

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, of which over half are under the age of 6, are at a higher risk for developing early-onset externalizing behavior problems (EBP; Koblinsky et al., 2000).
- Investigating parenting factors within this at-risk group is crucial given the role of parents in the development and treatment of EBP.
- 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)*

- For the purpose of the current study, the *total stress* raw score along with the *difficulty child*, *parent-child dysfunctional interaction*, and *parental distress* subscales were examined.

Quality of Parent-Child Interactions

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

- The DPICS-IV 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).

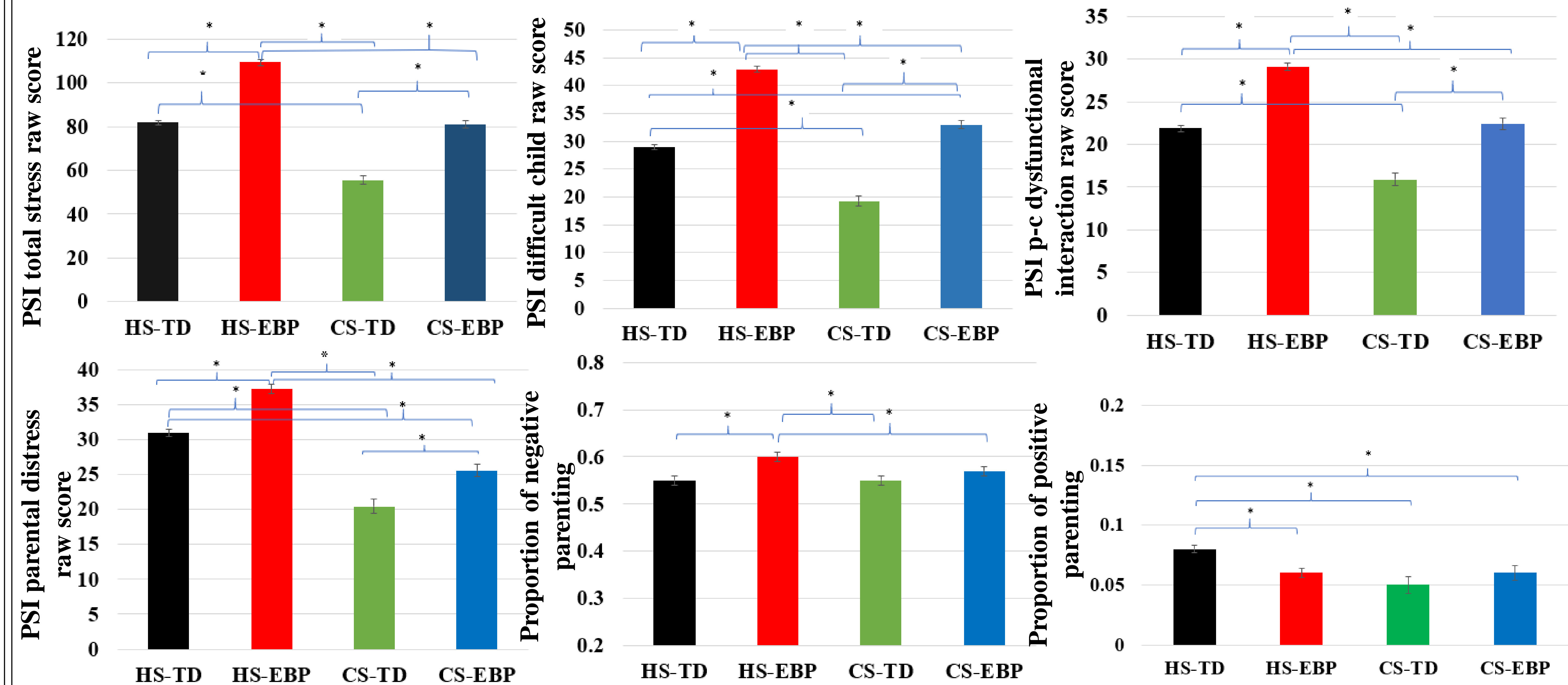
RESULTS

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



HS-TD = Homeless Shelter Sample: Typically Developing HS-EBP = Homeless Shelter Sample: Elevated Behavior Problems
CS-TD = Community Sample Typically Developing CS-EBP = Community Sample Elevated Behavior Problems

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.