



Research Brief

Shared Parental Responsiveness Among Fathers and Mothers with Low Income and Early Child Outcomes

Key Findings

- Both mothers and fathers from low-income contexts displayed moderate levels of parental responsiveness.
- Fathers' and mothers' shared parental responsiveness was significantly associated with higher levels of their preschoolers' prosocial behaviors.
- Fathers' and mothers' shared parental responsiveness was also significantly associated with higher levels of their preschoolers' receptive language.
- Fathers' resident status—whether fathers consistently lived with the mothers since the focal children's births—did not moderate any of the examined relationships.

About this Study

Both fathers' and mothers' parental responsiveness are key contributors to their young children's development. However, the ways in which fathers and mothers work as a system, as well as the role of shared parental responsiveness in child development, are not well understood, especially among families from low-income contexts. Informed by the family systems theory, the current study aimed to examine whether shared parental responsiveness between fathers and mothers with low income was associated with preschoolers' developmental outcomes.

For the current study, participants were from the Building Strong Families project, a racially diverse group of families from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (N = 1,173). Fathers' and mothers' parental responsiveness were observed during father-child and mother-child interactions using the two-bags task. Preschoolers' child behavior problems, prosocial behaviors, and receptive language served as developmental outcomes of interest. A common fate approach to dyadic analysis was employed to create shared responsiveness and individual residual variance latent variables, which the child outcomes were regressed onto. Moderation analysis by fathers' resident status was conducted.

The common fate modeling results showed that shared responsiveness positively predicted preschoolers' prosocial behaviors ($B = 0.33, p < .001$) and receptive language ($B = 14.85, p < .001$), above and beyond individual residual variance. Neither shared parental responsiveness ($B = 0.05, SE = 0.03, p = .088$) nor individual residual variance ($B = 0.01, SE = 0.01, p = .085$) was significantly associated with child behavior problems. Furthermore, fathers' resident status did not moderate any of the examined relationships, suggesting that shared parental responsiveness and its associations with preschoolers' developmental outcomes operate similarly across resident and nonresident father families.

Conclusion

There may be benefits to young children's development when mothers and fathers from low-income contexts demonstrate shared responsiveness. Interventions serving families with low income could help strengthen mother-father shared responsiveness to promote child development. For example, in early parent education programs (including home visiting), this may take the form of encouraging fathers and mothers to be aware of how they and their partners display responsiveness toward their children and work toward aligning their responsiveness behaviors and, more broadly, coordinating their parenting styles to work as a joint team and thus promote their children's healthy development.

About the researchers

Dr. Joyce Y. Lee, Assistant Professor at OSU CSW with a research focus informing child welfare policies and practices to improve children's health outcomes and strengthen children's relationships with their family members. Dr. Shawna J. Lee, Professor at University of Michigan School of Social Work whose research primarily focuses on child maltreatment prevention, fathers' parenting behaviors and father-child relations, and the effects of parental corporal punishment on child wellbeing. Dr. Kaitlin Ward is a Research Scientist at the University of California-Berkeley's School of Social Work. Her research focuses on parenting, child maltreatment, family relations, and child development. Dr. Garrett T. Pace, Assistant Professor at University of Nevada, Las Vegas researches family processes, correlations and consequences of family violence, and prevention of family violence. Olivia D Chang is a PhD student at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. Their research focuses on parenting, child development, family relations, and health and health disparities.

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