

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Family Risks and Protective Factors: Pathways to Early Head Start Toddlers' Social-Emotional Functioning

Whittaker, J. E. V., Harden, B. J., See, H. M., Meisch, A. D., & Westbrook, T. R. (2011). Family risks and protective factors: Pathways to Early Head Start toddlers' social-emotional functioning. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 26, 74-86. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2010.04.007

**SUMMARY:** Children from high-risk environments (e.g., adolescent motherhood, homelessness) are more likely to have social-emotional dysfunction than children from low-risk environments; however, positive parenting may serve as a protective factor. This longitudinal study assessed 114 mother-toddler dyads from Early Head Start families over two 2.5-hour home visits, six months apart. Results revealed that positive parenting (defined by maternal sensitivity) served as a protective factor for toddlers from high-risk families.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The more family risk factors (e.g., inadequacy of family resources, maternal depression) toddlers experienced, the more likely they would show social-emotional dysfunction (e.g., aggressive behaviors, low social competency).
- A high level of maternal sensitivity protected toddlers from being influenced by family risk factors.
- Older mothers (e.g., over 30 years of age) had higher level of maternal sensitivity than younger mothers.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate Service members and military spouses about ways to develop positive parenting skills
- Help Service members and their spouses identify appropriate resources to support them as they improve their parenting behaviors

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer additional support (e.g., home visits, free workshops) to military families whose children are at a higher risk for functioning problems due to risk factors such as dual-military parents, single-parent, etc.
- Develop workshops for Service members and their spouses on how to increase their parental sensitivity

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness on military bases (e.g., flyers, campaign) regarding the important influence of positive parenting on children's social-emotional functioning
- Encourage the development and continuation of parenting programs that promote positive parenting

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited from Early Head Start centers, and to qualify for the study, they had to be from high-risk families.
- Assessments were conducted over two home visits (2.5 hours each), approximately six months apart; family risk and maternal sensitivity were assessed at Time One, and toddlers' social-emotional functioning was assessed at Time Two.
- Data were analyzed to examine the association between family risk and toddlers' social-emotional functioning, as well as the role maternal sensitivity has on this association.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 114 mother-child dyads; half of the children were male ( $n = 57$ ).
- The average age of mothers at Time One was 26.14 years (age range = 15-51 years,  $SD = 6.64$ ) and the average age of children at Time One was 16.41 months (age range = 3-25 months,  $SD = 5.97$ ).
- The majority of mothers were Black (74%), followed by Latino (14%), White (4%), Native American (4%), and other (4%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Children in the study were between 3-25 months old, so results of the study cannot be generalized to children who are older.
- The sample was homogeneous (i.e., mostly Black), which limited the generalizability of the findings to other racial groups.
- Most of the measures (e.g., family risk, child functioning) were based on mothers' self-report; therefore, the relationship between family risk and child functioning might be amplified due to shared source.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Recruit a more diverse sample that includes families of multiple race/ethnicity backgrounds and various socioeconomic status to increase the generalizability of the study
- Gather data that includes a broader age range of children to examine whether older and younger children benefit from positive parenting equally
- Include fathers in the study to get a more comprehensive picture of how parenting influences child outcomes

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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