Reviewer's report

Title: Life course risk and resilience factors for behavioural and emotional problems in middle childhood

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Reviewer: Sarah Stewart-Brown

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This is a valuable study in spite of the relatively small sample size, because datasets with good measurement of parenting and maternal mental health issues are relatively rare.

The finding that is most important is that in this low risk sample parenting and maternal wellbeing are still important predictors of emotional and behavioural problems in their children.

The paper presents some problems which need addressing before publication

Major revisions

Title: ‘This should be early childhood risk and protective factors for …’ The study does not address the life course only life up to 8 years

Results: There is a need for a supplementary table showing univariable associations in order that the reader can assess which variables were tested

Interpretation of data: An important problem relates to comments on the prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems in this cohort. Defining emotional and behavioural problems by the 20th centile cut point and then reporting prevalence as about 20% is tautological. To be meaningful the cut point needs to be externally referenced and benchmarked against other measures. Otherwise there is no justification for making any comment about prevalence.

Discussion: The lack of data on fathers needs to be addressed as a limitation. Our knowledge of predictors is profoundly biased towards those measured in mothers because the researchers starting these studies did not appreciate the importance of fathers and studies like this perpetuate that bias.

Minor revisions

Background: needs to emphasise the long term risks to mental health from childhood emotional and behavioural problems. At the moment general health, academic and social problems are mentioned but the health need is justified on the basis of spend on mental illness.

Methods: there is room for confusion in the tables and the text about when risk was measured. For example in table 1: Demographics - when was history of demographic risk assessed; maternal characteristics: - when was history of mental health risk assessed; when was poor emotional health assessed; etc

Does maternal abuse (page 9) include abuse of the mother when she was a
child; or does it only relate to partner abuse?

Interpretation of data: Protective factors are not demonstrated to be causal only associated– they should be labelled factors associated with good outcomes. Good academic performance, good self esteem and good peer relationships are manifestations of good mental health they may or may not be causes of it.

Discussion: I am concerned about the labels used to discuss the results. The term 'social environment'; is too broad and is not often used to encompass parenting and parent-child relationships. The latter together with maternal mental wellbeing are the key independent predictors and should be labelled as such. It is noteworthy that for both outcomes two different measures of parenting quality were predictive independently of each other. These measures are likely to have a reasonably high correlation and so will share some of the variance. The fact that they are independently predictive is important to emphasis

The very different levels of ‘risk’ in the different data sweeps need to be discussed. Why is the prevalence so high in the 8year data sweep and what does this mean for assessment of risk at other ages ?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I undertake and publish research on parenting and its lifecourse influence