Influence of Mother, Father, and Child Risk on Parenting and Children’s Cognitive and Social Behaviors


The families of 4,200 nationally-representative children born in the United States in 2001 were surveyed, interviewed, and observed at 4 time points from birth to kindergarten entry to examine the influence of maternal, paternal, and child risk factors (poverty, unemployment, ability to speak English, emotional/physical health, antisocial behavior) on children’s cognitive and social behaviors. Maternal risk was directly and indirectly linked to cognitive outcomes through maternal sensitivity. Paternal risk was only indirectly linked through maternal sensitivity.

**Key Findings:**

- Maternal risk (presence of risk factors) at 9 months is directly and negatively associated with children’s cognition at 24 months.
- Paternal risk is indirectly related to children’s cognition at 24 months through lower levels of maternal supportiveness at 24 months.
- Both maternal and paternal risk are only indirectly associated with positive and negative child social behaviors. Higher risk mothers and fathers are more likely to have children with fewer positive and more negative behaviors because their risk is associated with reduced quality of mother-child interactions.
- Fathers’ engagement with the child is positively related to children’s cognition. Fathers’ risk negatively influences the quality of the mother-child interaction (which is directly related to cognitive and social behaviors).
- Mothers’ parenting is influenced by her own and her partner’s level of risk. Fathers’ parenting is influenced by the mother and child’s risk, but not his own.

**Implications for Programs:**

- Programs could offer supportive parenting classes that address the stresses faced by high-risk parents and teach strategies for managing such challenges.
- Programs could offer courses on how to increase parental supportiveness when parenting young children.

**Implications for Policies:**

- Policies could recommend that parents in military families be regularly assessed for these risk factors; parents with many risk factors could be offered intervention or supportive classes.
- Policies could allocate funds for programs that promote positive parenting strategies early in the child’s development.

**Avenues for Future Research:**

- Additional studies could review the complex nature of family dynamics including the nature of couple conflict and support among high-risk families.
- Future research could follow these families as the youth progress through elementary school to examine how patterns may change over time.

Prepared by the Military REACH Team.
For additional information, please visit reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu
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Methodology:
- Parent interview, resident father questionnaires, child assessment, and observation of parent-child interactions were used to collect data on a nationally representative sample of children born in 2001.
- Data was collected at 9, 24, and 48 months after the child’s birth and at kindergarten entry.
- Primary caregivers completed measures of the child’s physical health/disability and self-regulatory behaviors. They reported on their own level of poverty, emotional and physical health, antisocial behavior, relationship conflict, fathers’ engagement in cognitively stimulating activities, mothers’ supportiveness, and harsh parenting.
- The child’s cognitive ability was assessed and coded through observation.
- Path analysis tested the direct and indirect effects of maternal, paternal and child risk factors, maternal supportiveness, and father’s cognitive stimulation on child outcomes.

Participants:
- 4,200 children participated; no gender information was reported. Average number of children in household = 1.79 (SD=2.08)
- Racial/ethnic composition of children: 61% White, 25% Hispanic, 7% Other.
- Average mothers’ age = 29.57 years (SD= 5.77 years); 36% less than high school ed., 29% high school or GED, 21% college.
- Average fathers’ age = 31.98 years (SD= 6.42 years); 20% less than high school ed., 19% high school or GED, 37% college.
- Median household income = $40,001-$50,000; 15% were below the poverty threshold.

Limitations:
- Several important risk factors (e.g., legal involvement) were not measured.
- Some variables (e.g., relationship conflict) were assessed via screeners rather than complete assessment instruments.
- Only biological mothers and fathers were assessed; thus, these findings may not apply to children in other kinds of home environments.
- Observational data was only collected of maternal behavior; paternal behavior was not assessed.

Assessing Research that Works

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Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications

Overall Quality Rating: ⭐⭐⭐⭐