corresponsibility in child safeguarding and protection at a community level.

Psycho-educative interventions aimed at fostering appropriate and effective coping strategies in parents can be implemented so that caregivers learn to use different coping skills to deal with Covid-19 induced family and parenting stress. When providing parenting interventions to caregivers,

they could focus on re-thinking about the pandemic and their life experiences from a new and positive perspective to help parents explore possible beneficial impacts of these events. Such cognitive reframing can reshape negative perceptions towards Covid-19 related stressors as well as help make meaningful interpretations of the pandemic.⁵⁷

More financial support and psychosocial services should be available to high risk and low-income families to reduce sources of stress for caregivers and protect children from the distal social risk factors. In this regard, child maltreatment can be mitigated through research, policy, advocacy and lobbying with significant professional organizations in areas of child and family well-being. Reducing sources of stress for parents will not only diminish risks of child maltreatment but may also free up cognitive and emotional resources that caregivers can use to help children cope with the radical changes in their lives.⁵⁸

With regard to research implications, this article aims at understanding how parenting stress heighten the risk of child maltreatment during the Covid-19 pandemic drawing from studies that have compared Covid-19 to other adversities such as economic upheaval during past recessions, natural disasters or short-term epidemics. The current global crisis is distinct from the other adversities for its cumulative risk and its widespread impact.

A longitudinal observational research that examines specific family processes involved in Covid-19 and risk of child maltreatment is recommended. In addition, this study has not taken into consideration the impact of Covid-19 related stressors and parenting stress on different types of child maltreatment. Since the aetiology of the types of child maltreatment is different, future research could examine the effects of various Covid-19 induced stressors and parenting stress on the different subtypes of child maltreatment paying particular attention to cultural differences in parenting practices.

In brief, the Covid-19 pandemic poses threats to family well-being. Caregivers called to nourish hope, trust, relationships and emotional security are faced with unprecedented levels of uncertainty, fear and stress. The aim of this article was to illustrate how the radical transitions and disruptions related to the pandemic generate parenting stress associated with child maltreatment. Fortunately, there are parental resources and coping strategies within and across families that can protect children from the socio-contextual risk and limit its detrimental impact.

NOTE

¹ Docente aggiunta di Psicologia Dinamica presso la Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione «Auxilium».

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