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Mentalization: a transgenerational protector of the children's mental health



Parents are present in children's lives throughout their entire development and can be potential agents in improving their mental health. This article reviews the extent to which mentalization, the capacity to be aware of one's own and others' mental states, can be a protective factor in childhood in order to prevent or detect mental disorders at an early age.

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Mental health is key for children to grow and develop well to achieve their full potential. Parents need to ensure their children's well-being and promote their good mental functioning to enhance the prospects of their future life as adults. Moreover, since half of mental disorders begin before the age of fourteen, it is essential to prevent, detect, and treat them at an early age.

The review presented here shows how a specific mental capacity of parents, mentalization, can significantly benefit the mental health of children up to the age of 12. Mentalization is the capacity to be aware of one's own and others' mental states, such as emotions, intentions, desires, and thoughts. What we wondered at the onset of this review was to what extent parents' mentalization may be a protective factor for children. Additionally, we wondered if, in the case of parents' psychopathology, it could moderate the transmission to their offspring.

Our review analyzed the scientific literature that measured parents' mentalization and their children's mental health outcomes. 88% of the 73 studies selected showed significant associations. Almost all supported the statement that children of parents with healthy mentalization skills show better functioning and less psychopathology. In addition, almost all the studies that explored the possibility of a moderating role of parents' mentalization in the transgenerational transmission of psychopathology reported significant effects. In a context where mental health is mostly addressed only once there is a problem, these results suggest that fostering parents' mentalization not only in clinical but also in non-clinical settings could help to improve child mental health in terms of symptoms, functioning and well-being, and to stop the growing incidence of mental disorders across development.

By strengthening a skill already present in all people, not only adults' mental health but also that of the children in their care could be beneficial in terms of fewer symptoms, better social and role functioning, and higher well-being. Children exposed to adults with improved mentalization skills could grow up healthier and more resilient and achieve adulthood, ready to transfer a new level of mental health skills to the next generation, thus perpetuating the transgenerational effect. To promote mental health while children grow up and before any clinical problem is structured, so as to prevent its evolution, could be one of the few ways to curb the current pressure on the public health care networks. Parents are present in children's lives throughout their entire development. This review supports the idea that by strengthening parents' mentalization, both in clinical and in non-clinical settings, child mental health could be robustly benefited.

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