# The Protective Effects of Maternal and Paternal Factors on Children's Social Development

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## Abstract

The goal of this study is to examine associations among family and child protective factors, maternal and paternal levels of distress, and children's social competence in a sample of 156 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse first-time mothers and fathers, and their children, followed from 9 to 30 months of age. Using multiple linear regression modeling, our results indicate that dyadic synchrony and children's positive temperament during infancy are significantly associated with fewer behavior problems and paternal optimism with high levels of social competence at 21 months (main effects). Father optimism and child positive temperament are only significantly related to higher levels of social competence and fewer behavioral problems, respectively, in the context of low levels of paternal distress (interaction effects). These results suggest that in our sample maternal dyadic synchrony operates in the same way across levels of maternal distress as it relates to children's behavior problems, with the exception of paternal optimism and children'

growing up poor will be well adjusted (Becvar, 2013; Masten, 2001; Wright & Masten, 2005).

Thus, we examined the associations among multiple child and family protective factors and children's positive social adjustment in a sample of urban and ethnically and economically diverse first-time mothers and fathers, and their children followed from infancy to preschool. Following Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw's (2008a) methodological approach to understand resilience across different levels of risk, we examined the association between protective factors and toddlers' positive social adjustment depending on the intensity or level of family distress risk.

## Theoretical Background

Our study is framed within a relational developmental systems framework used in the field to study resilience (Masten, 2018). Rooted in family system and ecological theories, this framework suggests that families are systemic units (e.g., mothers, fathers, and children) of interconnected relationships and action patterns where individuals respond and interact with one another as individuals and as mothers and fathers (i.e., parent–child subsystem). Resilience depends on the interactions with other systems, in particular parents who are most influential on children's development. Central to the systems framework to study resilience is the importance of identifying protective processes (Masten, 2018). Protective factors are typically defined as characteristics of the child, family, and broader environment that buffer or reduce the negative effects of adversity on child outcomes (Masten, 2013; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Masten & Reed, 2002). Scholars have identified protective processes at the family and individual levels.

### Protective Factors

Family-Level Proactive Factors At the family level, the protective factors that link parenting to individual child resilience have received the most empirical attention. Nurturant parenting has been most studied and is empirically associated with positive outcomes for children even in the context of adversity (Masten, 2018; Masten & Monn, 2015; Masten & Reed, 2002; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008a). Various dimensions of nurturant parenting, such as being warm, responsive and sensitive to children's needs, and providing positive reinforcement, even in the context of risk, have been associated with fewer behavior problems and better peer social competence (Baker, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2007; Cabrera, Fagan, et al., 2011b; Jeon & Neppl, 2019; Newland, 2015; Serrano-Villar et al., 2017). Fathers who are responsive and sensitive to their children's needs have children with better cognitive scores

and better social skills compared to toddlers whose fathers are classified as more negative or intrusive (Baker, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2006).

Of particular importance for young children is the quality of parent-child interactions (i.e., being warm and responsive during parent-child interactions), which are critical for the development of children's skills (Landry et al., 2006; Provenzi et al., 2018). Studies show that children who report having a good relationship with their fathers are perceived to have more positive peer relationships and fewer behavioral problems than children who report not being close to their fathers (Cabrera, Cook, et al., 2011a). Zhang et al. (2020) found that warm/stimulating Latina and African American mothers had infants with low levels of total problem behaviors (i.e., internalizing, externalizing, and dysregulated behaviors) than mothers who were less stimulating. Other studies have

Second, unlike past studies, we also investigated whether the relative benefits of certain protective factors might differ depending on levels of maternal and paternal sources of stress, which provides a strong measure of parental risk and appreciates that stress may be experienced differently by parents in the same family and at different levels of intensity. The question of whether protective processes differ across levels of

activities, and behaviors. Mothers and fathers were also each videotaped separately engaging in a parent-child interaction for 10 min of free play during home visits at 9 and 18 months.

## A  tlc      e

The BB2 enrolled 210 families consisting of mothers and fathers, and their 9-month-old infants (n= 420 parents), the analytic sample for this study includes a subset of 156 families with complete data at the time of this study. The means and standard deviations for the analytic sample are presented in Table 1. When compared to the full sample, parents in the analytic sample are more likely to have graduated high school (t= 7.108, p< .01 for mothers, t= 4.680, p<.05); fathers (but not mothers) are more likely to report more distress compared to the full sample (t= 29.61, p< .01); identify as Latino, African, or African American; and include immigrant families from a variety of home countries including El Salvador, Cambodia, Taiwan, Ethiopia, and Mexico. However, the analytic sample did not significantly differ from the full sample on income, racial/ethnic m18(o)05.60009oTeu9237(Tpy4)-393(enrol)-8.199999809(l618(5V00Tf.51210,80.7m)17.7y-8.19953.1999990

Table 2  Pearson correlations with variables of interest (mothers)

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Child gender | 1.00 | −.06 | .06 | .14 | .05 | .03 | −.03 | −.11 | .12 | .15 |
| 2. Parent education | | 1.00 | .07 | .12 | −.18* | .8 | .01 | .09 | −.07 | −.04 |
| 3. Nurturant parenting | | | 1.00 | .16 | .04 | .01 | −.12 | −.19* | −.03 | .13 |
| 4. Dyadic synchrony | | | | 1.00 | .05 | .06 | 0.12 | .08 | −.17 | .15 |
| 5. Parents' executive function | | | | | 1.00 | .05 | −.12 | −.12 | .03 | .13 |
| 6. Optimism | | | | | | 1.00 | −.20** | .11 | −.21** | .21** |
| 7. Distress | | | | | | | 1.00 | −.09 | .27** | −.18* |
| 8. Easygoing temperament | | | | | | | | 1.00 | | |

Table 5). We found a significant main effect of mother-child dyadic synchrony on problem behaviors ($\beta = -2.624$, p< .01). We also found a marginally significant and positive association between mothers' reports of distress and problem behaviors ($\beta = 1.984$, p< .10) and a negative and marginally significant association with social competence ($\beta = -0.819$, p< .10).

For the fathers, the overall model was significant for social competence ($F_{(14, 102)} = 2.005$, p <.05; Table 4) and marginally significant for problem behaviors ($F_{(14, 102)} = 1.767$, p <.10; Table 5). We found a marginally significant main effect of fathers' reports of optimism on children's social competence ($\beta = 1.46$, p< .10) and a marginally significant main effect of children's easygoing temperament on children's problem behaviors ($\beta = -0.793$, p< .10). Father distress was significantly related to children's problem behaviors ($\beta = 2.395$, p< .05).

## Interactions Between Child Protective Factors and Parental Distress

To test the hypothesis that parental distress moderated the association between the protective factors and children's social skills, five interaction terms (i.e., nurturant parenting x distress, parent-child dyadic synchrony x distress, executive functioning x distress, optimism x distress, positive temperament x distress) were included in the multiple regression in the third step. Independent variables in the interaction were centered prior to creating the interaction terms.

There were no significant interactions between mothers' protective factors and maternal distress on either child outcome (Tables 4 and 5). For fathers, there was a marginally significant interaction between fathers' optimism and paternal distress on children's social competence ($\beta = -1.905$, p< .10). We then conducted follow-up differences in simple slope analyses to determine at which level of distress the interaction was significant (Aiken & West, 1991). The analysis indicated that the positive association between paternal optimism and children's social competence was strengthened in the context of low paternal distress (Fig. 1). Thus, for children whose fathers report experiencing high levels of distress, increased paternal optimism did not protect them from its negative effect on child social competence.

Additionally, we found a marginally significant interaction between children'

factors might vary by levels of parental risk (i.e., parental distress). Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that maternal dyadic synchrony and positive child temperament were

## Limitations

It is important to note several limitations of this study. First, families were recruited from two geographical regions and findings may not apply to families in other locations. Second, we focused solely on first-time, co-habiting parents and these findings may not generalize to parents with more than one child, separate households, or additional caregivers (e.g., step-parents/new partners). Third, though the BITSEA is a validation measure, it is reliant on parent report, rather than direct observations, of child behaviors.

## Conclusion

Research frequently focuses on the risks that threaten children'

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