



Intergenerational Transmission of Child Maltreatment: Mediating Roles of Maternal Depression, Daily Stress, and Family Violence



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Introduction:

- Children of caregivers who have a history of childhood maltreatment are at increased risk of being maltreated.
- A lack of prospective, longitudinal studies with comprehensive child maltreatment assessment techniques has hindered our ability to identify mediating processes that transmit maltreatment risk across generations.
- Aim:** Examine **maternal distress** (i.e., maternal depression and maternal stress) and **family violence** (excluding child abuse, e.g., intimate partner violence) as mediators from mothers' experience of childhood physical/sexual abuse to their use of physically abusive and psychologically aggressive discipline strategies toward their children between four and eight year old.

Methods:

- Population: mother-child dyads ($N = 768$) identified as at-risk for family violence.
- Mothers were assessed for previous experiences of childhood physical and sexual abuse, current depression and stress, and use of physically abusive and psychologically aggressive discipline strategies when their children were four and eight years old.
- Analyses:** structural equation modeling with bias-corrected confidence intervals was used to test mediation paths. We controlled for mothers' marital status, age, education level, whether household incomes were below the federal poverty limit, and prior reports of emotional and physical abuse.

Results:

- The models predicting physical abuse, $\chi^2(7) = 6.74$, $p > .05$, CFI = 1, RMSEA = 0, and psychological aggression, $\chi^2(7) = 7.18$, $p > .05$, CFI = 1, RMSEA = .01, both fit the data well.
- In both models, maternal distress, but not family violence, significantly mediated the association between maternal history of maltreatment and their use of physically abusive parenting strategies, unstandardized indirect effect = .01, 95% Confidence Interval (CI) [.01, .04], and psychologically aggressive parenting strategies, unstandardized indirect effect = .02, 95% Confidence Interval (CI) [.01, .02].

Discussion:

- Findings support an ecological-developmental explanation of the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment
- Though family violence has consistently been implicated as a risk factor for child maltreatment in previous research, it was not associated with increased physically and psychologically aggressive parenting in the current sample.
- Evidence-based interventions that target maternal mental health and provide stress management techniques (e.g., Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Processing Therapy) may reduce distress among mothers with histories of maltreatment, and could be crucial for preventing child abuse.

The relationship between mothers' history of child maltreatment and their use of abusive discipline strategies toward their own children—that is, the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment—is mediated by mothers' current levels of depression and stress




Figure 1. Structural Path Model

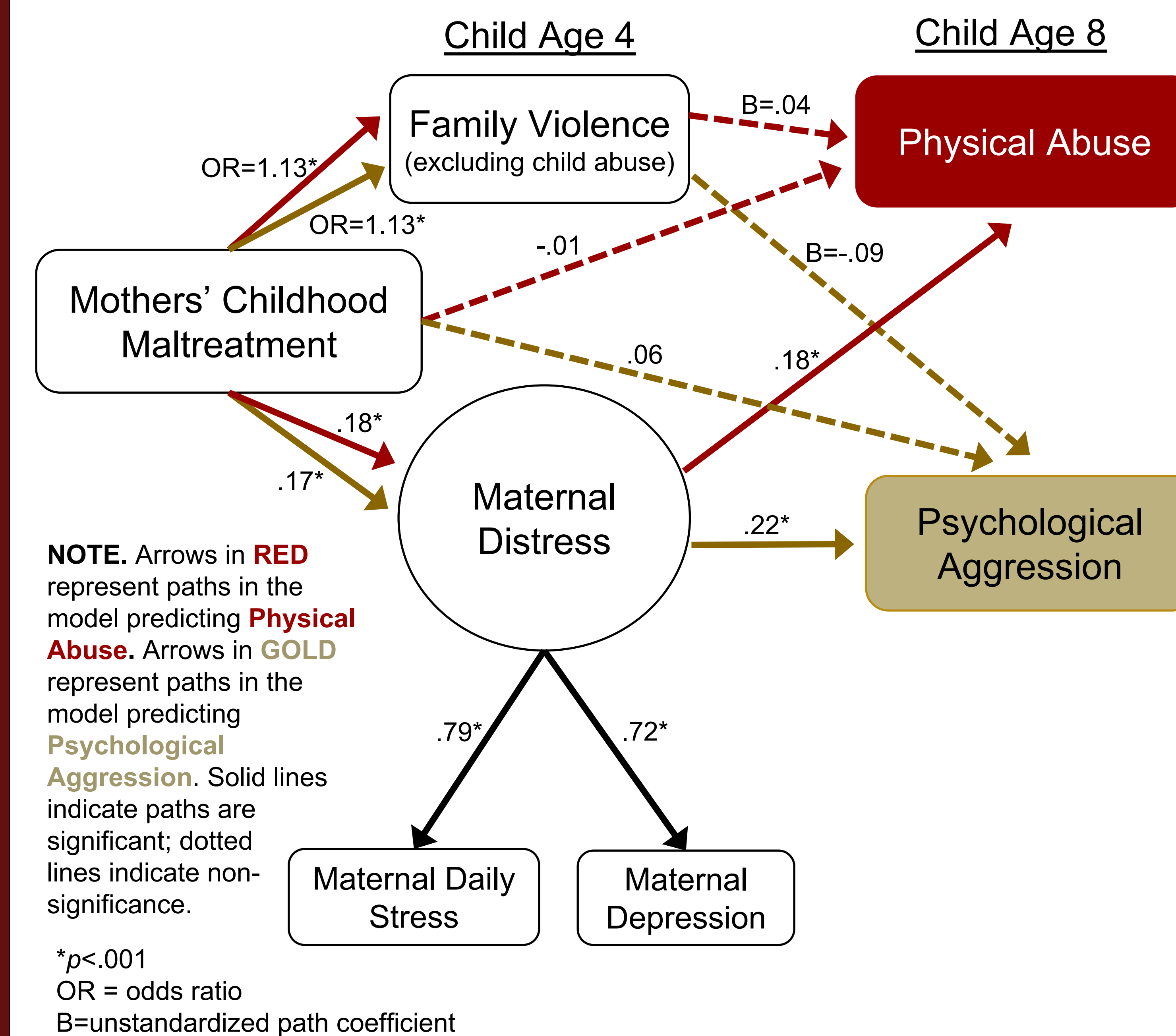


Table 1. Mediation Path Indirect Effects

Mediation Path	Indirect Effect [95% CI]
Mother's Childhood Maltreat. → Matern. Distress → Phys. Abuse	.01* [.01, .02]
Mother's Childhood Maltreat. → Matern. Distress → Psychol. Aggr.	.02* [.01, .04]
Mother's Childhood Maltreat. → Family Violence → Phys. Abuse	Non-significant
Mother's Childhood Maltreat. → Family Violence → Psychol. Aggr.	Non-significant

* $p < .001$

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	N (%)
Child gender (% female)	386 (50.3%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	203 (26.4%)
African American	443 (57.7%)
Latino or Hispanic	35 (4.6%)
Other	87 (11.3%)
Families below poverty line	634 (82.6%)
Mothers' history of sexual abuse	284 (38.4%)
Mothers' history of phys. abuse	259 (35%)
Mothers' high school graduation	414 (53.9%)