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“The Perpetuation of Intergenerational Abuse as Assessed by Adverse Childhood Experiences”

Every year, tens of thousands of children under 6 are placed in Louisiana’s foster care system due to child maltreatment (DCFS 2023). The LSU Infant Team provides psychological services to these children and all of their caregivers to minimize trauma-related psychological distress. Children exposed to trauma are at risk of negative neurodevelopmental, psychosocial, and physical outcomes (Vandervort et al., 2012). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as child maltreatment, have been found to have a highly significant relationship with negative effects on health and life opportunities in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). It has also been found that when parents have ACEs, their offspring may be at a higher risk of also being exposed to ACEs (Narayan et al., 2021). Using archival data from the LSU Infant Team, we hypothesized that the parent’s own history of ACEs would predict the number of ACEs experienced by the child and we predicted that children with higher number of ACEs would experience a longer length of time in foster care. Therefore, this would measure the perpetuation of intergenerational trauma within a family.

The results indicate that children whose mothers were abused as a child ($N = 156$) demonstrated a higher number of ACEs ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.335$) as compared to children whose mothers were not abused ($N = 140$; $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.211$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(293.962) = -2.662$, $p = 0.008$. Likewise, children with mothers who had caregivers with a SUD ($N = 112$) demonstrated a higher number of ACEs ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.335$) as compared to children whose mothers who did not ($N = 110$, $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.267$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(220) = -2.762$, $p = 0.006$. The results utilizing a linear regression analysis also indicated that a child’s ACE score significantly and positively predicted the length of the case, $F(1,319) = 8.376$, $p = 0.004$.

These results suggest that parent’s trauma impacts the likelihood of children experiencing traumatic events themselves, which could lead to adverse health/life outcomes. Therefore, early intervention and understanding parents’ own trauma is crucial for helping families involved in the foster care system. Even though the relationship between a child’s ACE score and their time in foster care may be impacted by the parent’s participation in services, the results suggest that those children who are the most vulnerable are at higher risk for further negative life events. Previous research has found that the mere fact of entering foster care is traumatic enough for children to evidence psychological and health problems (Pickover & Brown, 2016). Furthermore, these findings demonstrate a need to build resilience in children and parents against current and future stressors. Further research should continue investigating different and additional ACEs to better understand their impact on children’s outcomes in foster care.