



A cross-lagged study:

The bidirectional temporal relationship

between parenting stress and child maltreatment



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## Background

Child maltreatment is a global public health problem, with approximately one billion children experiencing some form of violence each year. Parenting stress has long been proposed as a major risk factor for child maltreatment.

However, there is still a lack of evidence from longitudinal studies examining the causal relationship between parenting stress and child maltreatment.

While previous research has examined the link between child maltreatment and parenting stress showing that parenting stress leads to child maltreatment (unidirectional), we examined whether perpetrating child maltreatment may also lead to parenting stress (bidirectional).

We used data from two studies for our analysis. The e-Parenting for Lifelong Health Evaluation Study (ePLH) and the Longitudinal Studies in Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN).

## Research Question

Is there a bidirectional relationship between child maltreatment and parenting stress (i.e., does perpetrating child maltreatment also lead to a increased level of parenting stress)?



## The Programme

Study 1 was based on the ePLH evaluation of ParentChat, a 16-session evidence-based online intervention focused on increasing positive parenting and reducing child maltreatment for children aged 2-17. The intervention was based on the in-person Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) programmes adapted for delivery via either online chat groups (e.g., WhatsApp or Viber) or a combination of Zoom video sessions plus online chat groups.

The study involved 484 caregivers from six low- and middle-income countries: North Macedonia, Malaysia, Moldova, Montenegro, the Philippines, and South Africa.

Study 2 was based on publicly available data from LONGSCAN, a study of child maltreatment in the United States. Children and their caregivers were enrolled at or before child age of four and prospectively followed at two-year intervals until age 18. We used dataset from 772 participants, where child maltreatment and parenting stress was measured when the children were age 6 and 16 years.

## Study Design

We used cross-lagged panel analysis (a structural equation model that analyse panel data in which two or more variables are repeatedly measured at two or more different time points) to examine the potential relationship among the two variables of child maltreatment and parenting stress.

## Research Findings

- We observed a bi-directional relationship between parenting stress and child maltreatment i.e., perpetrating child maltreatment predicted higher subsequent short-term parenting stress.
- Parenting stress during early childhood has a long-term impact on adolescence maltreatment.

## Lessons Learned

Stress-related affective factors should be considered in parenting intervention programmes and clinical practice, such as encouraging parents to adopt appropriate coping strategies against parenting stress or helping parents to identify avoidable stressors.

## Recommendations

1. **Impact:** This study provides chronological evidence for the potential causal relationship between parenting stress and child maltreatment, consistent with findings from previous research. This highlights the importance of parenting programmes that includes content to reduce/manage parenting stress.
2. **Research and evaluation:** Further research can build on our findings e.g., lab experiments with hypothetical scenarios that would manipulate the level of parenting stress in high-pressure vs. low-pressure environments may provide further causal evidence and more insights into the psychological mechanisms.

## In conclusion

Parenting stress predicts later child maltreatment and the occurrence of child maltreatment also predicts short-term parenting stress, suggesting the presence of a vicious cycle between the two variables.