How Poverty and Depression Impact a Child's Social and Emotional Competence

By Abby C. Winer and Ross Thompson, UC Davis

To grow up in poverty can have a lasting impact on a child. What is less understood is how it affects the early relationships that shape a child's social and emotional growth.

In ongoing research, Center for Poverty Graduate Student Researcher Abby C. Winer and Faculty Affiliate Ross A. Thompson have found that a mother's level of education, household income and symptoms of depression each have lasting effects on her child's social competence in early childhood.

Key Findings

- Education level, household income and symptoms of depression have short-term effects on preschoolers' understanding of emotions, as well as lasting effects on children's social competence.

- Rather than household income, a mother's educational attainment was the, most direct predictor of a child's understanding of emotions at age four.

- A model of 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 over time.

How can we explain the relationship between risk factors associated with poverty and a child's developing social and emotional competence? A complete model of this relationship shows that a mother's level of education, income, and emotional risk, such as depression, all have short-term impacts on her child's understanding of emotions, but also have long-term impacts on the quality of the time they spend together.

Children's early understanding of emotions predicts their later non-compliance, and children who better understand emotions are less likely to show non-compliant behaviors as they grow older. While demographic risk does not directly predict non-compliant behavior when a child enters school, it does predict a mother's interaction with her child, which in turn leads to differences in her child's behavior. Mothers with lower household income and lower levels of education were more likely to be more negative during play interactions with their children.

This ongoing study has so far found that a mother's level of education, household income, and depressive symptoms have direct, lasting effects on her child's social competence in early childhood. Children in families with greater demographic and emotional risks are less able to understand emotions in others and themselves. This leads to more difficulty following rules, which puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers as they enter formal schooling.

About the Center

Over the past 50 years, the U.S. has experienced a rising standard of living without reducing the fraction of the population that live in poverty. In response to this, the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis is one of three federally designated National Poverty Centers whose mission is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on poverty in the U.S., to disseminate this research, and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Our research agenda spans four themed areas of focus:

- Labor Markets and Poverty
- Children and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty
- The Non-traditional Safety Net, focusing on health and education
- The Relationship Between Poverty and Immigration

The Center was founded in the fall of 2011 with core funding from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Measuring Risks and Effects

This study analyzes data from a recent short-term longitudinal study that involved observing how a sample of multi-lingual, economically diverse mothers interacted with their children during free play and clean-up sessions. That study also involved measuring the children's social-emotional competence. The observations took place when the children were four years old and then again 18 months later.

Researchers Winer and Thompson used this data to index demographic risk as a mother's level of education and household income, and emotional risk measured by a mother's feelings of depression and distress. The researchers then coded mother-child interactions for the frequency of negative feelings expressed by mothers during the sessions, and for the mother's overall level of involvement with their children.

The researchers also indexed the children's social-emotional competence based on their responses in a puppet-based emotion-understanding task at four years old, and then 18 months later in an age-appropriate task to assess their ability to comply with rules and standards of conduct.

Demographics and Depression

This study finds that a mother's educational attainment, rather than household income, was the strongest, most direct predictor of children's emotional understanding at age four. Mothers with higher levels of education had preschoolers who were better able to identify emotions, even in situations in which the other person felt differently than they would.

Demographic risk factors were not found to directly predict children's social competence at school entry. Instead, household income and educational attainment were associated with the quality of mother-child interactions at 5½ years of age. Lower household income and educational attainment were associated with greater amounts of negativity in mothers' interactions with their children.

Emotional risk factors predicted differences above and beyond what could be explained by a mother's income and education. Emotional risk, such as depression, in preschool was a direct, strong predictor of children's social competence at school entry. Indirectly, emotional risk was associated with mothers' interactions with their children, which in turn, predicted deficits in children's social competence. Mothers with greater depressive symptoms when children were four years old were more negative and less involved in their interactions with their children at 5½ years of age.

A model of the pathways from demographic and emotional risk over time on children's compliance explained 59 percent of the variance in children's social and emotional competence at 5½ years of age. The model revealed that these risk factors were associated with children's social and
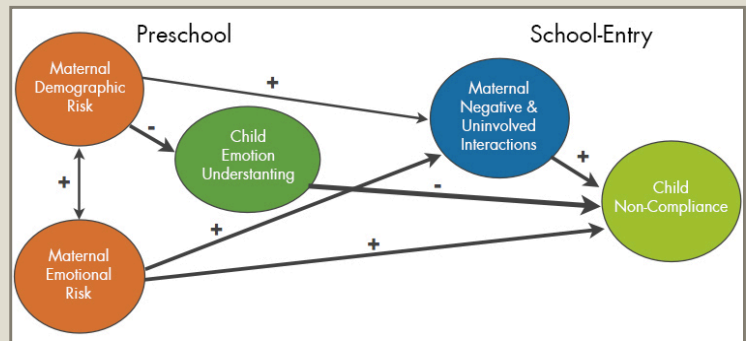
This figure shows a model of significant pathways from familial risk to children's social-emotional competence.

emotional competence through their short-term effects on children's emotion understanding and their long-term effects on the quality of mothers' interactions with their children.

This study finds that over time, a mother's depressive symptoms are a better predictor of social competence than both income and education. Children whose mothers showed more symptoms of depression when they were four years old were more likely to show overt non-compliance 18 months later at 5½ years of age.

Pathways out of Risk

This study contributes to our understanding of how poverty 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. 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.

To do so, efforts should target both parents and children. These efforts might include family income support and other forms of economic assistance, as well as mental health services to address the emotional consequences of poverty for family members. According to this study's findings, helping mothers reach higher levels of emotional well-being over the course of the 18 months, and coaching children to identify and understand emotions in themselves and others could both help to diminish the long-term effects of early demographic and emotional risk.

Meet the Researchers

Abby C. Winer is a Ph.D. candidate in Human Development at UC Davis. Her research interests include children's cognitive processes, conscience and moral development and research with at-risk and diverse populations.

Ross A. Thompson is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at UC Davis. His research focuses on public policy concerns, including school readiness and its development, early childhood investments, and early mental health.