

Relationship between child’s social-emotional development and social support among single-mother families

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Background

- Single mothers experience elevated levels of poverty and parenting stress (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005).
- This may impact their parenting styles and the emotional climate of the home environment, which in turn may undermine a range of children’s social-emotional development skills (Jiang et al., 2023).
- In contrast, support from various social networks may help single mothers decrease their stress (Choi & Pyun, 2014) and promote children’s social-emotional outcomes (Chu et al., 2010).
- While social support may have unique protective roles in social-emotional development of young children at risk (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), the interplay between different types of social supports and families’ poverty level in predicting children’s social-emotional development is relatively unexplored among single-mother families.

Research Questions

- Are different types of social support directly associated with child’s social-emotional outcomes among single-mother families?
- Is this relationship moderated by mothers’ income level?

Methods

DATA & SAMPLE

- Single-mother families (N = 1,129) from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing study (FFCW)
- Single mothers, unpartnered at Year 3, and their children at Year 5.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics (N = 1,129)

	N / M	% / SD
Mothers’ race/ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	145	12.88%
Black, non-Hispanic	713	63.32%
Hispanic	236	20.96%
Other	32	2.84%
Mother has college degree or higher	332	29.43%
Child is female	556	49.25%
Income 100+% FPL	463	41.01%
Mothers’ age	24.55	5.88

PREDICTORS (AGE 3)

- Social supports:
- Non-resident fathers’ financial support
 - Non-resident fathers’ parenting help
 - Friends/family support
 - Number of public assistance supports

MODERATOR (AGE 3)

Mother’s income level: below 100% federal poverty line [FPL; n = 666] vs. at/above 100% FPL (n = 463).

OUTCOMES (AGE 5)

- Social competence – Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory
- Internalizing problems – Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
- Externalizing problems - CBCL

ANALYSIS

Hierarchical linear regressions; variables entered in the following order: i) predictors, ii) covariates, and iii) interaction terms (each social support X income level).

Results

Table 1
Regression analyses for single mothers’ social supports and children’s social-emotional outcomes (N = 1,129)

Predictor	Social Competence				Internalizing Problems				Externalizing problems			
	β	SE	95% CI	p	β	SE	95% CI	p	β	SE	95% CI	p
(Intercept)	1.97	0.08	1.81, 2.14	<.001**	0.09	0.05	-0.004, 0.18	.06	0.28	0.07	0.14, 0.43	<.001***
Non-resident father provides financial help	0.02	0.03	-0.03, 0.07	0.50	0.04	0.02	0.001, 0.08	.04*	0.03	0.02	-0.02, 0.07	.30
Family/Friends provide financial help	0.03	0.02	-0.02, 0.08	0.20	-0.01	0.02	-0.04, 0.02	.61	0.02	0.02	-0.02, 0.05	.40
No. public assistance supports	-0.003	0.01	-0.02, 0.01	0.60	-0.003	0.01	-0.01, 0.01	.59	0.020	0.01	0.005, 0.03	<.01*
Fathers’ parenting help (days)	0.01	0.01	-0.01, 0.02	0.30	-0.002	0.004	-0.01, 0.01	.61	-0.010	0.01	-0.02, 0.0004	.06
Mothers’ income is 100%+ FPL	0.06	0.03	0.01, 0.11	0.02*	-0.04	0.02	-0.08, -0.01	.01*	-0.004	0.02	-0.05, 0.04	.80
F	7.16***				9.74***				8.44***			
R ²	.11***				.16***				.13***			

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
Note. For parsimony, predictor-only models are presented. Mothers’ race, education, age, parenting stress, and child’s sex were included in the analyses as covariates. None of the interaction terms were significant

Discussion

- Non-resident fathers’ financial help predicted higher internalizing problems
- Number of public assistance programs predicted higher externalizing problems
- Higher mothers’ income independently predicted increased child social competence and decreased internalizing problems but did not moderate any of the associations between social supports and child outcomes.

Implications:

- The counter-intuitive association between public assistance programs and child outcomes could stem from the stigma due to public assistance receipt, the characteristics of mothers who opt for public assistance, or the quality of different types of supports.
- The negative relationship between fathers’ financial help and child outcomes could be explained by possible single-mother housing instability, where financial help might not actually reach mothers.
- The findings prompt examination of the quality of various types of supports and beyond the support existence since the relationships between social supports and child outcomes are complex.

References

