

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Fathers and Mothers at Play with their 2- and 3-Year-Olds: Contributions to Language and Cognitive Development

Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Shannon, J. D., Cabrera, N. J., & Lamb, M. E. (2004). Fathers and mothers at play with their 2- and 3-year-olds: Contributions to language and cognitive development. *Child Development*, 75(6), 1806-1820. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2004.00818.x

SUMMARY: A longitudinal, observational study of children at 24 and 36 months old evaluated the effect of parent-child interactions, and father-child interactions in particular, on children's cognitive and language development. Results suggest that positive parent-child interactions significantly influence child development, and that fathers have both direct and indirect influences on child outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Fathers' and mothers' positive parenting (characterized by sensitivity, positive regard, and cognitive stimulation), as well as parental education, marital status, and income were associated with higher cognitive and language scores at 24 and 36 months.
- Fathers' supportive parenting predicted child outcomes beyond the effect of mothers' supportive parenting, suggesting independent and direct influence of fathers' parenting.
- Parental education was a robust predictor of child outcomes, even after accounting for positive support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Encourage fathers' involvement in programs related to improving children's functioning
- Increase awareness about the relationships between positive parenting strategies and positive child outcomes

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Develop curricula that teach positive parenting strategies, especially to new parents
- Offer classes to parents of children with cognitive delays about ways they can support their children and strategies to improve their cognitive and language skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend routine screening of children who are at-risk of cognitive delays for early detection of difficulties
- Support initiatives that increase training for professionals to teach families about positive parenting

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METHODS

- Data were gathered from families who participated in the National Early Head Start evaluation study.
- Children were administered measures of cognitive and language development. Parents participated in semi-structured, parent-child interactions that were coded along three positive and three negative parenting dimensions.
- Data were collected from parents and children when the child was 24 months and 36 months.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 290 resident fathers and their partners, along with a child enrolled in the Early Head Start program. Only 111 families had data at both time points.
- In this sample, 60% of fathers were White, 22% were Black, 15% Latino, and 3% other (similar racial/ethnic background reported for mothers).
- About half of participating children were males and average age at Time 1 was 25.01 months (SD = 1.40) and at Time 2 was 37.10 months (SD = 1.61).

LIMITATIONS

- Demographic data of families who completed data at both time points differed significantly from those who did not, which may indicate that the two groups differ in ways that were not addressed in the study.
- Parenting characteristics were based on a 10-minute videotaped interaction, which may not accurately reflect overall parenting characteristics of the families observed.
- There was a restricted range of negative parenting behavior in the study, precluding stringent tests of the association between negative parenting and child outcomes.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include a larger, more representative samples to determine whether the findings generalize to other families
- Explore multiple methods and informants to characterize parenting behavior
- Conduct a longer study period to evaluate the long-term effect of those parenting behaviors on child cognitive and language development

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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