



Family risk profiles and school readiness: A person-centered approach[☆]



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ABSTRACT

With cumulative risk and latent class risk profile models, this study explored how multiple family risk factors experienced during the first three years of life predicted children's school readiness at age four, within a geographically and economically diverse U.S. sample. Using data from the National Institute on Child Health and Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, family risk experiences were best captured by three distinct profiles: (a) low risk (78%), (b) low resourced: single-parent, minority (12%), and (c) low resourced: parental harshness, depressed (10%). Findings indicated that early risk experiences could be described in terms of family risk profiles characterized by both sociodemographic and family processes. Cumulative risk model results suggested that a greater number of risks across infancy, toddlerhood, and early preschool years significantly predicted poorer school readiness outcomes in the prekindergarten year (i.e., lower self-regulation, early math, early literacy, and more behavior problems). Latent class risk profile results provided a similar, yet more nuanced, understanding of the relation between multiple risk and subsequent child outcomes. Specifically, children characterized by the low risk profile exhibited stronger school readiness than children characterized by the low resourced: single, minority profile who in turn exhibited stronger school readiness than those characterized by the low resourced: parental harshness, depressed profile. Results support a dual-approach to modeling family risks through both cumulative and profile analyses, and can inform efforts to integrate services to better identify the co-occurring needs of families with young children most likely to struggle with early school readiness skills.

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Children's earliest experiences within the family context shape many aspects of school readiness before the kindergarten year (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). *School readiness* is a broad set of behaviors and skills that enable children to effectively engage and learn at school, establishing a foundation for long-term achievement outcomes (Duncan et al., 2007). Exposure to multiple, or cumulative, family risk factors (e.g., low household income, maternal depression, parental harshness) during the first three years of life is negatively related to aspects of school readiness, including self-regulation and early math and literacy skills (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Rhoades,

Greenberg, Lanza, & Blair, 2011; Sektnan, McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2010) and is positively related to adjustment challenges, such as behavioral problems (Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1998). Cumulative risk modeling illustrates that the greater number of contextual risks children experience is more detrimental to school readiness than any single risk on its own (e.g., Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). This would suggest that having fewer risks is better overall. Nonetheless, children do not often experience the same combinations of risks, and those differential combinations may have important implications for developmental outcomes, regardless of the total number.

Recent person-centered approaches (e.g., latent class analysis [LCA]) have begun to address the issue of how distinct patterns of risk factors may help explain variation in school readiness (Rhoades et al., 2011; Roy & Raver, 2014), but only among low-income samples. Whether distinct risk combinations influence development differentially in more economically diverse samples (e.g., families

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living below *and* above the poverty line), or how family process risks (e.g., parenting) co-occur with other risk factors to predict school readiness, remains largely unknown. With the present study, we examined how early exposure to combinations of family process and sociodemographic risks intersect, with implications for children's school readiness outcomes during the prekindergarten year (ages 4–5 years), using data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD).

1. Family risks and school readiness skills

Understanding variability in school readiness skills is important because the early childhood years signify a major developmental and social transition for young children (Denham, Warren-Khot, Bassett, Wyatt, & Perna, 2012). The current study focuses on three distinct aspects of school readiness skills during prekindergarten known to have long-term importance for social and academic functioning: early math and literacy achievement, self-regulation, and behavioral adjustment (Duncan et al., 2007; McClelland, Acock, Piccinin, Rhea, & Stallings, 2013). Risky family contexts can compromise children's emerging development in these areas.

Cumulative, co-occurring family risk factors are particularly problematic for school success (Family Life Project (FLP) Key Investigators, 2013; Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012). Children develop within dynamic contexts where they experience contextual risk at different levels (i.e., distal sociodemographic risks, proximal family process risks) and in complex ways (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006). Nuances in combinations of risks may exacerbate the negative influence of low-income households. Specifically, family process risks, such as parenting and home environmental factors, are often conceptualized as mechanisms that explain how multiple, co-occurring sociodemographic risk factors impede children's developmental well-being (Morales & Guerra, 2006; Lengua et al., 2007); however, risk within the family process domain may *magnify* other risk experiences in a child's life, given particular risk combinations. For example, when children experience family process risk factors *in addition* to low-income and other contextual risk factors (i.e., household structure, race/ethnic minority status), they are more likely to experience challenges spanning developmental domains (Evans, Kim, Ting, Tesher, & Shannis, 2007; Schleider, Chorpita, & Weisz, 2013; Swanson et al., 2012). Further, cumulative risk evidence suggests that specific combinations of risk factors that cut across multiple domains (e.g., social and family risk factors) better explain the relation between early risk and academic and behavioral well-being than any single risk factor, or one domain of influence, on its own (e.g., Burchinal, Roberts, Hooper, & Zeisel, 2000; Corapci, 2008).

Moreover, although children living in low-income households disproportionately experience adverse conditions across risk types (Evans, 2004), low family income does not influence child well-being in isolation, but is interrelated with other risk experiences. Thus, in the current study, we strategically selected three sociodemographic risks (i.e., *family income*, *single-parent status*, and *racial/ethnic-minority status*) and three family process risks (i.e., *low cognitive stimulation in the home*, *parental harshness*, and *elevated maternal depressive symptoms*) that are robust predictors of school readiness (e.g., Nesbitt, Baker-Ward, & Willoughby, 2013; Rank & Hirschl, 1999; Sektnan et al., 2010). We chose these specific risk factors for the current study in response to a critique regarding the difficulty of translating LCA research into practical uses because of common use of a large number of indicators that may not be accessible for policy-makers and practitioners (Cook, Roggman, & D'zatko, 2012). Whether and how these risk factors

combine to jointly predict academic, self-regulatory, and behavioral aspects of school readiness is unclear, demonstrating the impetus for this study.

1.1. Sociodemographic risks

Household structure and family income tend to be interrelated, with members of single-parent households more likely to live in poverty than those in dual-parent households (Rank & Hirschl, 1999); however, *single-parent status* appears to have unique negative implications for development across domains (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). For example, compared to households with two parents, children raised in single-parent families struggle more with social and academic adjustment (Astone & McLanahan, 1991), perhaps because of fewer economic and psychological resources to support school readiness (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

Racial/ethnic-minority status, accounting for the effects of low-income, has predicted school readiness challenges across domains (Blair et al., 2011; Nesbitt et al., 2013) for a number of reasons. Greater proportions of U.S. families who identify as a racial/ethnic minority (i.e., Black, Latino) live in and experience deeper or more chronic poverty than White or Asian children (Burchinal & Willoughby, 2013; US Census Bureau, 2004; Wight, Chau, & Aratani, 2011). Additionally, racial/ethnic-minority status increases the likelihood that families face intergenerational discrimination and additional social inequalities that can inhibit access to early childhood education; these factors likely overtax children's underlying physiology through stressed family processes, undermining critical skills for school readiness (Contrada et al., 2000; Farkas, 2003).

1.2. Family process risks

Family process risks, including parenting and home environmental factors, are often conceptualized as proximal process mechanisms that explain how multiple, co-occurring distal sociodemographic risk factors impede developmental well-being (Lengua et al., 2007; Morales & Guerra, 2006); however, there is also the potential for family processes to exacerbate the effects of other sociodemographic risks in a child's life on school readiness competencies (Schleider et al., 2013; Swanson et al., 2012). In addition, although children in low-income homes are more likely to also experience more family-process risks than children in middle- or high-income homes, this is not always the case; there is heterogeneity in risk experiences. In recent years, investigators have started to document the influences of unique and disparate combinations of sociodemographic and family process risks on school readiness skills (Choe, Olson, & Sameroff, 2013; Crosnoe, Leventhal, Wirth, Pierce, & Pianta, 2010). Thus, in addition to modeling family processes within a mediational framework, it is also important to understand how different combinations of family process risks may co-occur with sociodemographic risk factors to differentially predict school readiness.

Cognitive stimulation within the home environment facilitates school readiness skills through cognitively stimulating and challenging activities (McLoyd, 1998; Morrison & Cooney, 2002); conversely, the lack of stimulating activities and learning materials available in the home—particularly among low-income households—acts as a risk factor related to lower self-regulatory skills (Downer & Pianta, 2006; Evans, 2003), and social and academic achievement difficulties (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; Duncan et al., 1994). This may be attributed to fewer opportunities to engage with books or learning activities that encourage paying attention, critical thinking, and appropriate behaviors.

Parental harshness, marked by a punitive or intrusive interaction style, also has negative implications for school readiness,

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