

## Parenting Styles as a Mediating Factor in the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

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### ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to explore the role of different parenting styles as a mediating factor in intergenerational transmission of trauma. Intergenerational transmission is defined by the APA as “the transmission of trauma or its legacy, in the form of a psychological consequence of an injury or attack, poverty etc. from the generation experiencing trauma to the following one”. (APA,2024). The trauma reaction can be distinct for every individual and this paper will examine how this affects the parenting and attachment styles of parents and whether they mitigate or perpetuate the effects of trauma. Authoritative parenting style is characterised by high warmth fosters resilience in the children and buffers them against negative outcomes. The other parenting styles like authoritarian and neglectful - exacerbate the transmission as they lead to higher levels of psychological distress and emotional dysregulation in children and maladaptive coping mechanisms. The findings highlight the need for trauma-informed parenting interventions and therapeutic processes for the parents to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and promote healthier development of children.

**Keywords:** *Parenting Styles, Mediating Factor, Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma*

In present times, with daily news about climate disasters, pandemics, mass shootings, sexual assaults, raids on countries, and the threat of nuclear weapons etc. has shifted widespread attention to the impact of trauma. media, books and films also portray how trauma affects individuals and percolates down through generations. According to specialists like Mattar, the director of training at Immigrant and Refugee Health Center, Boston Medical Centre - trauma is at the centre of various health problems as explored further in this paper (Zimmerman, 2023).

Trauma as defined by the APA is “any disturbing experience that can result in significant fear, feelings of helplessness, horror, terror & confusion, dissociating, or other disruptive feelings that are intense enough to have a long lasting effect on the individual’s attitudes, behaviour and functioning.” Traumatic events can be caused by the actions of another individual like - sexual assault, physical assault, war, industrial accidents and by nature like - natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, draught, landslides, tsunamis etc.). They also

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challenge an individual's view of the world they live in as a safe, just and predictable environment. (APA, 2024)

There are various types of trauma - due to a single stressful/ dangerous event (*acute*), due to repeated exposure to highly stressful events like abuse, bullying or interpersonal violence (*chronic*) or exposure to multiple traumatic events (*complex*). There is also vicarious trauma also called secondary trauma which is experienced by individuals who are in close contact with someone who has experienced trauma and it affects them enough to develop symptoms. People at the highest risk of experiencing vicarious trauma are family members, especially parents, children or siblings; mainly people who care about the individual experiencing trauma. (Leonard, 2020)

Despite the trauma experience and reaction being different for every individual, there are some common signs and symptoms of trauma - a lack of self worth, anxiety, feeling detached from self (depersonalisation), emotional numbness, isolating socially, negative thoughts and loss of interest in hobbies. Individuals also struggle from impaired life skills - difficulty in critical thinking, decision-making and time management (Health, 2020). Trauma also causes physical reactions like - headaches, fatigue, sweating, feeling jumpy, racing heart and digestive symptoms. Most individuals also experience hyperarousal i.e a constant state of alertness which can exacerbate digestive symptoms, sleep problems etc. (Leonard, 2020)

### ***Parenting Styles and the Consequences on the Child's Emotional Regulation and Behaviour***

As per APA parenting styles are the “ways in which parents interact with their child”. They have been classified on the basis of degrees of emotional warmth and levels of control. (APA, 2024). According to research, it is essential for children to receive positive parenting during the first year of cognitive development. It aids in building self confidence and resilience of the child. A child's emotional needs can be met through sensitive parenting whereas negative parenting can be a causative factor for social issues and depression. (Lanjekar, 2022)

Authoritative parents have a one-way method of communicating with the child where the rules are rigid and established by the parent with no input from the child. There are expectations on the child to uphold the set standards, where mistakes would lead to consequences. This results in the child being extremely well behaved and showing better adherence to precise instructions due to the punishments they face on account of misbehaviour or disobedience. Children either show an extremely shy and socially inept temperament along with high levels of aggression and inability to make decisions due to denial of autonomy. Poor self esteem and rebellion against authority figures are also consequences of rigid parental rules. (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022)

Authoritative parents focus on developing nurturing relationships with their children. They also use disciplinary action, more so to support behaviour and give reasons for the expectations set for the child. There is frequent communication between both parties and the children are allowed to negotiate. It is essential for both parties to put in a lot of effort and have plenty of patience. This helps children be confident, responsible and helps them to regulate their emotions. This parenting style also helps children reach goals independently shown in their high academic performances. (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022)

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Permissive parents have low expectations while still being warm and nurturing. There are minimal rules imposed on the children and they are left to figure things out for themselves. Communication is open and the behaviour of the parents is more like that of friends instead of parents. This increases the child's risk of obesity, sleep and routine problems like homework, screen time etc. due to the lack of well-established rules. It also hinders their ability to self regulate. The child shows an impulsive, selfish and arduous temperament with a decent self esteem and moderate social skills. (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022)

Rejecting and neglecting parents are uninvolved with the children and stay out of their way. They at best fulfil the child's basic needs while staying detached from the emotional needs of the child. There is limited communication, no nurturance and extremely low expectations from the child. The children end up comparatively more self reliant and self sufficient than that of other parenting styles with higher resilience. However, they have challenges maintaining social relationships, controlling their emotions, academic performance and have less effective coping strategies. (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022)

Research shows that parental overprotection has the strongest relationship with regular alcohol use in adolescents when perceived highly by adolescents. Rejection and emotional warmth from parents towards the child on the other hand have shown no significant relation to alcohol use in adolescents. (Visser et al., 2012)

### ***Trauma and Parenting***

Apart from the first-hand consequences of trauma, it affects the individual's behaviour with others, mainly family. The association between trauma and parenting is multifaceted and deeply impactful, affecting both the parent and child. When parents experience trauma, whether through personal history, relationship struggles, or external stressors, it can create a ripple effect on their parenting style and their children's development as trauma can significantly disrupt a parent's ability to effectively nurture and engage with their children. It turns into a vicious loop.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) along with the environment in which the children grow plays a determining role in how they interact and connect with their environment as adults. Early, severe or prolonged exposure to high stress can alter neural connections in the brain. These changes combined impacts their parenting style as adults. This can be seen in the bond formation, being overprotective or overcompensatory, retraumatizing the child, unable to be an authority figure or provide guidance to the child. (TOI Lifestyle Desk, 2024) Unresolved childhood trauma can significantly shape parenting styles. Research done in 2017 shows that maternal PTSD from interpersonal violence (IPV) can hinder a mother's ability to co-regulate emotions with her child, essential for the child's self-regulation. (Ingabire, M. C et al.,2023) Another study done in 2023 highlights the link between maternal PTSD and the intergroup attitudes of adult offspring, demonstrating that the severity of PTSD symptoms in mothers negatively affects their children's reconciliation attitudes, independent of the children's own PTSD or depression. Notably, maternal PTSD symptoms did not influence parenting styles, suggesting that the mental health challenges faced by mothers who are survivors of mass violence can have significant repercussions on their children's social attitudes, potentially shaping how these offspring engage with and perceive others in their environment. (Suardi et al., 2017)

Such parenting styles further lead to trauma in their children. Study shows that childhood trauma leads to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, with some

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victims denying their trauma or constructing a false self-image. (C. Downey and Crummy, 2022) Parenting is fundamental to early socio-emotional development, and adverse parenting styles are associated with adjustment challenges and an increased risk of mood and behavioural disorders. For example, a parent who struggles with trusting their significant other may raise a child who is similarly anxious about relationships, perpetuating a cycle of emotional distress. (A.M. Lomanowska et al., 2015)

Parents who encounter difficulties in emotional regulation, which can manifest as mood swings, anxiety, or withdrawal. These emotional challenges often lead to inconsistent parenting styles, like avoidance, overprotection, overcontrol, or emotional neglect. Parents may unconsciously distance themselves from their child's emotional needs, become overly controlling to compensate for their past loss of control, or shelter their child excessively in an attempt to protect them from harm. These trauma-rooted behaviours can limit a child's independence and emotional development. (Kelloway & Claire, 2021) Trauma exposure, even without a trauma-related disorder, predicts greater distress and the perception of children as difficult, highlighting it as a family risk factor; caregivers with trauma exposure experience higher levels of parenting stress, which increases the risk of dysfunctional parent-child relationships. (Sprang et al., 2013)

A study on parents demonstrated the effect on children of parents who had ACEs, specifically, parental child maltreatment. The mothers who had ACEs had a more poignant effect on their children's functioning and the fathers who had ACEs had an impact on the AFEs (adverse family experiences) of the whole family; whereas both parents ACEs had a similar effect on their children's behavioural problems. The study also provided support for positive PFEs (parental family experiences) lowering AFEs due to their effect on the family health also mediating the relationship between the father and the children's ACEs. (Reese et al., 2022; Wang, X., et al., 2023)

### ***Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma:***

The term intergenerational trauma was coined after recording high rates of psychological and emotional distress in the children of Holocaust survivors. (Rakoff, V. M., et al., 1966) Intergenerational transmission of trauma, is defined by the APA as “the transmission of trauma or its legacy, in the form of a psychological consequence of an injury or attack, poverty etc. from the generation experiencing trauma to the following one” (APA, 2024). If a family member, especially parents or grandparents have been through extremely distressing or oppressive events, their emotional and behavioural reactions can have an effect throughout the rest of the family. The events experienced can range from neglect, abuse (psychological, physical or sexual), adverse childhood experiences, discrimination to racism, natural disasters and genocide.

When investigated, results from a study show that there is a relationship between parental child rearing practices and children's mental health. The study finds a ‘cycle of violence’ demonstrating a significant link between a mother's experience of childhood maltreatment (ACEs) and maternal violence against the child. (Roth et al., 2014) Another study provides evidence indicating increased use of negative/intrusive parenting (cause of various negative outcomes later in the child's development) by mothers who have high maternal trauma symptomatology. This same study also indicated the positive outcomes of psychological flexibility - decreases in maternal trauma symptomatology leading to increased infant cognitive development. (Brassell, 2018)

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On the contrary, a study conducted to gauge the effects of trauma and role of reorganisation in mothers found that mothers who had unresolved trauma and who had insecure attachment had infants with insecure attachment; the exception found in this study was that mothers that were reorganising towards secure attachment were more likely to have infants with a secure attachment since they were able to respond to their children in a sensitive manner. (Iyengar et al., 2014)

According to Dr Gayani DeSilva, (2021) “Being systematically exploited, enduring repeated and continual abuse, racism, and poverty are all traumatic enough to cause genetic changes. Unfortunately, specific races and events are more prone to transgenerational trauma”. This is seen in USA where African Americans and Mexicans are more vulnerable to racism, the lasting effects of catastrophes such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that has left traumatic reactivity for the succeeding generations or the grave effects of genocides like that of the European Jews, Cambodian citizens and Rwandans over various periods of time. (sonia, 2021)

Life would have been easier if the past remained in the past. However, the past doesn't stay behind. A study conducted in 2021 among children of Holocaust survivors also suggested that trauma affected the immune system. The researchers found genes related to the immune system less active in the children of Holocaust survivors as compared to average, leading to low innate immunity (hereditary) in the participants (Daskalakis et al., 2021).

Another study conducted in 2019 has shown that effects of trauma can be intergenerationally passed on through epigenetic mechanisms like methylation. Specific associations have been made in alteration in methylation patterns in sperm, which can induce intergenerational effects. This research also shows that there are fundamental sex-related differences in the cortico-striatal and limbic patterns, when dealing with stress (Jiang et al., 2019).

### **Parenting as a Mediator:**

Parenting acts as a crucial mediator that shapes the interplay between various factors affecting child development. Research underscores the importance of parenting as a mediator, showing that effective parenting strategies can significantly alter the trajectory of children's behavioural issues. For instance, in behavioural parent training (BPT), various studies indicate that parenting behaviour mediates changes in child and adolescent externalising problems, with composite measures of parenting and discipline receiving the strongest support, particularly in prevention studies (Forehand et al., 2014).

The quality of parenting can either amplify or mitigate the effects of external influences, resulting in diverse outcomes in emotional and social well-being. Negative parenting practices, such as neglect or harsh discipline, can significantly hinder a child's development and lead to maladaptive behaviours. These detrimental approaches often worsen the impact of external stressors like socioeconomic challenges, parental mental health issues, and exposure to trauma, making it increasingly difficult for children to cope and thrive. (Wu Shu, 2024)

In contrast, when parents adopt positive parenting behaviours—such as warmth, support, and appropriate discipline—they cultivate a nurturing environment that promotes healthy development. This supportive atmosphere empowers children to build essential skills such as emotional regulation, social competence, and resilience. Parents, by actively addressing their own trauma and implementing healthier parenting strategies, they can greatly enhance

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their children's outcomes, equipping them to navigate life's challenges more effectively. (Wu Shu, 2024)

Research has consistently highlighted the pivotal role of parenting in fostering resilience among adolescents. The way parents interact with their children can profoundly influence how young people cope with challenges and stressors. Authoritative parenting, characterised by warmth and clear boundaries, not only nurtures emotional well-being but also equips adolescents with the tools necessary to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. Moreover, authoritative parenting has been shown to significantly predict resilience in adolescents, while authoritarian parenting shows no significant relationship with resilience (Devi & Singh, 2021).

Another study enhances our understanding of the positive correlation between parenting style and academic resilience, showing that supportive parenting helps adolescents manage stress and build resilience in their academic pursuits. It highlights that self-efficacy and academic motivation mediate this relationship, suggesting that fostering a nurturing environment while boosting students' confidence can significantly improve their resilience. (Ye Shengyao et al., 2024)

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper we have discussed the various styles of parenting, their impacts on the children and the effect they can have on the transmission of intergenerational trauma. Parenting styles play a vital role in how children regulate emotions, foster resilience, coping mechanisms and their levels of anxiety and stress. As seen with research, supportive and nurturing style of parenting promotes better coping mechanisms in children exposed to trauma versus harsh, rejecting and permissive style fosters maladaptive emotional regulation and increases levels of anxiety and stress. Children model after their parents when it comes to coping mechanisms which can range from emotional withdrawal, hypervigilance, aggression or high anxiety and stress. Parents who have ACEs are known to exhibit harsh and inconsistent disciplinary actions due to their emotional mutability like authoritarian (cold and high control), neglectful (cold and disinterested). Parents who are informed about their trauma, model healthier coping mechanisms in case of stress and anxiety. This helps children develop resilience (especially emotionally) and daily skills of problem solving and decision making, fostering effective ways to regulate their emotions. They also encourage open and two-way communication which fosters safety and security in the child, reducing the impact of the parent's trauma on the child.

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