

Mothers' Feelings of Loneliness: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Longitudinal Associations with Depressive Symptoms and Child Adjustment

I. Luoma¹, M. Korhonen², R. Salmelin³, T. Tamminen²

¹Child Psychiatry, Tampere University Hospital, Tampere, Finland ; ²School of Medicine, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland ; ³School of Health Sciences, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

Introduction

In earlier studies, loneliness strongly correlates with depression and depressive symptoms. Longitudinal studies are rare.

Objectives

The aim of the study was to investigate in a longitudinal setting the prevalence and risk factors of maternal loneliness as well as the associations between maternal loneliness, depressive symptoms and child's subsequent psychosocial adjustment.

Methods

Mothers' reports of loneliness were explored in a sample of 133 mothers during pregnancy (T1) and when the firstborns were 8-9 years old (T2). Maternal depressive symptoms were screened with the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) at three time points: T1, T2 and at 16-17 years of child's age (T3). Child psychosocial adjustment was assessed with the Child Behavior Checklists (CBCLs) at T2 and T3 and with the Youth Self Reports (YSRs) completed by the adolescents at T3.

Results

The prevalence of loneliness (sometimes, often or always) was 36% at T1 and 32% at T2. Loneliness during pregnancy was associated with physical illness or disability, weaker life satisfaction and change in the pair relationship. Lonely mothers reported higher levels of depressive symptoms simultaneously and longitudinally. Mothers reporting loneliness at T1 and/or T2 showed higher depressive symptom levels at T1, T2 and T3 and reported more emotional and behavioural problems in their child at T2 and T3. The adolescents also reported more problems if the mother had reported loneliness at T1 and/or T2.

Conclusions

Loneliness is common among mothers and co-occurs, predicts and is predicted by depressive symptoms. It may expose the children to poorer psychosocial outcomes.