Behavioral and Cognitive Outcomes of Young Children in the United States Whose Mothers have Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract
Despite an increase in international studies examining the experiences of parents with intellectual disabilities (ID) and their children, few studies have been conducted in the US using population-based data. This study examined the behavioral and cognitive outcomes of 3-year-old US children of mothers with ID compared with children of mothers without ID. We found that children of mothers with ID had poorer behavioral and cognitive outcomes in comparison to same-age children of mothers without ID. Notably, however, children of mothers with ID were not at increased risk of being aggressive unless their family income was below 200% of the federal poverty level. Further, families headed by mothers with ID faced multiple hardships related to socioeconomic factors, limited social supports, and poor self-reported health. Accordingly, policies and programs must be implemented to address the needs of these families.

Introduction and Review of the Literature
The prevalence of parents with ID is unknown, but it is increasing as opportunities for community integration continue to improve. However, few policies and programs adequately support these families. Indeed, rather than provide supports, child protective services remove children of parents with ID from their homes at disproportionately high rates.

To better understand the needs of these families, there is a growing body of international research investigating outcomes of children whose parents have ID. Past studies have found that children of parents with ID are more likely to experience cognitive, behavioral, and emotional disabilities if the parent has a childhood trauma history, mental illness, or limited social network. Mothers with ID may also have parenting difficulties if they have other comorbid conditions or have children with disabilities. Other studies have found that parents with ID often experience increased
stress, which can lead to their children having behavior problems. In addition, children of mothers with ID may have poor outcomes if their mother’s male partner exhibits antisocial or abusive behaviors, or has a criminal history. This finding is noteworthy because women with ID are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than nondisabled women. Furthermore, research has found that even after controlling for ecological hardships (e.g., poverty, poor housing, social isolation) often experienced by parents with ID, children of these parents may be at increased risk of developmental and behavioral delays.

The paucity of existing population-based research in the US led us to address the following questions:

1. Do the behavioral and cognitive outcomes differ for US children of mothers with and without intellectual disabilities? and
2. Do the contextual factors in which these families live predict children’s behavioral and cognitive outcomes?

To do so, we analyzed data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally representative dataset, and compared mothers with ID (n = 263) and their children to mothers without ID (n = 1,298) and their children.

Findings

- Compared to mothers without ID, those with ID were significantly younger.
- Mothers with ID were more likely to be unmarried.
- Mothers with ID were more likely to have income below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- Mothers with ID were more likely to lack a high school diploma.
- Mothers with ID were less likely to participate in organizations or groups.
- After controlling for a variety of mothers’ and family characteristics, children of mothers with ID had higher rates of anxious/depressed and withdrawn behaviors as well as lower cognitive scores.
- Children of mothers with ID did not have higher rates of aggressive behaviors unless the mother’s income was below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Summary & Recommendations
We believe this is the first nationally representative US study to compare behavioral and cognitive outcomes for children of mothers with and without ID. Findings from our study suggest that children of mothers with ID may have poorer behavioral and cognitive outcomes in comparison to same-age children of mothers without ID. Notably, however, children of mothers with ID were not at increased risk of being aggressive unless their family income was below 200% of the federal poverty level. Our study also found that mothers with ID experience greater hardships than mothers without ID. Accordingly, this study’s findings reinforce the need to fund and provide evidence-based supports for these families to address children’s behavioral and cognitive development. Moreover, in light of the economic hardships experienced by these families, policymakers should increase income transfer program benefits, such as SSI.


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**References**


