



The influence of family routines on the resilience of low-income preschoolers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 January 2013

Received in revised form 28 February 2014

Accepted 11 March 2014

Available online 8 May 2014

Keywords:

Family routines

Low-income families

Preschoolers

Prevention

ABSTRACT

Using data from the Birth to Three Phase (1996–2001) of the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, we investigated whether family routines at 14, 24, and 36 months play a role in the development of children's self-regulation and cognitive ability at 36 months. The moderating effects of child sex and race/ethnicity were also examined. Analyses revealed that routines do matter for child outcomes; concurrent routines appear to be critical for fostering self-regulation at 36 months, whereas early routines may be important for children's later cognitive ability. Second, the effects differed by child sex, with early routines having a stronger association for girls and concurrent routines having a stronger association for boys. Associations also varied by race/ethnicity such that routines appear to matter slightly more for African-American children than European-American and Hispanic children. Implications of these findings with respect to strength-based interventions for low-income preschoolers and their families are discussed.

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In 2010, 22% of all children under 18 in the United States lived in poverty. Young children are now the poorest age group in the U.S. (Economics and Statistics Administration, 2009; National Research Council, 2000). Past research has found strong associations between low-income and poor cognitive, social, and academic outcomes for children (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Kaiser & Delaney, 1996). These early deficits tend to have lasting effects, with low-income children being considerably more likely to drop out of school (Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kalil, 2010), commit a crime (Loeber & Farrington, 2000), be unemployed, and suffer from poor overall health as adolescents and adults (Duncan et al., 2010). Poverty among children from birth to age 6 can be especially devastating for children's development since these years represent the period of greatest developmental vulnerability. Thus, identifying factors that support positive development for low-income children is critical.

Resilience research suggests that sufficient positive assets can offset the detrimental effects of adversity or risk. More specifically, both individual and environmental factors can buffer children from the effects of vulnerabilities including poverty, resulting in more positive outcomes across domains (Masten, 2001; Patterson, 2002). Because parents and other caregivers are often the first "environmental protective agents" children experience, they are typically the most important and consistent protective factor for young children (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Research focused on school-aged children indicates that families who create predictable routines around activities such as mealtime, play, reading, and bedtime may be able to

protect their children from many of the stresses associated with inadequate economic resources (Brody & Flor, 1997; Fiese & Everhart, 2008). Indeed, chaotic living conditions commonly found in low-income families are associated with difficulty responding to social cues, poor self-regulatory skills, and lower scores on tests of cognition and achievement (Dumas et al., 2005; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005; Hart, Petrill, Deckard, & Thompson, 2007). Regular routines not only create stability within the home, thereby reducing household chaos, but also provide a sense of belonging and increase family cohesion, which enhances child well-being (Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983; Sytsma, Kelley, & Wymer, 2001). Thus, routine practices may be especially important for families experiencing significant stress or challenges including those associated with poverty (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2000).

Despite emphasis frequently placed on the importance of family routines, we have little empirical knowledge about the role of routines in the development of very young children. Because the first three years of life are a tremendous period of growth and development and key practices are established during this time (Bruer, 1999), understanding whether family routines established early in life are related to children's development may provide critical insight into strategies for fostering positive development, especially among lower-resourced families. In addition, empirical evidence about how the effects of routines may differ by child sex or race/ethnicity is mixed and requires further investigation. As such, the purpose of the current study was twofold. First, using a sample of low-income preschool children and their families, we tested whether family routines were associated with more positive child self-regulation and cognitive outcomes. Second, we investigated whether the effects of family routines on child

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outcomes differed by child sex and race/ethnicity. It is important to note that, unlike the majority of research on low-income families, the current study focuses on the presence of positive parenting (i.e., family routines) rather than the absence of harmful parenting (i.e., harsh parenting, neglect, or abuse). Because this approach builds on the strengths that families already have, study findings will be critical for creating effective prevention and intervention programs that are both scalable and sustainable.

Resilience

Children experience the stress of poverty in many different ways and with many different outcomes. Some children function at levels above which would be expected based on their risk factors, while others suffer multiple setbacks and even maladjustment (Radke-Yarrow & Brown, 1993). Researchers commonly use the term resilient to describe children who “defy the odds” and rise above their circumstances. Resilience is defined as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543) or good outcomes despite a serious threat to development (Masten, 2001). Resilience reflects an individual's interaction with his or her environment and is therefore inhibited by risk factors and fostered by protective factors. Risk factors include life circumstances that increase the likelihood of poor outcomes among children, including poverty, parental divorce, or environmental disasters (Benzie & Mychasiuk, 2009; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Protective factors, on the other hand, can modify responses to negative events so that individuals and families can overcome adversity and may include coping strategies, positive home environments, and supportive schools or neighborhoods. Studying children who overcome adversity to achieve good outcomes can tell us a great deal about ways we can reduce risk and promote competence.

There is strong evidence supporting the notion that positive parenting practices can serve as a protective factor against the stresses associated with poverty (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000; McGroder, 2000). Yet, a focus on the strengths of low-income families rather than their deficits, especially for families with young children, is significantly underrepresented in the literature. The few studies that do focus on strengths have reported that some parents are able to nurture and protect their children despite their poor financial situation (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; Maupin, Brophy-Herb, Schiffman, & Bocknek, 2010). Relatively few studies have investigated the family processes that encourage positive social-emotional (e.g., self-regulatory skills) and cognitive outcomes among low-income children. One potential practice that may help children overcome adversity but that has rarely been investigated, especially in very young children, is family routines.

Family routines

Although there are many different ways to think about family routines, for the purposes of this study, family routines have been defined as “observable, repetitive behaviors that involve two or more family members and occur with predictable regularity in the day-to-day and week-to-week life of the family” (Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983; Koblinsky, Kovalanka, & Randolph, 2006, p. 555). Routines include family-level behaviors (e.g., mealtime) and child activities (e.g., homework time) that are supervised or arranged by an adult, all of which provide order, predictability, and structure to everyday life (McLoyd, Toyokawa, & Kaplan, 2008). Healthy routines create structure, but are also flexible and meet the needs of a changing family (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2000). Common routines for young children include activities such as play, reading, mealtime, and bedtime.

In general, research indicates that the establishment and maintenance of consistent family routines is positively associated with a range of social, academic, and health outcomes (Churchill & Stoneman, 2004;

Ferretti & Bub, 2013; Fiese et al., 2002; Koblinsky et al., 2006). More specifically, family routines predict better physical health and academic performance, fewer school absences, better peer relations, and more positive parent-child relations among elementary school children two years after parental divorce (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986). In addition, routines have been found to decrease disruptive behavior in children with disabilities (Lucyshyn, Albin, & Nixon, 1997), to facilitate good nutrition in infants diagnosed with failure-to-thrive (Yoos, Kitzman, & Cole, 1999), and to increase treatment adherence in families of children with asthma while decreasing child anxiety (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2000; Markson & Fiese, 2000). More recently, research has explored the benefits of routines unique to low-income families. Family routines have been linked to higher levels of self-reliance, social competence, and academic achievement among low-income adolescent and school-aged children (Brody & Flor, 1997; Taylor, 1996). For example, Seaton and Taylor (2003) found routines positively predicted academic self-concept and school engagement among African-American adolescents.

Despite the emphasis frequently placed on the importance of family routines, we have little empirical knowledge about the role routines play in the development of very young children. Yet, routines may be particularly important during these early years as children prepare to enter formal school settings. The few studies that have examined routines in young children report positive effects similar to those for older children. For example, for low-income children ranging in age from 36 to 48 months, regular family routines were associated with more adequate sleep, fewer injuries, and increased ability to represent temporal relationships (Flores, 2004; Koulouglioti, Cole, & Kitzman, 2009). Keltner (1990) explored family routines among 91 African-American Head Start families and found that children ranging in age from 39 to 69 months demonstrated more cooperative, compliant behavior when their families engaged in regular and predictable family interactions. In a more recent study of 125 Head Start families with children between 32 and 67 months, children's externalizing behavior was negatively related to mothers' reports of the frequency of routines in their family (Churchill & Stoneman, 2004). Finally, in a study examining positive parenting, family routines, family conflict, and maternal depression, Koblinsky et al. (2006) reported that children (mean age = 53.3 months) of mothers who participated in more family routines had greater social skills and exhibited more self-control and cooperation, as reported by the mother. Thus, there is some evidence to suggest that family routines are important for supporting school readiness outcomes including social and cognitive skills but it remains unclear whether routines established even earlier can help foster positive development, especially among low-income children. Given the importance of school readiness to later academic and life success, it is essential to consider the role of routines in the development of both social and academic outcomes.

Only a few investigators have examined possible child sex differences regarding the effects of routines on individual development and the findings have been inconsistent (Yoon, Newkirk, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012). In a study of the influence of routines on children's post-divorce adjustment among first through fifth graders, Guidubaldi et al. (1986) found that regular bedtime routines predicted higher achievement for boys, but not for girls. On the other hand, in a younger Head Start sample, Churchill and Stoneman (2004) found that routines were more important when explaining girls' outcomes (i.e., conduct disorder, social competence with peers, and math ability) than when explaining boys' outcomes. Because girls typically mature more rapidly than boys (e.g., Halpern, 1997), they may be more receptive to family routines and thus benefit more. Thus we investigated possible sex differences in the effects of family routines on child outcomes. Likewise, a clear consensus has not been reached regarding the influence of race/ethnicity on the association between family routines and child outcomes (Flores, Tomany-Korman, & Olson, 2005; Sytsma et al., 2001). In comparison to their higher-income peers, children from low-income

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