

Intergenerational transmission of trauma from African American mothers to their children due to vicarious racism

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A study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (JAACAP)*, published by Elsevier, reports that among Black

and African American mothers of preschool-aged children, lifetime experiences of perceived racial discrimination were associated with increased parenting stress which was mediated by stress overload and depressive symptoms.

"Vicarious racism, or exposure to racism experienced by caregivers or others, is associated with [poor health](#) and developmental outcomes for children," said lead author Eileen Condon, Ph.D., APRN, FNP-BC. Dr. Condon conducted the analyses as a Postdoctoral Associate at the Yale School of Nursing and is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Connecticut School of Nursing. "Because early childhood is a period of rapid brain growth and development, young children may be especially vulnerable to environmental stressors, including racism-related stress.

The findings are based on a secondary analysis of data from the Intergenerational Impact of Genetic and Psychological Factors on Blood Pressure (InterGEN) study. InterGen is a longitudinal cohort study designed to examine the effects of genetic and psychological environmental stressors on [blood pressure](#) in African American mother–child dyads.

The study examined 250 mothers who identified as Black or African American with preschool children, aged three to five years old. The mothers completed self-report measures on lifetime experiences of racial discrimination, current parenting stress, parenting styles, individual coping strategies, and past-week stress overload and depressive symptoms.

Fifty-seven percent of women reported having experienced at least one racial discrimination event. These experiences were associated with higher parenting stress, and this relationship was mediated by increased stress overload and depressive symptoms. Mothers' coping strategies—including [social support](#) and problem-solving—did not

mitigate the effects of racial discrimination on parenting stress. Additionally, mothers' racial discrimination experiences were not associated with authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive parenting styles.

"These results suggest that racism-related stress may be transmitted from caregiver to child through the influences on the caregiver's mental health and parenting stress; individual coping mechanisms may be insufficient to buffer the effects of vicarious racism-related stress," said senior author Dr. Jacquelyn Taylor, Ph.D., PNP-BC, FAHA, FAAN, Helen F. Petit Professor of Nursing and Founding Director of the Center for Research on People of Color at Columbia University School of Nursing, New York.

"Because Black and African American families experience disproportionate stressors due to systemic racism. There is an urgent need for investment in family-level interventions to support caregiver mental health, but most importantly, in systemic-level interventions to promote racial justice and eliminate structural racism."

While this study examined interpersonal experiences of racial discrimination, other harmful effects of structural racism, such as mass incarceration and criminalization of youth of color, may also contribute to parenting stress.

"Examination of other coping strategies to prevent intergenerational transmission of vicarious racism-related stress, such as racial socialization practices, and other potential mediating mechanisms, such as caregiver anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, are also important directions for future research," said Dr. Veronica Barcelona, Ph.D., MSN, MPH, RN, PHNA-BC Assistant Professor at Columbia University School of Nursing, New York.

"This study contributes to a growing body of evidence that demonstrates how racism creates and perpetuates racial inequities, beginning in [early childhood](#)," concluded Dr. Condon. "Additional research to understand mechanisms of vicarious racism transmission, especially with caregivers of [young children](#), will help us better understand how to support families and prevent intergenerational transmission of vicarious racism-related [stress](#)."

More information: Eileen M. Condon et al, Racial Discrimination, Mental Health, and Parenting Among African American Mothers of Preschool-Aged Children, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2021.05.023](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2021.05.023)

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