

The Relationship between Parental Distress and Child Emotional Problems

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ABSTRACT

The demands of parenting a young child create parental distress due to the mismatch between the expected parenting role and availability of resources. Extensive research has identified parental distress as a risk factor for child emotional problems such as anxiety (León-Del-Barco et al., 2019), depression (León-Del-Barco et al., 2019), and sadness (Xuan, Chen et al, 2018). However, most studies in this field have only focused on adolescents (Finkenauer, C., Engels, R., &Baumeister, R., 2005; Ara, E., 2015). Thus, this research was intended to investigate the relationship between parental distress and child emotional problems in Selangor. A total of 103 parents including 67 mothers and 36 fathers of children from the age range of 4 to 6 years old were employed using convenient sampling. Parenting Stress Index-Short Form and Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (PKBS-2) were utilized as the instruments of the study. Data were obtained via online survey and were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The major findings of the study showed that the parental distress is positively correlated to children's emotional problem ($r=0.840^{***}$, $p=0.00$) which indicates the higher the parental distress, the higher the children's emotional problem. To be specific, the majority of the respondents showed high level of parental distress and most of the respondents also indicated moderate level of children's emotional problem. This study suggests to consider strategies to examine parenting stress and the interventions to reduce the parenting stress.

Keywords

stress, emotional problem, parenting

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Introduction

Early childhood is considered as the fundamental period which creates the basis for future success in life (Tadesse, S. (2016). Secure and nurturing parent-child relationship in the early year's offers lifelong learning, behavioral, physical, and emotional benefits. Investigating the latter of these has been a continuing concern in the field of early childhood education all over the world. This is because the emotional problems among children have increased in many countries over the past decade (Renzaho et al., 2013; Maughan et al., 2008; Tick, 2007; Collishaw; 2004). Numerous researches addressed the issue of emotional problems among children, namely (1) internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Carapito et. al, 2018; Dennis et al, 2018; Idris, 2017; Black et al., 2017), (2) anxiety (León-Del-Barco et al., 2019; Ogundele, 2018), (3) depressive symptoms (León-Del-Barco et al., 2019; Mullick & Algin, 2011), (4) sadness (Xuan, Chen et al, 2018). In accordance with that, parental distress found to be the major influence towards children's emotional problems (Frediksen et al, 2019; Idris, 2017; Zhang et al, 2016; Reczek, and Zhang, 2015).

Up to now, several studies have highlighted a few factors that are associated with parental distress. Zhang, and friends (2019) found that parents who have less social support shows high level of distress compared to the ones receiving adequate amount of social support. Besides that, prenatal depressive symptoms also reported to have high influence on parental distress (Frediksen, Soest, Smith and Moe, 2019). Some recent studies further indicated that the financial problems as one of the major factors lead to parental distress (Chi et al, 2018; Bode et al, 2016). Thus, the existing body of research recognizes the importance of

addressing parental distress on children's emotional problem.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have attempted to explain the relationship between parental distress and children's emotional problem. Carapito and friends (2018) conducted a study to determine the relationship of the parenting stress and children socio-emotional adjustment as the mediating role. A total of 1053 participants (552 mothers and 501 fathers) were recruited to study parenting stress among parents and how it affects children's social and emotional problem. The results of the study supported that parental stress especially paternal stress indicating internalizing and externalizing behaviors among children. The study further revealed that parents who gives less attention and nurturance also leads to children's emotional problem. Dennis, Neece and Fenning (2018) also supported the findings above where the study expressed that parental distress as one of the major challenges in children's emotional development.

Besides that, Xuan and friends (2018) points out that "parental conflicts can easily lead negative emotions and feeling in the parents which is produce a negative emotional atmosphere in the family, elicit negative emotional (sadness, worry, anxiety and hopelessness) and disrupted emotional security for children". The major objective of their study was to investigate the relationships between parental conflict and their children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems through parenting stress and child emotionality. The study employed 2925 mothers of preschool children in China to attempt questionnaire regarding parental conflict, children's behavior problems, parenting stress and child emotionality. The findings of the study above mentioned that the association between parental conflict and children's

behavioral issues by parental stress was greater for children with high negative emotions.

Much of the available literature emphasized family's low financial income as one of the strong indicators for parental distress which eventually leads to children's emotional problem. Carreras, Carter, Heberle, Forbes and Gray (2019) found that parents who are having parental distress are mainly from low income family that may influence children's emotionality. The study also further highlighted that low-income context as an indicator of greater socio-demographic risk which more likely to develop a psychological disorder than their higher-income counterparts. Similarly, longitudinal findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study by Noonan, Burns and Violato (2018) also studied the relationship between family income and children's emotional problem. The study comprises 18818 children born in United Kingdom. The results of the study indicated that the parental distress which mainly occurs due to low income contributes to children's emotional problems. This is because the parental role on making sure the economic stability of the family eventually creates conflicts among spouses which concurrently leads emotional problems among children. In accordance that, Dennis, Neece and Fenning (2018) also notes "low-income, single, ethnic minority mothers have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to negative parenting outcomes". Overall, these studies highlight the need for researches regarding parental distress and children's emotional problem.

However, the studies aforementioned are mostly carried out in other countries and is limited to local surveys. Little is known about parental distress and its influence on emotional problems among children in Malaysia in general and Selangor in particular. Therefore, in an attempt to fill this gap current study would like to examine the relationship between parental distress and children's emotional problem in Selangor. So, the researcher believes that this study would serve a significant contribution to parents to be aware of their emotional well-being and its influence on children's emotional development. This study seeks to fill the research gap through addressing the following research objectives, namely (1) to identify the level of parental distress among parents in Selangor, (2) to identify the level of children's emotional problem in Selangor and (3) to investigate the relationship between parental distress and child emotional problems.

Methods

In this present study, quantitative correlational research design were employed to study the relationship between parental distress and children's emotional problems. Many researchers investigated parental distress and children's emotional problems also aforementioned and employed correlational research design (Flouri, Sarmadi and Francesconi, 2019; Xuan et al, 2018; Duchovic, Gerkenmeyer and Wu, 2009). This current study utilized convenient sampling in order to collect data from the parents' of preschool children in Selangor. The rationale behind using convenient sampling method has been discovered by Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016). They defined that convenience sampling can be employed when

the target population meet some practical criteria namely, (1) availability at a given time, (2) easily accessible to the researcher, (3) geographical proximity and (4) willingness of respondents to participate in the study. Moreover, Ackroff (1953) also supported the above-mentioned statement by emphasizing that convenient sampling method as one of the most commonly used methodology among students since it is economical as well helps researchers to overcome many of their research-related limitations. A total of 103 parents including 67 mothers and 36 fathers were participated in this study. Generally, the questionnaire of the study has been divided into three sections. Section A discussed about the demographic information about the participants whereas section B and C consisted of questions regarding parental distress and children's emotional problem respectively. Section B comprises 36 items which has been adopted from Parenting Stress Index-Short Form by Abidin (2012). As for section C, 42 items were adopted from Preschool and Kindergarten Behaviour Scales (PKBS-2) (Merrell, 2003) to examine the children's emotional problem. The data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the most widely used software to address the findings obtained through the Likert Scale statements. The calculation of mean, frequency, percentage and standard deviation (SD) of both variables were carried out. Subsequently, the Pearson Correlation was employed to determine the relationship between parental distress and children's emotional problem in Selangor.

Results

The report of findings was divided into background information of participants, descriptive analysis of the level of parental distress and children's emotional problem and correlation analysis of the relationship between parental distress and child emotional problems.

Table 1: Sample Description

Variable	n	%
Parent's Gender		
Female	67	65.0
Male	36	35.0
Parent's Age (Years)		
<25	21	20.4
26-30	40	38.8
31-35	22	21.4
36-40	11	10.7
>41	9	8.7
Marital Status		
Married	95	92.2
Widowed	2	1.9
Divorced	6	5.8
Ethnic Group		
Malay	56	54.4
Chinese	8	7.8
Indian	6	5.8
Others	33	32.8
Child's Age (Years)		
4	46	44.7
5	30	29.1
6	27	26.2
Child's Gender		
Male	49	47.6
Female	54	52.4
Number of Children		
1	37	35.9
2	32	31.1
3	21	20.4
4	9	8.7
5	4	3.9

In table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants of the study namely, (1) parent’s gender, (2) parent’s age, (3) marital status, (4) ethnic group, (5) child’s age, (6) child’s gender and (6) number of children. Majority of the respondents were mothers which is 65% followed by father with 35%. Most of the respondents of the study belongs to the age group of 26-30 which comprises 38.8%. As for the marital status of respondents, majority of them belongs to the category of married couple which accounts about 92.2%. Besides that, the participants are from the ethnic backgrounds of Malay, Chinese, Indian and others which can be interpreted as 54.4%, 7.8%, 5.8% and 32.8%, respectively. The age of children included in this study comprises from 4-6 years old. Majority of the children belongs to the age group of 4 followed by 5 and 6 with the respective percentages of 44.7%, 29.1% and 26.2%. Lastly, as for the number of children, majority of respondents have 1 child with the percentage of 35.9%.

Table 2: Level of Parental Distress

Level of Parental Distress	n	%
Low (<35)	1	1.3
Moderate (81-129)	54	68.4
High (>175)	79	100.0
Mean	108.7	
Sd.	31.3	
Min	35	
Max	175	

Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis of parental distress. The level of the parental distress classified into three categories, namely (1) low (<35), moderate (81-129) and high (>175). Based on the results obtained, majority of the respondents about 79 out of 103 classified having high level of parental distress which accounts for 100% whereas moderate and low level of parental distress indicates about 68.4% and 1.3%, respectively. This strongly specifies higher level of parental distress among the parents at Selangor.

Table 3: Level of Children’s Emotional Problem

Level of Children’s Emotional Problem	n	%
Low (<2)	1	1.3
Moderate (57-113)	47	45.6
High (>168)	29	28.2
Mean	87.6	
Sd.	39.9	
Min	2	
Max	168	

Table 3 shows the level of children’s emotional problem. The participants of this study comprises 103 parents in Selangor. The level of children’s emotional problem has been classified into three categories, namely (1) low (<2), moderate (57-113) and high (>168). Based on the results obtained, majority of the respondents about 47 of them showed moderate level of children’s emotional problem which accounts for 45.6% whereas high and low level of children’s emotional problem indicates about 28.2% and 1.3%, respectively. This shows that majority of children in Selangor are having moderate level of emotional problem.

Table 3: Relationship between Parental Distress and Children’s Emotional Problem

	Children Emotional Problem	
	r	p
Parental Distress	0.840***	0.00

Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 3 shows correlation analysis which indicates the relationship between parental distress and children’s emotional problem. The findings of the study shows that parental distress is positively correlated to children’s emotional problem (r=0.840***, p=0.00) which indicates the higher the parental distress, the higher the children’s emotional problem. This clearly highlights that the null hypothesis of “there is no significant relationship between parental distress and children’s emotional problem” is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between parental distress and children’s emotional problem. A strong relationship between parental distress and children’s emotional problem has been reported in numerous literature. Through the investigation, parental distress found to influence children’s emotional problem.

Discussion

This study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring parental distress and children’s emotional problem. In 1984, Belsky published a paper in which he described ‘support positively influences psychological well-being in general, and the mental health of parents in particular, is research demonstrating that, possibly as a consequence, overall support is positively related to parental functioning’.

The current study found that parents in Selangor are having financial problem which effect their emotional well-being. This statement seemed to go hand in hand with some other previous studies. In an investigation into parental distress, Noonan, Burns and Violato (2018) found “factors affecting parents’ capacity to promote positive development, in combination with financial hardship, which contributes to variation in behavior”. In line with the statement aforementioned, Carreras and friends (2019) emphasized that parents from low income families tend to suffer from distress which eventually affects children’s emotion. A few researchers also indicated that parents who have financial problems may effect children’s emotional problem. “Family and external factors, representing the parental stress and investment frameworks, substantially mitigated the effect of income and poverty on children’s behaviour” (Noonan, Burns & Violato, 2018). When parents have financial problems, they will think that children are factors causing this issues. The findings of the current study also supported the above mentioned statement where children from poor or families with financial difficulties tend to have emotional problems. This is due to the fact that parents will be more focused and spending more time for the financial stability of the family which subsequently decreases the quality time spend with the children at home. Besides financial difficulties, parent’s educational qualifications also one of the family-related matters which lead to parental distress.

This statement supported by Karunakaran, Jusoh, and China (2019) where educated parents indicated higher level of life satisfaction and less likely to have psychological problems.

On the other hand, current study also pointed out that most of the mothers in Selangor have high level of parental distress due to the duty of taking care of their children most of the time compared to their spouse. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that maternal distress has influence on children's emotional problems. (Noonan et. al, 2018; Arshat et. al, 2016; Yoo, Popp and Robinson, 2014; Daniel, Olson and Sameroff, 2013). Arshat and friends (2016) highlighted that maternal stress is considerably higher than parental stress as house-wives are the commuter of family who needs to take care of the children most of the time. This also further indicates that marital conflicts arises due to the intolerance in the roles of taking care of children among parents. Similarly, a recent study by Noonan et. al, (2018) indicated that children with mothers who are distressed shows higher socio-emotional problems as compared to their counterparts with mothers who had never reported distress. In addition, the study also further highlighted that maternal distress patterns is highly significant with the children's emotional symptoms. These results are consistent with those of Yoo, Popp and Robinson (2014) which emphasized that children's emotional problems are positively associated with long-term maternal distress.

Previous studies also reported "if parents are unable to regulate themselves appropriately, they may struggle to respond to their children's own distress in a functional way and model maladaptive regulatory strategies" (Carreras, Carter, Hebrele, Forbes and Gray, 2019). It will make children become frustrated and disappointed where parents does not build relationship with their children. Parent conflict also one of factors that can cause on parental distress. According to Xuan, Chen, Yuan, Zhang, Luo, Xue and Wang (2018), "children with difficult temperaments such as high negative emotionally would display more behavior problems when exposed to high parental conflict and parenting stress than children with low negative emotionally". Moreover, Cummings and Schatz (2012) also indicated that parental conflicts have significant impact on children's social and emotional problems. Based on the previous studies, findings showed positive relationship between parental distress and children's emotional problem (Carapito, Ribeiro, Pereira & Roberto, 2018). Similarly, respondents of the current study also highlighted that parental distress as an influence to children's emotional problem. Specifically, the findings of the study indicates negative impact of parental distress to the children's development. For instance, children will feel afraid and fear with their own parents.

Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim was to assess parental distress and children's emotional problem in Selangor. Based on this study, it have shown that parental distress influence children's emotional problem in Selangor. The results were measured by using SPSS software to analyze the data that have been collected. The method that has been utilized in this study is quantitative research design. The data has been

collected where researcher distributed the questionnaires to the parents of children from the age group of 4 to 6 years old. The results of this investigation showed that generally parental distress contribute significantly on children's emotional problem in Selangor. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between parental distress and children emotional problem.

An implication of this study is the possibility that provide the program for working parents. From this program, parents will be able to learn on how to manage their responsibility. Besides that, parents also will be able to control their emotional to become more positive with each other. For example, they able to cooperate on handling their children in daily life. The findings of this study suggest that by conducting the programs such as "How to improve their relationship?" may help parents to know and learn on how to build positive relationship. By having good coping strategies that focuses more on solution rather than problem can help parents to sustain strong marital engagement (Yusoff, Khan, Abdul Latif, and Abdul Aziz, 2019), which in turn will reduce the impact of the stress towards children emotional development. Above mentioned coping strategies will particularly be beneficial for the parents with Neuroticism personality trait since they are more likely to develop parental distress (Buhan, Rehman, & Ooi, 2017).

In addition, children also will have a good children development when their parents have a good relationship. Children also will have a great emotion where they able to communicate and build a positive relationship with their parents.

Taken together, these results suggest that parents should communicate with specialists to know the problem that effect to children emotional. Through appropriate therapy sessions, parents will be able to know the problems that children faces. Besides that, children also able to express their feeling and parents also able to know the reaction of their faces. From this therapy also, it can help build parents-child interaction where they start to share and communicate with each other. As a parents, they should give attention to children because children want parents to spend time with them. Parents also should be a caring and loving to children. The evidence from this study suggests that parents should contribute with preschool. This is because teachers also can observe the attitude of children in the school. In addition, teachers also one of the close persons with the children where they will be able to make the children feel comfortable. From this, teachers also can try to ask children on what does they feel when they at home. Besides that, preschool also can conduct a workshops and seminars to parents on how to become a good parents. Preschool also can educate parents on skill of parenting to child and explain how to make children to have positive outcome.

The current study has only examined parents and children in Selangor. Future researches are recommended to collect data from all states of Malaysia where they able to determine the level of parental distress influence to children's emotional problem in a much larger scale. Besides that, the sample size of this are very small which is 103 parents. This is because the participants on this study only focused on parents of child which is fathers or mothers in Selangor. Furthermore, the researchers was using quantitative to collect the data which is via online survey.

This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. Future researchers might investigate parental distress and children's emotional problem in larger population in Malaysia. This study also may help future research to know some information and knowledge from this investigation. Besides that, this issue also can be more usefully for future researches to investigate the influence parental distress and also children's emotional problem. In addition, future research also can investigate the role of parents for their children and how to avoid parental distress. Future research also recommend to explore some additional, widen research areas in this field of early childhood education.

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