



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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Maternal Stress and Mothering Behaviors in Stable and Unstable Families

Background

A secure attachment between mother and child is a child's most important resource for navigating stressful life events. Negative mothering behaviors, such as harsh punishment and neglect, deter the development of a secure attachment and are strongly associated with consequent child behavioral problems. Positive mothering behaviors, such as frequent playful interaction, help generate secure attachments.

However, mothers may differ in their ability to generate secure attachments with their child. Adequate levels of economic resources and emotional support help mothers parent optimally by controlling maternal stress levels. Unfortunately, the degree of available resources and support varies across family types. A marriage generally offers the highest economic resources and most emotional support, whereas single mother families usually have the least resources.

In addition to family structure, family instability may also affect mothering behaviors. Family instability disrupts the normal functions of the household and prevents the mother from being able to focus clearly on the child and provide optimal parenting.

This brief looks at whether family structure (e.g., relationship status and number of parents in the household) and family instability (e.g., whether the parent's relationship has changed since the child's birth) are related to maternal stress and differences in mothering behaviors. Specifically, are there differences in maternal stress and mothering behaviors across stably married, cohabiting, visiting (defined as mother reporting a romantic relationship with the father, but not living with him), and single-mother (defined as mother reporting no romantic relationship with the child's father) families? Does family instability have a negative impact on maternal stress and mothering behaviors?

Data and Measures

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [see box on back] to examine the differences in maternal

Table 1: Family Structure and Maternal Stress Results from Ordinary Least Squares Regression

Family Structure	Maternal Stress
(Married)	
Cohabiting	-.02
Visiting	-.09
Single	.21 ^{***a}

** $\leq .05$

a. denotes coefficient is significantly different from cohabitators and visitors at $p \leq .05$

stress and mothering behaviors across stable family structures, and between stable and unstable families. The sample includes 3,107 mothers who were interviewed at baseline and at the one-year follow-up.

Family structure is defined by the mother's relationship with her child's biological father at the child's birth and one year later. Families can be married, cohabiting, visiting, or single-mother. A stable family is defined as the mother reporting no change in her relationship status with her child's biological father from her child's birth to one year later, while an unstable family is marked by a change in relationship status. Changes include separation, when the baby's father moves out of the household or no longer has a romantic relationship with the baby's mother, or unification, when the relationship moves closer together through cohabitation or marriage.

We also consider the impact of the mother's background characteristics, economic resources, and emotional support from her child's father on her mothering behaviors. Age, race, education, religiosity, immigrant status, and number of children comprise the mother's background characteristics. Economic resources are represented by the mother's household income to poverty ratio measured at baseline and one year, and employment in the

Table 2: Low Playful Interaction/Spanking across Stable Families Using Logistic Regression Models (Odds Ratios)

	Low Playful Interaction		Spanked in Prior Month	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Family Structure				
(Married)				
Cohabiting	1.05	.85	1.16	.85
Visiting	1.61	1.37	1.77+	.78
Single	1.74**	1.41	2.13***	.89
Background Characteristics				
(White)				
Black		1.81**		1.82**
Hispanic		1.72**		.99
Foreign born		2.26***		.39***
(<High school)				
High school		.60**		1.19
Some college		.47***		1.29
College		.39***		1.51
Economic Resources				
Poverty ratio (baseline)				.99
Poverty ratio (1 year)				.87**
Employed prior week				1.11
Emotional Support				
Supportiveness (baseline)				.86
Relationship quality (1)				.89
Maternal Stress				
				1.09

***p ≤ .001 **p ≤ .01 +p ≤ .10

week prior to the one-year follow-up survey. Emotional support is based on the mean of three questions regarding the father's support, love, and affection. It is also measured by the mother's general perception of the quality of her relationship with the child's father.

Maternal stress is based on four questions about how much the mother agrees that "being a parent is harder than she thought," "taking care of children is more work than pleasure," she feels "trapped by parental responsibilities," and how often she "feels tired and worn out from raising her family."

We examine two domains of mothering behaviors at the one-year follow-up: playful interaction and spanking. A scale for playful interaction is based on the mean response to five questions regarding the number of days per week the mother does certain activities with her child. Playful interaction is coded as low if mothers engage in these behaviors an average of four days a week or less, which reflects the bottom 25 percent. The spanking outcome is based on whether the mother reports spanking her one-year-old child in the prior month.

Differences Across Stable Family Structures

In contrast to previous studies, mothers who are romantically involved with their child's biological father during the child's

first year report similar levels of maternal stress, regardless of whether they are married, cohabiting or visiting (see Table 1). However, single mothers report significantly higher levels of stress than all other mothers in stable relationships.

Mothers who live with their child's biological father over the child's first year, whether married or cohabiting, also have comparable odds of reporting low playful interaction and spanking their child (see Table 2). Mothers who do not live with their child's father, especially single mothers, are significantly more likely to report low playful interaction, but the difference is explained by differences in mothers' demographic characteristics (e.g., race, immigrant status, and education).

Living separately is also related to higher odds of spanking. The difference in spanking between family structures is explained by a combination of differences in demographic and economic characteristics. For example, black mothers are more likely than other mothers to spank their children, and black mothers are also more likely to be in a non-coresidential union. Spanking is largely related to race, ethnicity, and income, but is not influenced by family structure, per se.

Differences Between Stable and Unstable Families

Next we examine how relationship transitions might affect mothers' stress and mothering behaviors. Interestingly, among married and cohabiting mothers, there are no differences in maternal stress between mothers who are stably married or cohabiting and those who separate (see Table 3). However, visiting mothers who break up with the father of their child report significantly higher levels of maternal stress compared to their stable counterparts. Thus, higher levels of initial commitment are not necessarily associated with greater stress resulting from separation.

There are no significant differences in the odds of low playful interaction between mothers who separate and their stable counterparts, even among visiting mothers who break up. Married and cohabiting couples who separate do report more spanking than their stable counterparts. Variation in spanking among cohabiters who separate and their stable counterparts is explained by differences in background characteristics. However, the difference between mothers who separate from marriage and stably married mothers persists after controlling for background characteristics. The change in the separated mother's income over the first year appears to explain the significant variation in spanking.

Table 3: Maternal Stress and Mothering Behaviors Among Stable and Unstable Families

Results from Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models			
Maternal Stress	(1)	(2)	(3)
Separated married v. stable married	-.10	-.13	-.27**
Separated cohabitor v. stable cohabitor	.12	.09	-.03
Separated visitor v. stable visitor	.33**	.29**	.21+
Results from Logistic Regression Models (Odds Ratios)			
Low Playful Interaction	(1)	(2)	(3)
Separated married v. stable married	.88	.51	.39+
Separated cohabitor v. stable cohabitor	1.44	1.49	1.15
Separated visitor v. stable visitor	.79	.67	.57
Results from Logistic Regression Models (Odds Ratios)			
Spanked in Prior Month	(1)	(2)	(3)
Separated married v. stable married	2.80**	2.55*	2.12
Separated cohabitor v. stable cohabitor	1.55+	1.39	1.10
Separated visitor v. stable visitor	1.17	1.14	1.00

(1) bivariate

(2) controls for age, race, foreign born, religiosity, education, prior children, baseline poverty ratio, and supportiveness

(3) also controls for one year poverty ratio and relationship quality

**p ≤ .01 *p ≤ .05 +p ≤ .10

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Most studies comparing married and cohabiting parents find higher levels of maternal stress and poorer mothering behaviors in cohabiting parent families. Our current results find,

however, that family structure and family instability do not significantly affect a mother's stress level or behavior with her young child once differences in a mother's demographic characteristics are taken into account. Furthermore, mothers who experience instability over their child's first year have similar stress levels and mothering behaviors as compared to mothers in stable relationships, with few exceptions.

Nearly all differences in maternal stress and mothering behaviors across stable family structures and between stable and unstable families are explained by a mother's demographic characteristics, with the exception that single mothers report higher levels of maternal stress. Education and race, in particular, strongly predict a mother's interaction with her young child. However, these are factors that marriage cannot affect. Thus, these mothers would likely report similar mothering behaviors, whether or not they lived with their child's father.

Marriage itself is not responsible for the way a mother interacts with her child. Our findings have important implications for policies aimed at promoting marriage among unmarried parents. Those concerned about the effect that family structure and stability have on child well-being should consider education, individual parenting practices, and relationship quality in addition to focusing on marriage promotion. Further research is needed to analyze how these other factors directly or indirectly affect maternal stress and mothering behaviors.

Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies

2004-12-FF Lenna Nepomnyaschy Jul 2004 "Child Support and Father-Child Contact In Fragile Families"

2004-11-FF Ronald Mincy, Irwin Garfinkel, Lenna Nepomnyaschy Jul 2004 "In-Hospital Paternity Establishment and Father Involvement in Fragile Families"

2004-10 Lonnie Berger Jun 2004 "Children Living Out-of-Home: Effects of Family and Environmental Characteristics"

2004-09-FF Joshua Goldstein, Kristen Harknett Jun 2004 "Parenting Across Racial and Class Lines: Assortative Mating Patterns of New Parents Who Are Married, Cohabiting, Dating, and No Longer Romantically Involved"

2004-08-FF Jean Knab, Sara McLanahan Jun 2004 "Measuring Cohabitation: Does How, When, and Who You Ask Matter?"

2004-07-FF Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman, Heather Koball May 2004 "Bias in Retrospective Reports of Cohabitation Among New Parents"

2004-06-FF Cynthia Osborne May 2004 "The Relationship Between Family Structure and Mothering Behavior within Racial and Ethnic Groups"

2004-05-FF Jean Knab Apr 2004 "Who's In and for How Much? The Impact of Definitional Changes on the Prevalence and Outcomes of cohabitation"

2004-04-FF I-Fen Lin, Sara McLanahan Apr 2004 "Gender Differences in Perceptions of Paternal Responsibility"

2004-03-FF Lauren Rich, Irwin Garfinkel, Qin Gao Apr 2004 "Child Support Enforcement Policy and Unmarried Fathers' Employment in the Underground and Regular Economies"

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Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine whether family structure and family instability are related to maternal stress and differences in mothering behaviors.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies> or email the CRCW at rcw@opr.princeton.edu

This research brief was adapted from "Maternal Stress and Mothering Behavior in Stable and Unstable Families" by Cynthia Osborne. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief is based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the Fragile Families link, click on Publications, then click on Working Papers Series.

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