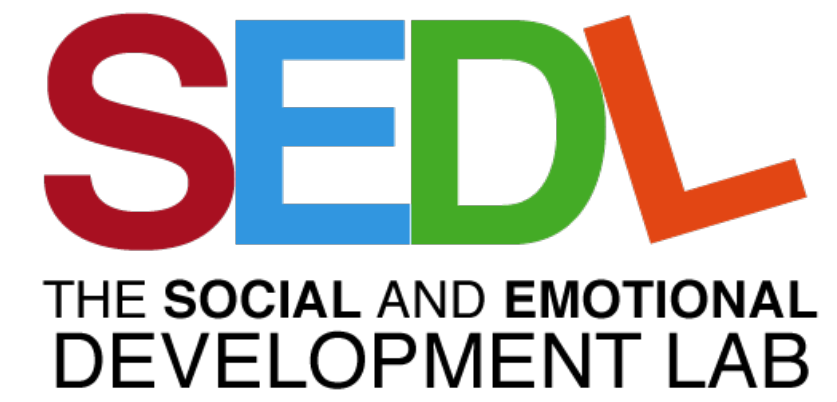


# The Impact of Demographic and Social Risk on Young Children's Social and Emotional Competence

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## Introduction

- Prior research has shown that intergenerational processes are important to understanding the problems of social-emotional competence for young children in families experiencing economic stress.
- The intergenerational transmission of poverty is mediated by the effects of poverty on children, parents, and the quality of their life together.
- The present study extends upon past findings to examine multiple forms of risk on preschool-age children's social-emotional competence.

## Methods

- Short-term longitudinal study of children and their mothers at 4.5 years of age (Time 1) and 18 months later (Time 2,  $N = 51$ ).
- **Demographic risk** was indexed as a function of maternal educational attainment and household income.
- **Emotional risk** was assessed using maternal reports of depressive symptoms and feelings of personal distress.
- **Maternal behavior** during laboratory free-play and clean-up sessions was coded for the frequency of negative affect and level of involvement at Time 2.
- **Children's social-emotional competence** was indexed using their responses to a puppet-based emotion understanding task at Time 1 and observations of children's compliant, cooperative behavior toward their mothers (reverse scored) during a clean-up task at Time 2.

**Table 1. Correlations between familial risk factors and child social-emotional competence**

Familial Risk Measures	Child Emotion Understanding (T1)	Maternal Negative Interactions (T2)	Maternal Uninvolved Interactions (T2)	Child Non-compliance (T2)
<b>Emotional Risk</b>				
Depressive Symptoms	-.158	.394**	.366*	.404**
Personal Distress	-.196	.215	.093	-.004
<b>Demographic Risk</b>				
Maternal Education	.479**	-.289*	-.068	-.278*
Household Income	.247*	-.374**	-.014	-.246+

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2. Hierarchical regression models predicting non-compliance at Time 2**

Predictor and Step	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change	F change	$\beta$ at Final Step
1. Depressive Symptoms Personal Distress	.174	.174	4.528*	.243* -.190*
2. Maternal Education Household Income	.260	.086	2.393	.067 -.051
3. Child Emotion Understanding	.511	.251	20.542***	-.436**
4. Maternal Negative Interactions Maternal Uninvolved Interactions	.585	.074	3.375*	.311* -.184

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

## Results

- The regression model of the pathways from demographic and emotional risks to children's social and emotional competence explained 59% of the variance in children's social and emotional competence at school entry (Figure 1).
- Rather than household income, mother's educational attainment was the strongest, most direct predictor of children's understanding of emotions in preschool.
- Demographic risk factors did not directly predict children's social competence at school entry.
- Emotional risk factors in preschool was a direct predictor of children's compliance behavior at school entry. Indirectly, emotional risk was associated with maternal affect and interactions, which in turn, predicted higher levels of non-compliance at school entry.
- Over time, maternal depressive symptomatology was a better predictor of children's social competence than both income and education.

## Conclusions

- This study contributes to our understanding of the ways in which risk is transmitted across generations.
- The findings illustrate that both demographic and emotional risk factors associated with poverty affect children's social and emotional competence over time.
- These effects are related to how mothers with riskier backgrounds interact with their children, and in turn, children being raised in families with greater risk are more likely to show deficits in social-emotional competence as they enter formal schooling.
- The pathways out of demographic and emotional risk are multiple and complex, but may be reversible by disrupting the compounding effects of familial risk on a child's development.

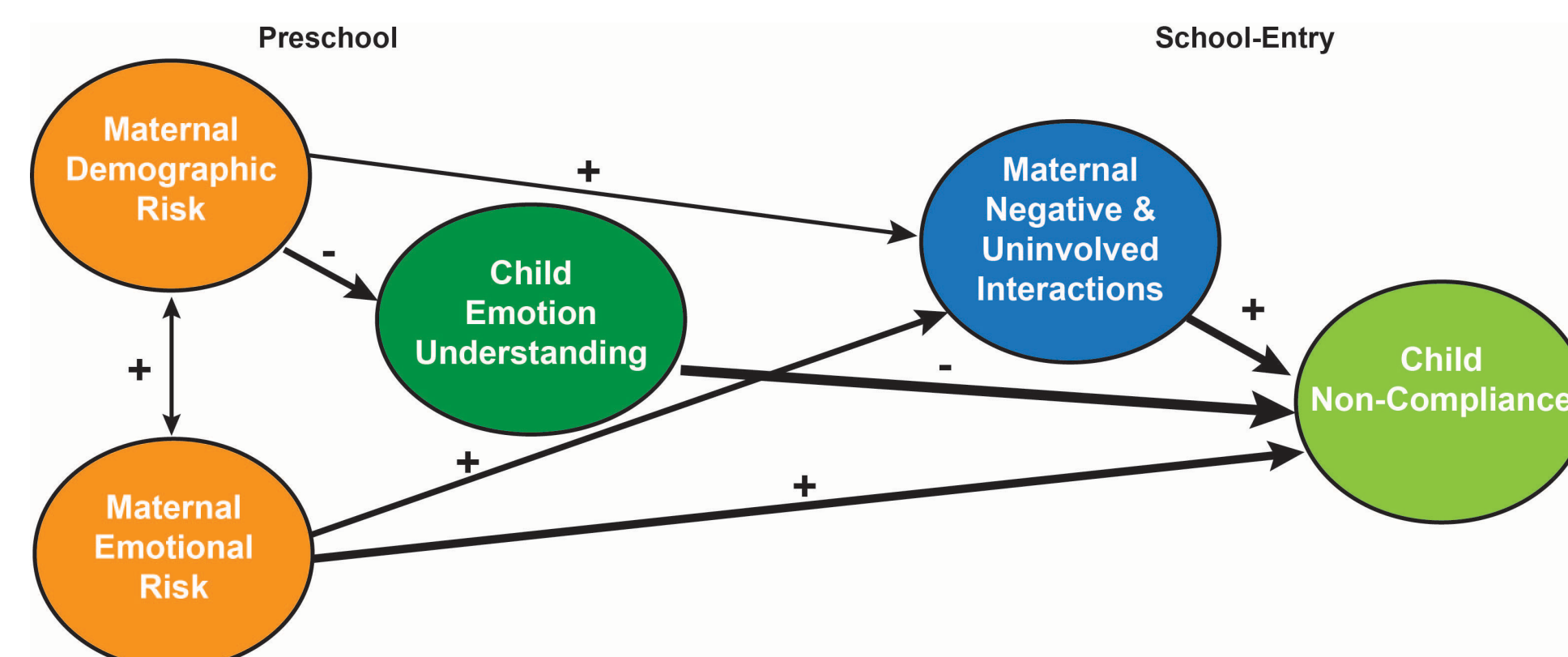
## SRCD Strategic Plan

The findings of this study advance SRCD's strategic goals of advancing and applying developmental science to policy with special attention to economic and contextual diversity in children's experience.

## Acknowledgments

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**Figure 1. Model of significant pathways from familial risk to children's social-emotional competence.**  
(Note. The thickness of the arrows indicate the size of the significant path coefficients; the direction of the associations is also indicated.)