

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

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

Cabrera, N. J., Fagan, J., Wight, V., & Schadler, C. (2011). Influence of mother, father, and child risk on parenting and children's cognitive and social behaviors. *Child Development, 82*(6), 1985-2005. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01667.x

SUMMARY: The families of 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 nine 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 due to the reduced quality of mother-child interactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Facilitate support groups for military families to help them cope with the unique stressors of military life and the stressors associated with parenting
- Collaborate with organizations connected with military parents to reduce family risk factors that may negatively affect child social and cognitive outcomes

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Disseminate information regarding normative social and cognitive development throughout the developmental stages and resources for military parents with concerns about their child's development
- Provide military parents courses on how to increase parental supportiveness when parenting young children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs that enhance military families parenting skills
- Recommend education for service providers working with military families regarding the unique risk factors associated with military service that may negatively influence children's cognitive and social development

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Registered birth data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) vital statistics system were used to select the sample.
- 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 were collected at 9, 24, and 48 months after the child's birth and at kindergarten entry.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 4,200 children and their parents; no gender information was reported.
- The average number of children per household was 1.8 (SD = 2.08), and the majority of children in the sample were White (61%).
- On average mothers were 29.6 years old and most had less than a high school education (36%); the average age of fathers was 32 years and most were college educated (37%).

LIMITATIONS

- Several important risk factors (e.g., legal involvement) were not measured, which could influence the results.
- 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, limiting what can be understood regarding parenting behaviors influence on children's development.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conducted a longitudinal study to examine how the influence of risk factors on child development changed over time
- Examine the unique risk factors in military families that could influence child development
- Continue to examine how fathers' risk influences child developmental outcomes

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