

# APSAC Research-to-Practice Brief

**Study Title:** Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma: Maternal Trauma-Related Cognitions and Toddler Symptoms

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## Introduction:

This study seeks to show how mothers with histories of maltreatment and certain trauma-related cognitions transmit traumatic reactions to their young children, and whether this results in negative child outcomes. It considers cognitive pathways, such as posttrauma appraisals (i.e. shame, self-blame, anger, fear, betrayal and/or alienation around a trauma memory) and disorganized memory (memories of maltreatment that are non-sequential or lacking), as possible methods of transmission. Both *posttrauma appraisals* that are expressed through thoughts, feelings, or behavior, and *disorganized memory*, which cause distressing thoughts and emotions, can lead to mothers' distorted understandings of their children and disrupt healthy attachment. *Top-line finding: If a mother believes her child, rather than prior trauma, caused her distress, a dysfunctional parent-child relationship could result, as well as mood and/or behavior problems in the child.*

## Hypotheses:

Researchers hypothesized that higher levels of maternal posttrauma appraisals and disorganized memory would be associated with maternal trauma symptoms, more child internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and dysfunction in the mother-child relationship. They also hypothesized that dysfunctional mother-child relationships would affect child symptoms.

## Subjects:

Participants in this study included 113 mothers of 2-5-year-olds who lived in a metropolitan area in the Rocky Mountain West and who had experienced child abuse or neglect. Most of the mothers were married and over two thirds were white, with African-American mothers making up the second largest grouping. Over two-thirds identified as middle class or higher, and three-quarters had at least some college education.

## Findings:



Researchers found strong associations between mothers' traumatic symptoms and their children's mood and behavior problems. Maternal trauma-related cognitions, however, correlated only with child internalizing symptoms, not externalizing ones. Maternal posttrauma appraisals and disorganized memory predicted higher levels of dysfunction in the mother-child relationship than did the mothers' trauma symptoms. However, dysfunctional mother-child relationships did not appear to directly affect child symptoms.

As the current study relied on maternal self-report and is cross-sectional in design, causal relationships could not be inferred. Other factors not studied could also have affected the findings.

### **Recommendation**

The study's findings suggest that clinicians working with trauma survivors and their children may find that targeting parental cognitions could enhance the mother-child relationship and decrease child mood symptoms.

Future research that employs multi-method, multi-reporter, longitudinal approaches and/or randomized control trials would help clarify the causal mechanisms through which parental cognitions lead to child problems and the interventions most likely to alleviate them.

### **Bottom Line**

*This research suggests that trauma can pass from parent to child through alterations in maternal thought processes and traumatic memories.*

Treatment to improve mother-child relationships or child mood symptoms should include a focus on how mothers recall and think about their own maltreatment experiences.

**Citation:** Babcock Fenerci, R.L. & DePrince, A. (2018). Intergenerational transmission of trauma: Maternal trauma-related cognitions and toddler symptoms. *Child Maltreatment* 23(2), 126-136.

### **About the Research-to-Practice Brief Author**

Karen Zilberstein is Clinical Director for A Home Within, a national nonprofit that provides pro bono psychotherapy for individuals who have experienced foster care. She has authored numerous journal articles and a book, *Parenting under pressure: Struggling to raise children in an unequal America*, that will be released in 2019.