Impacts of Early Intervention and the Family Environment on the Well-being of Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities

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By:
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There is scant research disentangling the relationship between different aspects of parental well-being, early intervention services and the family environment among mothers and fathers of children with developmental disabilities. This dissertation sought to address gaps in the literature by (1) addressing a broader conceptualization of parental well-being; (2) investigating outcome measures longitudinally over a 12 year period; (3) examining the ways in which Part C early intervention (EI) services and the family environment impact parental well-being both when the child was three, and beyond early childhood after controlling for child and family characteristics, and (4) investigating these relationships for mothers, and for fathers (in the first paper), who have traditionally been excluded from such investigations.

This study is presented in the form of a three-paper dissertation. The Early Intervention Collaborative Study (EICS) provided the data for the study. EICS is a longitudinal investigation of 190 families of children with developmental disabilities (Down syndrome, motor impairment, and developmental delay), who were initially recruited between 1985-1987 upon entering early intervention programs in either Massachusetts or New Hampshire (Shonkoff et al. 1992; Hauser-Cram et al., 2001). The dissertation study focused on data collected when the children were 3, 5, 10, and 15-years-old to explore trajectories and early predictors of parental well-being when children reach adolescence. The purpose of this study was to examine how the type, and perceived quality of Part C early intervention services and the family environment impact the well-being of parents of children with developmental disabilities in three different domains: parental competence, parental psychological well-being, and the parent-adolescent relationship.

Papers one and two analyzed parental competence trajectories for 93 fathers and 118 mothers from toddlerhood through adolescence using measures of the family environment and early intervention services to model competence when the child was three, and change over time using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). Paper 1 analyzed father data. Results indicated that there was no significant change over time in paternal competence after controlling for various covariates. However, family relationships, positive supports, and perceived helpfulness of EI home visits were significant predictors of paternal competence at age three. Further, at ages 3, 5, 10, and 15, fathers with higher levels of competence were those who rated home visits and family relationships higher when their children were three. Paper 2 analyzed mother data and results revealed on average, maternal competence remained stable between early and middle childhood but increased significantly into adolescence. After controlling for child and family characteristics, positive family relationships in early childhood predicted an overall significant increase in competence.

Paper 3 explored the extent to which perceived helpfulness and quality of EI services and a positive family relationship in early childhood predict two measures of maternal well-being at age 15, psychological well-being and the quality of mother-adolescent relationships. Regression analyses demonstrated that the mother’s perception of the quality of the EI provider’s skills and family relationships during early childhood predicted greater maternal psychological well-being.
In contrast, parent-adolescent relationships were a function of perceived helpfulness of early intervention and child characteristics in early childhood.

Overall, we found that by investigating multiple aspects of parental well-being, different measures of well-being were influenced by unique factors – early intervention services and the family environment. By taking advantage of longitudinal data, findings demonstrated that factors in early childhood influence change over time in maternal well-being, levels of well-being for fathers when their child was three, and well-being during adolescence for mothers. Early intervention service characteristics and the internal family environment influence maternal and paternal well-being differently. Finally, trajectories of well-being are different for mothers and fathers. These findings reiterate the importance of early childhood family relationships and early intervention services for parental outcomes across stages of child development.

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Defense hearing:
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