Caregiving Efficacy and Parenting Stress Influences on Parenting Behaviors

When behavioral problems arise in children, eyes turn to parents and caregivers to alleviate the problems. While there are biological factors that affect behavior, parenting is crucial to child development. Parenting is a heavily involved, complicated role with many outcomes. A child’s environment, especially the caregiving context, strongly influences the biological, psychological, and social components of child development. Given the importance of parenting practices for child development, it is vital to have a better understanding of the factors that promote or weaken effective caregiving practices. A factor that influences parenting is caregiving efficacy or confidence in one’s parenting skills. However, parenting stress also influences parenting behaviors. Coleman & Karraker (1997) define parenting stress as difficulties or demands experienced in the parenting role, such as managing children’s behavior, establishing and maintaining family routines, and engaging in daily caregiving tasks. Parenting stress may undermine parents’ confidence in their parenting abilities, which then may negatively affect parenting behaviors.

Previous research findings suggest that high caregiving efficacy and low parenting-related stress produces the most positive outcomes of parenting behaviors (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Tharner et al, 2012). More research, however, is needed to explore the parenting behaviors of caregivers with both high caregiving efficacy and high parenting stress or vice versa. The present study uses data from a larger study, exploring the process of engaging of low-income caregivers in preventive intervention services, done through the Bradley Research Center at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. This study proposes to evaluate parenting behaviors chosen by the underexplored population of parents with a combination of the same level of caregiving efficacy and parenting stress.
The effects of caregiving efficacy and parenting stress on parenting behaviors was evaluated using participants from 124 families with a young child between the ages of 3 and 5 years old. These families were enrolled in Head Start programs at two centers in Rhode Island. Caregivers completed a set of questionnaires on demographic information, caregiving efficacy, parenting stress, and parenting behavior. The current study explores the following questions:

1. Does higher caregiving efficacy lead to parenting behaviors that are more positive?
2. Does more parenting stress lead to parenting behaviors that are less positive?
3a. Does the combination of high caregiving efficacy and high parenting stress associate with negative discipline practices, poor social support, and inconsistent patterns of rule setting and upholding?
3b. Does the combination of low caregiving efficacy and low parenting stress associate with inconsistent patterns of discipline practices, a moderate amount of social support, and poor patterns of rule setting and upholding.

The present study aims to increase the understanding of the relations among caregiving efficacy, parenting stress, and parenting behaviors with a focus on low-income mothers of preschool-age children. Outcomes of this study may shed some light on the potential of efficacy to buffer the effects of stress and help direct future studies on additional ways to look at combinations of all the factors that contribute to parenting behaviors.