

How Do Demographic and Emotional Risk Factors Affect Children's Early Social-Emotional Competence Over Time?

Abby C. Winer, Ross A. Thompson, and Alberto Guzman-Alvarez
University of California, Davis



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 years of age (Time 1) and 18 months later (Time 2, N=51).
- **Demographic risk** was indexed as a function of maternal education and household income at Time 1.
- **Emotional risk** was assessed using maternal reports of depressive symptoms and feelings of personal distress at Time 1.
- **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)
Emotional Risk				
Depressive Symptoms	-.158	.394**	-.366*	.404**
Personal Distress	-.196	.215	.093	-.004
Demographic Risk				
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 ²	R ² change	F change	β 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

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; **** $p < .001$.

Results

- The hierarchical regression model predicting children's social competence at T2 was significant ($F[7, 38] = 7.652, p < .001$) and explained 59% of the variance in children's non-compliant behavior at school entry.
- Demographic risk factors were associated with greater maternal negative affect in mother-child interactions at Time 2.
- Maternal depressive symptoms were a direct, strong predictor of children's social competence at Time 2.
- Indirectly, depression was associated with greater negative affect and *less* un-involvement in mothers' interactions with their children.
- Children's emotion understanding in preschool negatively predicted their later non-compliance at school entry and greatly contributed to the fit of the model.
- Maternal negative interactions positively predicted non-compliance at school entry.

Conclusions

- Together, these results contribute to our understanding of the ways in which poverty is transmitted across generations.
- The findings illustrate that both demographic and emotional risk factors affect children's social and emotional competence over time.
- Our analyses revealed that demographic and emotional risk factors were associated with children's social-emotional competence through their concurrent effects on children's emotion understanding and their long-term effects on the quality of mothers' interactions with their children.
- Demographic risk did not directly predict non-compliance at school-entry; instead, it was associated with mothers' poorer interactions with their children.
- 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.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to our dedicated research assistants and willing participants and families.

This research was supported in part by a generous grant from the Amini Foundation for the Study of Affects and a Poverty Research Training Fellowship awarded by the UC Davis Center for Poverty Research to Abby C. Winer.

Contact information: acwiner@ucdavis.edu

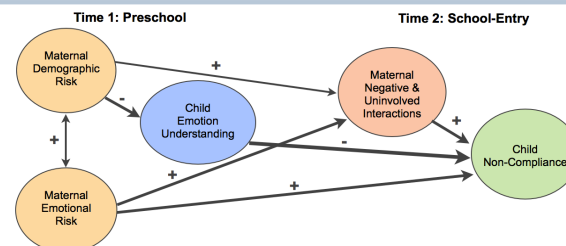


Figure 1. Model of significant pathways from familial risk to children's social-emotional competence.
(Note: The thickness of the arrows indicate the size of the significant path coefficients; the direction of the associations is also indicated.)