



Parent support for learning at school entry: Benefits for aggressive children in high-risk urban contexts



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ABSTRACT

Children growing up in urban poverty are at high risk for low achievement across the school years, particularly when they enter school with elevated aggressive–disruptive behavior problems. In general, parent support for child learning is associated with school readiness and school success, but whether it serves as a protective factor for aggressive children in disadvantaged urban contexts is unknown. In this study, 207 urban and predominantly African American children with elevated aggressive–disruptive behavior problems at kindergarten entry ($M = 5.94$ years, $SD = 0.39$ years) were followed into first grade. Two dimensions of parent support for learning were assessed: teacher-rated parent school involvement and observed quality of parent teaching behaviors. Cross-lagged analyses indicated that parent support for learning predicted growth in aspects of children's academic knowledge and executive functioning over time, controlling for children's prior skills and demographic risk factors. Promoting parent support for learning may be a promising strategy to enhance the school readiness of children at dual risk due to contextual adversity and elevated aggressive–disruptive behavior problems.

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Introduction

Children who grow up in urban areas characterized by poverty and violence are at high risk for school difficulties. Over one-third enter school lacking the cognitive and/or self-regulation competencies that are needed for positive adjustment and academic success (Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Researchers have suggested that family strengths may provide a particularly critical source of resiliency under conditions of adversity (Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, & Clark, 2010). However, parent support for learning rarely has been studied as a protective factor in samples of children at high risk for school readiness delays and school difficulties.

The current study addressed this gap in the existing literature by examining predictive links between parent support for learning and child school readiness in a sample of children with elevated aggressive–disruptive behaviors at school entry living in very

disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Using both observer and teacher ratings of parent support for learning and a longitudinal design that modeled bidirectional parent–child influences across kindergarten and first grade, this study examined change in academic knowledge and executive functioning (EF), two aspects of school readiness that enhance the pace of learning by supporting learning engagement and problem-solving (Blair, 2002).

The importance of early academic knowledge and EF for school success

Academic knowledge (e.g., literacy and math skills) and EF (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control, and attention set-shifting) are two critical components of school readiness that predict children's long-term academic trajectories (Blair, 2002). Because learning is a cumulative process, children who enter kindergarten with higher levels of emergent academic knowledge are in a better position to take advantage of learning opportunities and show accelerated academic growth as they progress through school, whereas children with lower academic readiness fall further behind their classmates over time (Duncan et al., 2007; La Paro & Pianta, 2000;

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Lee & Burkam, 2002). In addition, EF at school entry contributes to the pace of children's learning both by enhancing their knowledge acquisition directly and by supporting self-regulated and engaged learning behaviors in the classroom (Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh, & Gest, 2009; Blair, 2002; McClelland et al., 2007). Longitudinal studies suggest synergistic associations between emergent academic knowledge and EF at school entry, and each makes unique contributions to growth in children's achievement during the early school years (Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman, & Nelson, 2010).

Given the developmental sequelae of early academic knowledge and EF, it is of concern that children who exhibit elevated rates of aggressive–disruptive behavior at school entry also often exhibit deficits in these important aspects of school readiness (Bierman et al., 2009; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999; Hughes, White, Sharpen, & Dunn, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2004). Furthermore, aggressive behavior problems, delays in academic knowledge, and deficits in EF are all more common among children growing up in poverty, relative to children growing up in more socioeconomically advantaged families (Blair et al., 2011; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; NICHD ECCRN, 2005; Raver, Blair, Willoughby, & the Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2013). Urban poverty is associated with a set of adversities that might account for these concurrent risks for school difficulties. For example, aggressive–disruptive behavior problems and poor school readiness (i.e., deficits in academic knowledge and EF) are each linked empirically with low levels of parent educational attainment, single parenthood, family insularity and low levels of social support, and exposure to stress associated with neighborhood violence and family conflict (DeBell, 2008; Dodge et al., 1994; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Magnuson, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Huston, 2009).

The role of parent support for learning

In the context of these multiple adversities associated with urban poverty, family strengths may be particularly important because they may serve as protective factors that foster resilience and support school readiness among children at risk (Mistry et al., 2010). Certainly, among aggressive children living in high-risk neighborhoods, there is variation in their school readiness at school entry and their later school achievement (Bierman et al., 2009; Mistry et al., 2010). Parent support for child learning may represent a key process that promotes school readiness over time and that, conceivably, could protect children living in urban poverty who show high rates of aggressive–disruptive behavior from experiencing academic difficulties when they enter elementary school.

A wealth of empirical evidence links various aspects of parent support for learning with child school readiness. For example, parents who provide greater access to learning activities and materials in their homes have children with better academic knowledge (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAadoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Mistry et al., 2010), though studies examining associations with EF specifically have produced mixed results (Dilworth-Bart, 2012; Sarsour et al., 2011). In addition, parents' involvement at school and attitudes regarding education have been associated with children's early literacy and math achievement (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). Although the link between parent school involvement and EF has not been examined, involvement has been linked with children's attention and task persistence as reported by teachers, which may be proxies for EF (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004). Observational studies examining parent teaching behaviors, which include responsiveness to the child's needs, support for child self-direction, explicit teaching or clarification, and cognitive stimulation (Ayoub,

Vallotton, & Mastergeorge, 2011; Mulvaney, McCartney, Bub, & Marshall, 2006; Pianta, Smith, & Reeve, 1991), have shown that these behaviors are linked with children's early academic knowledge (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003; Mulvaney et al., 2006) and EF (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010; Hammond, Müller, Carpendale, Bibok, & Liebermann-Finestone, 2012; Hughes & Ensor, 2009; Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007).

Although many studies have documented links between parent support for learning and child school readiness, much of this research has focused on representative samples in which parent support for learning is highly correlated with parent education and socioeconomic status (Arnold et al., 2008; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). More recently, a few studies have focused specifically on families living in poverty to better understand how parent support for learning may promote child school readiness in the context of socioeconomic risk (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Furthermore, parenting practices often have been studied as predictors of aggressive–disruptive child behavior at school entry, but this research typically has focused on behavior management practices that increase risk for child aggression (e.g., harsh, inconsistent discipline), rather than support for learning, which might represent a protective factor that reduces the likelihood of emerging academic difficulties when children high in aggressive behavior enter school. Additional research is thus needed to determine whether support for learning has beneficial effects even among children at high risk for school readiness difficulties, such as aggressive children in disadvantaged urban contexts.

The present study

The present study took advantage of longitudinal data that were collected in the context of a preventive intervention for children with elevated aggressive–disruptive behavior problems at school entry (Greenberg, Bierman, Nix, & Gatzke-Kopp, 2012). The intervention focused on improving parent management of problem behaviors and promoting positive peer relations and did not have significant effects on the variables studied here (i.e., parent support for learning, child academic knowledge, and child EF). Although intervention outcomes are outside the scope of the current paper, the rich longitudinal dataset made it possible to examine links between parent support for learning and aspects of child school readiness in this high-risk sample, controlling for several concurrent risk factors. Specifically, this study controlled for family income, parent education level, age, and single parent status, which are typically associated with parent support for learning (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, Cox, & Key Family Life Project Investigators, 2008; Lengua et al., 2007; NICHD ECCRN, 2005). The current study also controlled for children's aggression at the start of kindergarten, which could potentially influence both parent support for learning and child school readiness. We addressed the critical question of whether parent support for learning serves as a protective factor promoting child school readiness among children who face multiple risks for school difficulties: those with elevated aggressive–disruptive behavior problems living in high-risk urban contexts. Although prior work has demonstrated the link between parent support for learning and children's academic knowledge in high-risk, low-income samples (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; McWayne et al., 2004; Mistry et al., 2010), the association between parent support for learning and children's EF has only been documented in relatively low-risk and ethnically homogeneous samples (Bernier et al., 2010; Hammond et al., 2012; Hughes & Ensor, 2009). Thus, we extend existing research by examining the effects of two independently measured dimensions of parent support for learning on children's academic knowledge and EF within

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