



Children's elicitation of changes in parenting during the early childhood years[☆]



Arya Ansari^{*}, Robert Crosnoe

University of Texas at Austin, United States

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ABSTRACT

Using a subsample of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B; $n = 1550$), this study identified parents who engaged in more developmentally problematic parenting—in the form of low investment, above average television watching, and use of spanking—when their children were very young ($M = 24.41$ months, $SD = 1.23$) but changed their parenting in more positive directions over time. Latent profile analysis and other techniques revealed that parents who demonstrated less optimal parenting behaviors when their children were 2 years old were more likely to be African American, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and experiencing greater depressive symptoms. Approximately half of such parents, however, made positive changes in their parenting practices, with 5% in the profile characterized by high investment and low use of spanking by the time that their children were in elementary school. These positive changes in parenting behavior were more likely to occur among parents whose children were already demonstrating early reading skills and less problem behavior. These potential “child effects”, suggesting that children elicited improvements in parenting, were more pronounced among higher income families but did not vary according to parents’ educational attainment. Findings from this study have implications for intervention programs, suggesting that children’s academic and behavioral skills can be leveraged as one means of facilitating positive parenting.

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Early childhood is increasingly viewed as a critical period in lifelong development. The skills, resources, and capacities developed during these years can be carried forward through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood, influencing family formation, health, and socioeconomic attainment as well as sociodemographic disparities in these domains (Duncan et al., 2007; Palloni, 2006; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Thus, understanding the ecology that shapes early childhood development is important to children’s short- and long-term trajectories. Families are central to this ecology, and developmental research has elucidated many types of parenting that promote the current and future development of young children (Davis-Kean, 2005; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Yet, such positive parenting, or the lack thereof, is not static or immutable, as some

parents do change how they parent over time (Fulgini et al., 2013; Landry, Smith, Swank Assel, & Vellet, 2001). Such parenting, at any one time or over time, is multi-faceted, including but not limited to parents’ investment, time use, and discipline, and needs to be conceptualized and operationalized holistically.

In this spirit, might some seemingly at-risk parents take on more positive multi-dimensional profiles of parenting over time? Our attempt to answer this question draws on the developmental systems perspective (Lerner, 2006), which emphasizes how child development occurs as part of a dynamic transactional process between children and their proximate ecologies within larger social contexts and systems. By applying latent profile analysis and longitudinal modeling techniques to data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), we consider constellations of parenting behaviors across early childhood. Specifically, we examine a dimension of parenting that is consistently implicated in the development of school readiness across early childhood (investment) but do so in the context of other dimensions of parenting (television watching, spanking) that are also directly or indirectly related to school readiness but are rarely viewed in conjunction with investment (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). We also shift the focus away from children as passive recipients of parenting to explore how they evoke the parenting that they receive;

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, 305 E. 23rd Street, G1800, Austin, TX 78712-1699, United States.

E-mail address: aansari@utexas.edu (A. Ansari).

the so-called “child effects” that are theoretically meaningful but under-studied (Crosnoe, Augustine, & Huston, 2012; Lugo-Gil & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008). Child effects may vary across the socioeconomic spectrum, mattering more for some families than others, which we consider in this study (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2001; Magnuson, 2007; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Such research can advance theory by better capturing the dynamic bidirectional interplay between parents and children and inform policy by pointing to where social resources should be allocated.

Conceptualizing early parenting

Parents can support the healthy pro-social development of their children in many ways (e.g., warmth, attachment; Parke, 2004). In recent years, the cross-fertilization of psychology, sociology, and economics has increased attention to parental investment, or the amount of money and time that parents spend on and with their children to develop their human capital (Foster, 2002; Kalil, Ryan, & Corey, 2012). Investment behaviors include providing learning materials and directly (e.g., reading with children) and indirectly (e.g., visiting museums, extracurricular activities) supporting learning. Although these enriching experiences are important for children's educational prospects (Gershoff et al., 2007; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark, & Howes, 2010; Yeung et al., 2002), they need to be considered within the broader context of family processes that also support school readiness (i.e., parenting typologies; Cook, Roggman, & D'zatko, 2012; Fuligni et al., 2013; McGroder, 2000; Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett, & Cohen, 2009). After all, the same investments might not bring the same returns for children if they are coupled with certain parenting practices in one family and completely different practices in another (Crosnoe & Trinitapoli, 2008). Thus, parents' investment behaviors should be considered more holistically, along with other parenting behaviors that may not be explicitly connected to school readiness in the minds of parents but that are known to shape children's skills and competencies.

One other aspect of parenting is discipline. Sensitive and responsive parenting can develop a healthy and productive balance between autonomy and control while also facilitating children's early social and behavioral skills—two keys to school readiness and future success (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). In contrast, punitive practices are associated with adverse outcomes, such as aggression (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012), academic struggles (Ferguson, 2012), lower engagement with learning (Ansari & Gershoff, 2015), and anxiety (Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003). In particular, the disciplinary practice of spanking to control undesirable behavior is rather ineffective and may have unforeseen consequences for children's long-term development (Gershoff, 2013).

Another important parenting behavior is parents' regulation of children's television viewing (Christakis, 2009), with extensive viewing (particularly of non-educational programming) being an unproductive use of time that is related to more problematic behavioral and academic outcomes (Hancox, Milne, & Poulton, 2005; Huston, Wright, Marquis, & Green, 1999; Linebarger & Walker, 2005; Mendoza, Zimmerman, & Christakis, 2007). Indeed, one of the most frequently cited reasons that parents report letting their children watch television is to reduce adverse behavior (Radesky, Silverstein, Zuckerman, & Christakis, 2014; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Thompson, Adair, & Bentley, 2013). If investment is coupled with spanking and extensive television viewing, therefore, it may not be as supportive of children's school readiness as it otherwise would be; in other words, its benefits may be diluted.

This consideration of investment within a constellation of other parenting behaviors is in line with a general approach

to capture parenting more holistically, including in the form of multi-dimensional parenting typologies (Cook et al., 2012; Fuligni et al., 2013; Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006; McGroder, 2000; Mendez et al., 2009). Thus, we examine an oft-studied parenting behavior—investment—in a relatively new way by linking it to other behaviors that parents may engage in that are relevant to their children's school readiness but that may or may not reinforce investments in this pursuit. In particular, this approach allows us to identify those parents who appear to be “at-risk” in a more generalized way—low levels of investment coupled with high television viewing and frequent use of spanking. The developmental systems perspective (Lerner, 2006) suggests that such a multi-dimensional conception of parenting is also likely to be dynamic. Just because parents engage in one style of parenting when children are quite young does not mean that they will maintain that style as their children grow (Cook et al., 2012; Fuligni et al., 2013; Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006).

The first aim of this study, therefore, is to identify a typology of parenting that connects investment with time spent watching television and parents' use of spanking and then, among those who demonstrate concerning behavior (below average investment and above average television viewing and spanking) when their children are very young, examine whether such parents change their behavior over time. In other words, do parents who demonstrate problematic parenting change in ways to alleviate those concerns over time as their children age?

Considering child effects

Any positive changes in parenting behavior—“improvements” in parenting, for lack of a better word—are unlikely to be random. Most attempts to understand factors related to changes in parenting focus on parents themselves or on direct supports for them. For example, raising parents' education, work, and income has implications for their parenting (Dearing et al., 2001; Magnuson, 2007). As another example, several child-focused programs (e.g., Home Visiting, Head Start) have parent support/training components (Ansari & Gershoff, 2015; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). Notably, despite efforts to improve parenting, some parents demonstrate less positive behavior over time (Cook et al., 2012; Fuligni et al., 2013).

Our systems perspectives points to a different way to understand the potentially dynamic nature of parenting that, early on, seems to be problematic. Because parenting is a transactional system between parents and children, it may change as a function of children eliciting new responses from parents over time (Bell, 1968; Belsky, 1984; Crouter & Booth, 2003; Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003). Although such child effects are underrepresented in the literature on parenting compared to child outcomes of parenting, there is growing support for children as a passive or active medium of change in parents (Pettit & Arsiwalla, 2008). Much of the “child effects” literature, however, has focused on parents' mental health (Choe, Olson, Sameroff, 2014; Yan & Dix, 2014) and use of corporal punishment (Gershoff et al., 2012). Emerging research does suggest that children's academic and behavioral skills can elicit more educational involvement from parents (Crosnoe et al., 2012; Gershoff, Aber, & Clements, 2009), and there is some indication that these patterns extend to the overall quality of the home environment (Lugo-Gil & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008). Whether such child elicitation applies to changes in parenting over time, especially among parents whose parenting is initially concerning, is less clear.

The second aim of this study, therefore, is to examine whether children appear to elicit positive changes in parents whose engagement (or lack thereof) in a range of parenting strategies during the early years indicated the least support for children's school readiness. The hypothesis is that such parents will change the most

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