

Experienced parental stress and potential predictors up until the preterm infant's age of 12 months

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Abstract

The event of preterm birth means an unexpected disruption of pregnancy for both the infant and the parents, which entails a premature transition to parenthood. Parents are often faced with fear of medical complications or even the loss of their infant and many experience higher levels of emotional distress compared to parents of healthy and full term infants (Suttora et al., 2014). This often has negative consequences for the parent-infant relationship which, in turn, affects the infant's development (Flacking et al., 2012). Contradictory results regarding influencing factors and change of parental stress over time can be found from different studies

(Tandberg et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2015; Suttora et al., 2014). However, fathers are excluded from most studies within this field of research. Therefore, it is vital to investigate parental stress in both mothers and fathers after discharge from neonatal intensive care units (NICUs). The aim of this study was to describe experienced parental stress in mothers and fathers up until the infant's age of 12 months and potential predictors for parental stress at six months of infants' age. The study was a longitudinal study where data were collected on parental stress in mothers (n=493) and fathers (n=329) up until 12 months of infants' age using the Swedish Parenting Stress Questionnaire (SPSQ) and SF-36 questionnaires. Findings showed that mothers felt significantly more restricted in their parental role compared to fathers, at 8 weeks ($p<.001$), 6 months ($p<.001$) and at 12 months ($p<.001$). Mothers who were highly educated, multiparous or had twins felt more restricted in their parental role at 6 and 12 months ($p<.05$) Gestational age had an impact on the overall stress level in mothers, at 8 weeks ($p<.05$) but not thereafter. Fathers felt significantly more socially isolated compared to mothers, at 8 weeks ($p<.001$), 6 months ($p<.001$) and at 12 months ($p<.001$). Fathers of multiples felt more restricted in their parental role, at 8 weeks ($p<.001$), 6 months ($p<.001$) and 12 months ($p<.05$) and showed increased overall stress levels, at 8 weeks ($p<.05$) and 12 months ($p<.05$) compared to fathers of singletons. General health had a highly significant influence on perceived stress level in both mothers and fathers of preterm infants in all dimensions of stress at all points in time ($p<.05$). In conclusion, the present study emphasises multiple factors that influence stress in parents of preterm infants during the first year postpartum. Future parental support programmes should take into account both the different needs in parents of preterm infants, as well as that mothers and fathers differ regarding at what point in time they need support the most, which can be a vital step towards a healthier and happier family life after preterm birth.

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