

The quality of the home environment, especially the early home environment, has been shown to have large and lasting consequences for children's healthy development and future success (Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005; Heckman, 2006; Cavanaugh, Schiller, and Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Simons, Johnson and Conger, 1994; Teachman, 2002). Yet, dimensions of parent behavior, such as nurturance and teaching are unequally distributed across households due to the intergenerational transmission of parental behaviors as well as the constraints on parental resources. Family structure and changes in family structure are two important mechanisms through which the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage plays out. Children from advantaged families are much more likely to grow up in resource rich environments than children from disadvantaged families and their environments are more likely to be stable (McLanahan, 2007).

Our research examines how shifts in the relationship status of the mother are associated with a variety of observed parenting behaviors by the mother during early childhood. Mothers' parenting behavior is observed along a number of dimensions which measure: punitive punishment, emotional responsiveness, verbal and/or social skills and low language literacy. In an improvement on previous studies, we compare a number of ways of measuring family transitions and relationships. Not only do we consider the impact of exiting, entering, and undergoing a series of relationship transitions, but we also examine whether early transitions have a persistent direct effect on parenting and/or whether these transitions have an indirect effect on later parenting via their effects on earlier parenting behavior. Further, this research examines both coresident and noncoresident relationships as potential sources of instability that influence parenting behavior. We utilize the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study data and a path analysis approach to understand these relationships during the first five years of the child's life. With an oversample non-marital births, these data are ideal for examining how family structures and dynamics vary by socioeconomic status and race.

Theoretical Model and Expectations

The spillover hypothesis (Engfer, 1988), drawn from the relationship quality literature, posits that the positive and negative interactions between romantic partners can in turn affect the parent-child relationship. There is strong support for this association as it relates to relationship quality and parental engagement (Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Erel and Burman, 1995; Kitzmann, 2000; Krishnakumar and Buehler, 2000; McHale, 1995, White, 1999). The formation, dissolution, or continuation of a relationship is expected to affect the degree of social support a mother receives and her wellbeing. Empirical evidence suggests that exiting a relationship can have consequences for both the mental and physical health of the mother (Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; Lorenz, Simmons, and Chao, 1996), and that there is stress related to role adjustment following the exit or entrance of a relationship (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington and Stanley Hagan, 1997; Simons, 1996). Additionally, research highlights the importance of material consequences associated with changes in family structure (Bianchi, Subaiya and Kahn, 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Therefore, a relationship between changes in family structure and parenting may also be operating through overlapping financial and residential changes. All of these associated changes may contribute to the energy and time a mother has to parent.

From the literature, we have isolated a number of potentially salient factors in the relationship between family change and parenting. First, there is reason to expect that there are short and long term consequences associated with change in family structure (Amato, 2000; Amato and Keith, 1991; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). To address this, we examine both recent and early changes and how such changes may influence the early parenting behavior of mothers along the dimensions of punitive punishment, emotional responsiveness, verbal and/or social skills and language literacy. This is modeled in the following way; we examine how changes in family structure in the first year of life of a child (early), and changes between years 1 and 3 (recent) *directly* impact parent behavior at year 3. Further, we examine how these early changes as well as how changes between year 3 and 5 *directly* impact parenting at year 5. Finally, we examine how early changes may have an *indirect* relationship on mothers' parenting behaviors at year 5 that operates through raising or lowering the level of punitive punishment, emotional responsiveness, verbal and/or social skills and language literacy between year 3 and 5.

Second, the potential impact of the changing nature of the family should be broadly conceptualized and tested. The ways in which a family can change have become increasingly complex; such complexity is, in part, a function of the increase in nonmarital childbearing, and the rise in cohabitation. While there has been considerable study of how the relationship between biological parents is associated with parenting behaviors (Cox et al., 1999; Erel and Burman, 1995), nontraditional families have been less frequently incorporated into this research (Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Osborne and McLanahan, 2007). Given that a substantial number of women give birth outside of marriage (Hamilton et al., 2005; McLanahan et al., 2005), and that women may leave a marriage or cohabitation during the early years of a child's life, we must consider the possible impacts of entering and exiting unions of varying formality; including noncoresident relationships, cohabitating relationships and marriages. Further, it is important to consider not only whether such unions involve a biological or a new partner, termed a *social father*, but whether such changes have more severe impacts when a mother experiences a series of relationship transitions in a short period of time.

Data and Methods

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS); this study uses a longitudinal birth-cohort design and is nationally representative of births in cities with 200,000 or more with appropriate weighting (see Reichman et al for detailed sampling information). The FFCWS follows children born between 1998 and 2000 (N=4, 898), of which approximately 75% were born to unmarried women; data was collected from both mothers and fathers at birth, and at one, three and five years following birth. Additionally, we utilize a special In-Home module added during the three and five year data collections designed to assess the physical environment and parenting through direct observation. Approximately 80 % of those in the core survey also took part in the In-Home survey, with approximately 65 % completing both the survey and the observational component. We use path analysis in a structure equation framework to understand the relationship between family change and parenting, this technique is appropriate for examining the direct and indirect impact of factors over a

small number of time points. Fit of the structural equation models is assessed using the standard measures: χ^2 (chi-square) values, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA).

Measures

Parenting

Mothering behavior is measured using an In-Home survey, in which, the interviewer was asked whether they observed a specific behavior. These assessments are summed to create the subscale, with higher values indicating more positive mothering behavior. These items are combined into a series of subscales capturing punitive punishment, emotional responsiveness, verbal and/or social skills and low language literacy (Bradley and Caldwell, 1977; Fuligni, Han and rooks-Gunn, 2004; Leventhal, Martin and Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Linver, Brooks-Gunn, and Cabrera, 2004; Selner-O'Hagan et al., 2004). The subscales are examined separately, as well as jointly. The nonpunitive scale includes the following items: mother does not shout, express annoyance, spank, scold or criticize. The emotionally responsive scale consists of the following: mother talks with child two or more times during the visit, responds to the child's questions orally, praises the child during the visit, voices positive feelings toward the child, kisses or hugs the child. The verbal/social scale is measured by whether the mother's speech is audible, whether she initiates a verbal exchange with the observer, and whether she converses freely and easily during the visit. The language/literacy scale is the only scale that includes some items based on mother's reports and includes items such as the types of toys the child has in the house, number of books in the house, and the mother regularly reading and telling stories to the child.

Changes in Family Structure

We initially measure three types of changes in family structure: transitioning into a relationship, out of a relationship, and both into and out of a relationship. A transition into a relationship includes 1) a transition from a cohabitating relationship, with a social or biological father, to a marital union, 2) from single with no coresidential partner to a cohabitating union, or from 3) single with no coresidential partner to a marital union with social or biological father. Transitions out of a relationship includes moving into the single state from a marriage or a from a cohabitating union with a social or biological father. Experiencing both moves during a time period includes leaving a relationship with the biological father and entering a relationship with a social father or leaving a social father and entering a relationship with a new social father. Final analyses will also examine whether the entrance, exit and number of noncoresidential relationships between survey waves are a significant source of instability.

Additional Measures

We consider changes in income, residential moves, and maternal stress as mediating factors. We control for the standard set of demographic controls including the

mother's age, race/ethnicity, education and income/poverty level. We also control for additional measures that have been found to be predictive of family change and parenting including: family structure at the birth of the child, relationship instability prior to the birth, child gender, low birth weight, number of previous children, mother's self-reported health, as well as drinking and drug usage (Lundberg 2005; Reichman et al. 2004). Final analyses will also examine whether race/ethnicity, education level and birth order are appropriate as controls, or are best considered as potential moderating factors..

Preliminary results indicate that entering into a relationship with the biological father in the first year after the child's birth, or between year 1 and 3 directly increases the quality of parenting behaviors. Entering a relationship with a social father between year 1 and 3 increases the quality of early parenting as well. Leaving a relationship during either of these two time periods has a negative effect on early parenting. Thus, we see independent effects of both early and recent transitional behavior on parenting. We also find that early entrances into coresidential relationships have positive indirect effects, and early exits have negative indirect effects on parenting at year 5 that operate through their influence on early parenting.

Citations available upon request.