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Interpartner conflict and child abuse risk among African American and Latino adolescent parenting couples.

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OBJECTIVE: The goal of this study was to identify links between observed conflict interactions and risk for child abuse and harsh parenting among a multiethnic sample of adolescent mothers (14-19 years) and young fathers (14-24 years). **METHODS:** Prior to childbirth (T1), observation-based relationship data were collected from 154 expectant adolescent couples as well as information about physical aggression between partners. Two years after childbirth (T2), data relevant to harsh disciplinary practices and child abuse-prone attitudes were collected from both young mothers and fathers. Multiple regression analyses were run to examine the correspondence between (a) couples' relationship quality prior to childbirth and (b) subsequent risk for harsh and potentially abusive parenting practices. **RESULTS:** Findings indicated that interpartner violence prior to childbirth predicted physically punitive parenting behavior for fathers, but not for mothers. Young mothers and fathers observed to be more warmly engaged with each other during their pre-birth couple interactions (T1) reported lower rates of physically punitive parenting behavior with their children at T2. Couples' hostility at T1 predicted fathers' level of observed hostility toward his child during a structured play activity at T2. **CONCLUSIONS:** Results underscore the importance of addressing the quality of couples' relations as means of preventing dysfunctional parenting practices among adolescent mothers and their partners. Adolescent mothers and their partners are at heightened risk for engaging in dysfunctional parenting, including child abuse. Focusing on pregnant adolescents and their partners, this study sought to identify interpersonal predictors of child abuse risk. Although this study did not involve administering prevention or intervention services, the goal was to test hypotheses that would inform the development of programs for young at-risk couples. **PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS:** The decision to recruit young couples prior to childbirth was based on the presumption that this period of time could provide a window of opportunity to administer couple-based child abuse prevention programs. Consistent with previous research on marital relations and parenting, results of this study support the idea that efforts to develop and administer preventive-intervention programs targeting at-risk couples could help reduce the occurrence of harsh parenting behavior and abuse.

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