

Parents who experience their child's chronic pain as highly threatening and distressing have a higher priority for pain-control goals

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Objective

When confronted with chronic pain in their child, parents will likely prioritize the goal of pain control at the expense of pursuing other goals (e.g., school, leisure). However, it may be more beneficial for child functioning if parents find a flexible balance between pain-control and other important goals. Finding this balance might prove difficult for high catastrophizing parents, due to their excessive focus on pain.

The aim of the current study is twofold:

- exploring the content of parental goals when confronted with chronic pain in their child
- investigating whether flexibly switching from pain-control goals towards other valued goals (i.e., psychological flexibility) is difficult to achieve in parents with catastrophic thoughts about child pain

Method

Participants:

26 mothers ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.23$; $SD = 5.48$) of children with chronic functional abdominal pain or tension headaches (5♂, 21♀; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.50$; $SD = 2.55$; 4 - 14; $M_{\text{pain duration}} = 19.18$ months; $SD = 21.12$; 2 - 96)

Measures:

Parents reported (during a home-visit) on:

- level of catastrophic thinking about child pain
- level of distress (frequency & difficulty) in response to child pain
- goals regarding child school, social functioning, leisure, health, pain

Results

Thematic analyses identified following themes in parental goals for:

school, social functioning, & leisure: 1) participate & persevere; 2) having fun; 3) being competent; 4) gaining knowledge & skills; 5) personal, social & emotional development

Health: 1) food consumption; 2) sufficient movement; 3) life-style

Pain: 1) pain-control; 2) life despite pain; 3) cognitive-affective aspects

Spearman correlations:

- ↑ parental catastrophizing: ↑ parental distress frequency & difficulty
↑ importance & priority of pain-control
↓ psychological flexibility
- ↑ parental distress-difficulty: ↑ importance & priority of pain-control
↓ psychological flexibility

Conclusion

Parents who catastrophize about child pain and experience child pain as highly distressing might be at risk to persevere in pursuing pain-control goals, which may be dysfunctional, particularly when attempts to control child pain are futile (cfr., in the context of chronic pain)

Furthermore, parental feelings of distress might have an important impact on goal priorities of high catastrophizers. Future research is needed investigating whether the perseverance and prioritization of pain-control might serve to alleviate own evoked feelings of distress.