Impacts of Early Intervention and Family Environment on the Well-being of Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities: Implications for Policy & Research

A Dissertation Proposal Presented to
the Faculty of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management Brandeis University,
Waltham, Massachusetts
By
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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C: Early intervention, serves approximately 2.8% of children in the U.S. under the age of 3 (Data Accountability Center, 2010; Scarborough, Hebbeler, & Spiker, 2006). Early intervention establishes itself as a family-centered program designed to help families of children with disabilities reach their optimal potential and development through the use of state-directed programs (Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 2012). Beyond facilitating child development, EI is also designed to “support” families as parenting a child with a disability can be physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging for mothers and fathers (Seltzer & Heller 1997; Shultz & Quittner 1998; Spiker, 2011).

Many studies have examined parenting stress as an indicator of parental well-being using cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses and have found that parents of children with disabilities experience greater levels of stress than parents of children without disabilities (Baxter, Cummins, & Yiolitis, 2000; Dyson, 1991; Hadadian, 1994; Olson & Hwang, 2001). However, parental well-being also varies between mothers and fathers of children with developmental disabilities (DD) as well as by type of disability. Furthermore, EI service intensity and structure have been found to be associated with lower parenting stress during early childhood (Shonkoff, Hauser-Cram, Krauss, Upshur, 1992).

Well-being is a multi-dimensional construct and other aspects of parental well-being such as health, depression and competence have not been investigated to the same degree as stress. Researchers have yet to explicate the relationship between these indicators of well-being, child and family characteristics and resources, and early intervention services. This research seeks to address these gaps in the literature by (1) addressing a broader conceptualization of parental well-being (health, depression & competence); (2) investigating those measures longitudinally over the course of 12 years to determine their overall shape (3) controlling for child and family characteristics, examine the ways in which early intervention services and family environment impact parental well-being beyond early childhood, as well as investigating variables that may moderate this effect (social support, coping, and family cohesion); and (4) investigating these relationships for both mothers, and for fathers, who have traditionally been excluded from such investigations.

This study is designed as a quantitative, longitudinal analysis of secondary data from the Early Intervention Collaborative Study (EICS). Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) will assess trajectories of parental well-being from when children are three years old (exiting EI services) until the age of 15 (adolescence) and estimate the influence of EI services received during early childhood, as well as the family environment, on those trajectories. It is the intent of this research
to inform programs and policy, specifically early intervention of the importance of the intensity, timing, and type of services for parents of children with DD over the course of their child's life, by examining the extent to which EI services provided during early childhood may impact trajectories from preschool to adolescence.

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