



Instrumental social support, material hardship, personal control and neglectful parenting



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test pathways from perceived instrumental social support to neglectful parenting with two mediating variables—material hardship and personal control. I used a subsample of mothers ($n = 2910$) who participated in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (FFCW) from the birth of their children through age 5. The model fits the data well and the findings supported the proposed pathways among variables. Perceived instrumental social support decreased material hardship and increased personal control. Decreased material hardship and increased personal control in turn decreased neglectful parenting. Decreased material hardship also increased personal control. The study's findings contribute to the design and evaluation of social support prevention programs for child neglect.

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1. Introduction

Child neglect is the most frequent form of child maltreatment in the US (US DHHS, 2011). Although there are difficulties in defining and measuring child neglect, previous studies have identified predictors at the individual and family levels (e.g. Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001; Stith et al., 2009). These include parents' high levels of stress, anger/hyper-reactivity, and impulsivity, low self-esteem, depression, poor relationships with their own parents, experiences of childhood abuse, substance abuse, unemployment, social isolation, single marital status, and poor child-rearing skills. A large family size, low socio-economic status, and rearing a child with externalizing or internalizing behavior are additional risk factors. Many studies also have found that neglectful parents have significantly less social support or social networking compared to non-neglecting parents. Research indicates that neglectful parents have smaller networks of potential sources of support (Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick, & Shilton, 1993; Polansky, Ammons, & Gaudin, 1985) or general network size (Coohey, 1996). They also have less contact with relatives, families and friends (Coohey, 1996, 2007; Gaudin et al., 1993; Giovannoni & Billingsley, 1970). Many of these studies, however, were retrospective and simply compared neglecting and non-neglecting caregivers.

More prospective studies are needed to develop an understanding of whether and how social support can prevent child neglect; and developing such an understanding can contribute to designing and evaluating social support interventions as well as to shedding light on the etiology of child neglect. This study aims to test a pathway model from perceived instrumental social support to neglectful

parenting. The model tests the effects of perceived instrumental social support on neglectful parenting mediated by material hardship and personal control. Material hardship can be a more accurate indicator of financial difficulties (Heflin, London, & Scott, 2011) than income measures such as poverty, a well-known predictor of child neglect (e.g., McSherry, 2004). Among other limitations, the definition of poverty usually does not consider noncash transfers, whereas measures of material hardship directly identify the level at which people can meet their basic necessities using both cash and noncash transfers (Ouellette, Burstein, Long, & Beecroft, 2004). Although measures of material hardship can reflect financial hardship better than poverty, few studies have examined the relationship between material hardship and neglectful parenting. In addition to material hardship, this study examines personal control as a mediator of the effects of perceived social support on neglectful parenting. There are only a few empirical studies that have tested the relationship between personal control and neglectful parenting, a relationship that is supported theoretically by the Double ABCX model.

1.1. The influence of social support on neglectful parenting

Only a few studies have examined the relationship between social support and child maltreatment beyond simple comparisons of maltreating and non-maltreating mothers (Kotch, Browne, Dufort, & Winsor, 1999; Kotch et al., 1997, 1995). Kotch et al. conceptualized social support as the quality of the mothers' relationship with primary intimate and contacts/activities with social network members. In comparison studies, researchers found that child neglect is closely related to social isolation or social support, although they did not reveal how social support or social isolation affects child neglect. In these and other studies, neglectful mothers perceived that they had less support

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(Coohey, 1996; Gaudin et al., 1993; Polansky, Gaudin, Ammons, & Davis, 1985) including child care help (Coohey, 2007; Giovannoni & Billingsley, 1970). These mothers also received less instrumental/tangible and emotional support (Coohey, 1996), and reported that network members were critical in their remarks (Gaudin et al., 1993). Studies also indicate that neglectful parents have smaller networks of potential sources of support (Gaudin et al., 1993; Polansky, Ammons, & Gaudin, 1985) or general network size (Coohey, 1996). These parents had less contact with relatives, families, and friends (Coohey, 1996, 2007; Gaudin et al., 1993; Giovannoni & Billingsley, 1970).

Beyond simple comparisons of neglecting and non-neglecting mothers, Kotch et al. (1999, 1997, 1995) found that received social support predicted reduced child maltreatment reports, but the relationship depended on the level of life events or depression. In other words, they found interaction effects using cross-sectional data. High social support predicted less likelihood of child maltreatment reports for mothers with low depression and few life changes, for mothers with high total life events, and for mothers with low positive life changes. In these studies, the number of life events were measured based on mothers' reports on how many events they experienced among 38 life events given by researchers (e.g., marriage or eviction due to failure to pay rent) and how "positive" mothers viewed the event. High social support also predicted less likelihood of substantiated child maltreatment reports for those with high total life events. However, none of these studies was prospective, aiming to reveal the preventive effect of social support on child neglect and the seemingly complicated process.

1.2. The influence of material hardship and personal control on neglectful parenting

In the United States, poverty is usually defined as a family's pre-tax income falling below a government-established threshold based on family size and composition. Although poverty has been shown to be closely related to child neglect (e.g. McSherry, 2004), more recently researchers have found that poverty is an insufficient measure of financial difficulties, and material hardship can be a more accurate indicator of these difficulties (Heflin et al., 2011; Iceland & Bauman, 2007; Short, 2005). Since poverty is based on pre-tax income, it does not take into account taxes, the availability and use of non-income resources, or family expenses, which can significantly increase or decrease the families' ability to meet their basic needs. For example, the official poverty measure does not consider any type of non-cash government assistance, assets, and credit as well as costs for child care or housing. Research suggests that material hardship is a better measure to examine the impact of financial difficulty on parents' and children's behavior or development. For example, studies have found that material hardship mediates the negative impact of poverty on mothers' mental health, parenting, and child development (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002).

Despite the recognition that material hardship is likely a better measure of a family's ability to meet its basic needs, only a few studies have examined the relationship between material hardship and child neglect. For example, Slack et al. (2004) found that material hardship defined as any difficulties in paying rent, utility shutoffs, eviction, and infrequent employment predicted child neglect. In another study, Slack, Holl, Yoo, and Boger (2011) found that economic factors such as public benefits receipt, financial assistance from family members, food pantry use, difficulty paying rent, utility shut-offs, and cutting meals predicted child neglect reported to CPS. According to the researchers, it seems that once families' financial difficulties became heightened, and they sought financial assistance from family members, food pantry use, and receipt of public benefits, which could be considered sources of social support. Although there is a positive relationship between received concrete support and child neglect, it is

not likely that receiving such assistance from social support networks would result in child neglect. More likely, parents were unable to provide for their children's needs before seeking such assistance, but the assistance was not sufficient to provide for these needs. However, the use of cross-sectional data in this study did not allow establishing causal order between child neglect and receipt of financial resources from these sources of support.

As for personal control, researchers found that a lack of personal control predicts neglectful parenting (Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009). Also as a proxy for personal control, when caregivers perceive low parental power in parent-child interactions, they are more likely to abuse or neglect their children (Bugental & Happaney, 2004). Crittenden (1985) also compared differences between neglecting parents and adequate parents with similar low-income levels. The results suggest that neglecting parents have different patterns of thoughts and behaviors, leading to their believing themselves to be incompetent and helpless, whereas adequate parents think of themselves as competent and positive. Neglecting parents attribute life chances to pure luck beyond their control. Despite the dearth of empirical studies examining personal control and child neglect, there is a theory that supports this relationship. The Double ABCX Model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) states that for a successful environmental adaptation, individuals' perceptions of their situations are more critical than the mere numbers of stressors and resources. Although there are more studies using this model in the health area (e.g. Reichman, Miller, Gordon, & Hendricks-Munoz, 2000), some child welfare researchers have paid attention to this model and tested it empirically (Howze & Kotch, 1984; Kotch et al., 1999, 1997, 1995), using child maltreatment as the outcome of maladjustment to the environment. According to the theory, based on the balance between piled-up demands from stressors (aA factor) and the resources internal and external to a family to meet the demands (bB factor), a family gives a meaning to its life situation or the total crisis situation (cC factor); and based on aA, bB, and cC factors it chooses a cognitive and behavioral response to the situation. Then, as the outcome of coping, a family finally adapts to its environment (xX factor). For example, stressors (aA factor) can include a recent family member's illness or chronic poverty due to teenage motherhood with low education. Resources (bB factor) can include any skills, knowledge of individual family members, communication, coherence among members, or social support from non-family members. Subjective meaning of the situation (cC factor) can include clarifying problems or demands in a way that they are more manageable, decreasing a family's morale, or intensified emotions due to the crisis situation. Based on a family's perception of the balance between the demands and the resources and how it gives a meaning to the situation, a family chooses certain coping behaviors such as denial, blame, active working, or seeking support. Family's adaptation is on a continuum with positive and negative ends – bonadaptation and maladaptation.

Although the Double ABCX model does not specifically mention personal control as a measure of an individual's perceptions of a situation, the model's description of cC factor (the meaning to the situation given by a family) seems to be very close to personal control. In summary, when families have a negative perception that the situation is not manageable or controllable, they do not actively cope with their situation and families might end up mal-adapting, which can include neglecting their children.

1.3. Social support, material hardship, and personal control

Studies have shown that low income families utilize in-kind support from their social network such as food, housing, child care, transportation, and small financial gifts and loans to manage and survive daily demands from work and family and to survive (e.g. Edin & Lein, 1997; Heflin et al., 2011; Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005) more than high income families. In other words, experiencing material hardship leads a family to receive more instrumental social support.

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