



Factors related to parents' engagement in cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving in developing countries: Results from Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 3



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ABSTRACT

Stimulating caregiving practices facilitate early child development and learning. This study examined child-, family-, and country-level predictors of maternal and paternal cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving in 28 low- and middle-income countries, using data from the UNICEF 2005 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 3. The sample included 134,290 children, aged 0–4 years, from 100,270 families. Results indicated that maternal education and the country Human Development Index (HDI), an index reflecting the social and economic development of countries, were significant predictors of parents' caregiving practices and had large effect sizes. Maternal education further moderated the association between the HDI and parents' caregiving practices. The findings have important implications for supporting quality parenting and for promoting the well-being of young children in low- and middle-income countries.

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1. Introduction

Enriching and positive caregiving benefits child development. However, beliefs and practices around quality caregiving often vary greatly within and across nations. Many factors (such as the depiction of caregiving across generations, in society, and through media, as well as actual family caregiving experiences) help formulate parenting beliefs and guide parenting practices (Bornstein & Putnick, 2012). There are multiple dimensions to caregiving (Bornstein, 2006). Two of the most important dimensions are cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving because they relate directly to children's cognitive and socio-emotional development and play critical roles in children's school achievement, skill acquisition, and well-being later in life (Behrman & Urzua, 2013).

Despite the significance of cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving, parents may not always incorporate child-appropriate practices in their interactions with their children, due to the influences of both personal and environmental factors, thus jeopardizing optimal child development.

The inability of parents to adopt child-appropriate caregiving practices poses a particular concern for young children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, as they are especially sensitive to the environment in which they grow (Shonkoff, 2010). Approximately 92% of the children in the world live in low- and middle-income (LAMI) countries (Engle, Rao, & Petrovic, 2013). In these countries, inadequate opportunities for cognitive stimulation at home have been identified as one of the risk factors for child development, while a higher level of educational and language stimulation at home, both key to cognitive and socio-emotional parenting, has been recognized as a protective factor (Wachs & Rahman, 2013). A deeper understanding of the factors influencing parents' caregiving in LAMI countries is particularly important to inform evidence-based decisions about the provision of various supports for quality parenting. By doing so, the detrimental influence of risk factors can be reduced and the optimal effects of protective factors on child development can be bolstered.

Given that the majority of studies on parenting and child development have been conducted in non-LAMI countries, less is known about caregiving in the LAMI countries. This study therefore investigates factors related to maternal and paternal engagement in cognitive and socio-emotional activities with children from LAMI countries through an analysis of the *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey*

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3 (MICS 3), an international survey initiated by UNICEF to monitor the situation of children and women (UNICEF, 2006).

2. Ecological factors related to cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving

Several models of human development have been proposed and used to highlight the crucial interactions between children and the environment in which they live as they develop over time. In particular, the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) has been one of the most influential, offering a comprehensive account of the contextual influences – from the immediate settings of family and school, to the broader cultural values and social customs, and to the changes in environment over time – on child development. A more recent biodevelopmental framework (Shonkoff, 2010) further emphasizes the importance of children having “nurturing, contingent, stable, and predictable” (p. 359) experiences, especially at an early age, to facilitate healthy physical and mental development.

These models (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Shonkoff, 2010) indicate that multiple factors impact the development of young children, including the type of parenting they receive. The ways in which parents care for their children are also shaped by multiple factors (Luster & Ogakaki, 2005): the characteristics of the child (e.g., age, gender), characteristics of the parents themselves (e.g., age, education), immediate family environment (e.g., financial standing, marital relationship), and the broader social context within which families operate (e.g., cultural beliefs, country’s economic development level). Thus, in line with the ecological focus of these approaches, we review past research on the determinants of parenting practices based on (a) the child, (b) the family, and (c) societal characteristics.

2.1. Child characteristics

Every child is an individual, with characteristics that can affect the degree and type of parenting provided by the caregivers. One key characteristic is a child’s age. Past work has shown that during mother-child dyadic activities, mothers were more responsive to older children (Wertsch, McNamee, McLane, & Budwig, 1980), provided younger children with more detailed step-by-step help (Vandermaas-Peeler, Way, & Umpleby, 2002; Vandermaas-Peeler, Way, & Umpleby, 2003), and increased the amount of talk and diversity of vocabulary as their children matured (Rowe, Pan, & Ayoub, 2005). As children transition from preschool to primary school, the focus of parents’ cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving changes from facilitating children’s school-related learning skills to providing motivational support, because parents judge themselves as less able to help with specific school subjects as their children mature (Dauber & Epstein, 1995).

Another important child characteristic is gender. Several studies have shown that parents are more likely to provide enriched caregiving, for example, engage in more responsive interactions, with children who are of the same gender as them than those of the opposite gender (Ivrendi & Isikoglu, 2010; Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998; Tracey & Young, 2002; Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004). Other studies, however, have found that parents’ caregiving practices do not differ between boys and girls (Tulananda & Roopnarine, 2011; Rowe et al., 2005; Hossain, Roopnarine, Ismail, Hashmi, & Sombuling, 2007). The inconsistencies in findings may be due to differences in the samples and activities studied, suggesting the need for further studies.

2.2. Family characteristics

Just as children differ from one another, families often vary along a number of important characteristics. Overall, maternal education predicts a variety of positive parenting practices. For instance, better-educated mothers usually have better access to resources that support their parenting compared to less-educated mothers (LeVine, 2003). Additionally, higher maternal education is related to a more stimulating environment for the child (Ertem et al., 2006) and to increased parental involvement in children’s learning at home (Ozgun & Honig, 2005; Saraff & Srivastava, 2010; Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007). Indeed, because better-educated mothers tend to be more responsive and interactive, higher maternal education is an important protective mechanism for economically disadvantaged children (Walker et al., 2011).

Secondly, a family’s economic environment – i.e., the amount of resources a family has in the household – has an influence on parenting practices. Household resources are positively associated with the degree of support children receive for their language development and learning (Rafferty & Griffin, 2010). Family income is also linked to other risk factors, such as the psychological well-being of the parents and the parents’ subsequent ability to be responsive to their children’s needs (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Garcia-Coll, 2001; Nievar & Luster, 2006). Low-income parents are also more likely to use physical discipline, such as spanking, with their children compared to high-income parents (Berlin et al., 2009).

Thirdly, the location of the household residence (i.e., whether it is urban or rural) is associated with parental caregiving as well, though the literature on this association is relatively scarce. In a study with single-parent African American families, urban parents were more likely to monitor their children’s activities than those living in rural areas (Armistead, Forehand, Brody, & Maguen, 2002). Further studies are needed to elucidate whether the location of children’s residences (urban versus rural) is a consistent and meaningful determinant of parental caregiving practices in multiple countries.

2.3. Societal characteristics

Although all parents, regardless of their circumstances, typically endeavor to nurture and protect their children from harm, child rearing patterns and practices vary markedly in child development expectations across cultures (Bornstein & Putnick, 2012). Socio-contextual and cultural factors can influence parenting practices in two ways. One, they influence the availability of resources to support the development of culturally valued competencies. Two, they influence childrearing behavior through the instantiation of practices endorsed by folk theories of parenting (Ogbu, 1981).

Socio-contextual factors, such as cultural beliefs, influence parenting practices, and can lead to different parenting practices within and across countries. For example, Chinese parents instruct their children in more formal, structured, and direct ways while providing more encouragement than do their European American counterparts (Huntsinger, Jose, Liaw, & Ching, 1997). Chinese parents also provide more specific instruction on certain school subjects, such as mathematics, in their children’s daily lives compared to American parents (Pan, Gauvain, Liu, & Cheng, 2006). These differences reflect the emphasis on academic achievement in Chinese cultures (Rao, Sun, & Zhang, 2014). In terms of discipline, African American parents report more physical discipline strategies than European American and Hispanic American parents (Berlin et al., 2009; Coley, Kull, & Carrano, 2014), reflecting within-country culture differences.

Furthermore, prior studies examined the association of the Human Development Index (HDI) and parents’ caregiving practices.

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