



Research Brief

Family Stress Processes Underlying Material Hardship and Parental Detachment and Warmth Amongst Racially Diverse Fathers and Mothers with Low Income

Key Findings

- Material hardship was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms for both mothers and fathers.
- For both mothers and fathers, depressive symptoms mediated the links between material hardship and higher levels of destructive interparental conflict.
- For both mothers and fathers, depressive symptoms mediated the links between material hardship and lower levels of parental warmth.
- For mothers, maternal destructive interparental conflict mediated the links between maternal depressive symptoms and higher levels of maternal detachment.
- For fathers, paternal destructive interparental conflict mediated the links between paternal depressive symptoms and lower levels of maternal detachment. This result suggests a compensatory mechanism whereby when fathers report more negative conflict with mothers, mothers compensate for such poor interparental functioning by increasing emotional engagement with their young children.

About this Study

The family stress model was applied to examine the associations between material hardship, parental depressive symptoms, destructive interparental conflict, and parental emotional availability. This study contributes novel information to the literature by including data from both mothers and fathers from racially diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, using multimethod data (observational and survey), and examining fathers' residential status as a moderator. Participants (n = 858) were racially and ethnically diverse families with preschoolers and low income from the Building Strong Families project. Mothers primarily reported on material hardship, and both mothers and fathers reported on their depressive symptoms, destructive interparental conflict, and warmth. The two-bags task was employed to assess both parents' detachment. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the links between material hardship and parental warmth and detachment, with depressive symptoms and destructive conflict as mediators. Material hardship was linked with higher maternal and paternal depressive symptoms, which were each, respectively, associated with mothers' and fathers' destructive conflict. Subsequently, maternal destructive interparental conflict was linked with higher, but paternal destructive interparental conflict linked with lower, maternal detachment. For both parents, depressive symptoms were linked with lower warmth. Fathers' resident status did not moderate examined family processes. Fathers and mothers with low income share similar and different pathways by which material hardship impacts their emotional availability toward their preschoolers. Importantly, the findings point to targeting parental depressive symptoms and maternal destructive interparental conflict to facilitate positive parenting in diverse families.

Conclusion

Family stress processes can compromise parents' abilities to engage in positive parenting that helps them build strong emotional connections with their young children. Fathers and mothers in our study shared both similar and different pathways by which material hardship impacted their parental detachment and warmth. Importantly, the results suggest parental depressive symptoms and maternal destructive interparental conflict as potential targets for family strengthening policy and programmatic interventions to alleviate the negative effects of material hardship on parenting in families with low income.

About the researchers

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