

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Nonresident Fathers' Financial Support, Informal Instrumental Support, Mothers' Parenting, and Child Development in Single-Mother Families with Low Income

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**SUMMARY:** Single mothers and their children were followed over the first five years of the child's life to examine the relationships among nonresidential fathers' financial and informal instrumental support, mothers' parenting and parenting stress, and their children's behavioral and cognitive development over time. Nonresidential fathers' financial support was directly associated with children's cognitive development.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Nonresident fathers' financial support directly improved child cognitive development at the fifth year of the study (age five).
- Nonresident father financial support indirectly improved child developmental outcomes at years three and five via mothers' parenting stress.
- Fathers' informal instrumental support had a direct effect on child cognitive development at age five, and indirect effects on child outcomes through mothers' parenting stress.
- Mothers with higher levels of instrumental support were more likely to have less economic hardship, which in turn alleviates mothers' parenting stress and thereby promotes child development.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with other professionals in the field about ways to support single military mothers
- Facilitate support groups for single military mothers with children to increase kinship among those families

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for nonresidential military fathers, teaching effective means of maintaining an active part in their children's lives and emphasizing the clear benefits of financial support on child development
- Teach skills to support success in school and employment as part of their curricula for military parents

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote military fathers involvement in their children's lives, which may include increased flexibility in tour of duty hours to allow for quality time with their children
- Continue to support programs that offer resources and services to single military mothers

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## METHODS

- Data were drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study, a longitudinal birth cohort study of approximately 4,200 children born between 1998-2000 in 20 U.S. cities.
- Data from birth interviews (Time 1), one year-follow-up survey (Time 2), three year-follow-up survey (Time 3), three year in-home study (Time 3), and five year in-home study (Time 5) were used.
- A subset of low-income single-mothers and their children were included in the present study, using 300% of the federal poverty line to determine income eligibility.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Six hundred seventy mothers and their children (356 boys and 332 girls) were included in this study. Fifty percent had one child and 26% had two children.
- Mean maternal age at Time 1 was 24.30 (SD = 5.20) years and the majority of participants were African American (73%).
- Thirty-five percent of the mothers had completed high school and 33% had some education beyond high school.
- At Time 1, 53% of mothers were employed, and 45% received public support (public assistance or food stamps).

## LIMITATIONS

- Fathers' instrumental support was included in a general instrumental support question as answered by the mothers; this may not be an accurate measure of this construct.
- This study did not measure the multidimensional nature of social support and the potential differential effects of it making it difficult to understand how other types of support influence child outcomes.
- This study did not measure changes in the amount of fathers' financial support over time, which may have important implications on the results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore nonresident fathers' financial support using a longitudinal study design and measure changes in support over time
- Use measures to explore multiple dimensions and sources of social support, especially for military mothers
- Conduct a similar study with military families

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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