Welfare Reform and Preschoolers: Are Certain Children at Risk?

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Goals of Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996

- To limit dependency of low-income families on the government
- To promote employment and financial self-sufficiency
- To reduce births outside of marriage
- To promote marriage
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Key Aspects of Federal Guidelines

- Devolves Responsibility to the States
- End of Entitlements
- Time Limit of 5 Years
- Work Requirements after 2 Years
- Teenage Mothers Must Live with a Parent
- Sanctions
Proponents’ Views

Reforms Would:

- Increase family income
- Model disciplined work behavior
- Better structure family routines
- Provide the most reliable pathway out of poverty
Opponents’ Views

Reforms Would:

- Reduce time mothers and children spend together
- Increase parental stress
- Decrease responsive parenting
- Move children into low quality childcare or unsupervised settings
- Drive families deeper into poverty
Welfare Reform and Young Children’s Well-Being

- Overall, moving off welfare and getting a job do not harm or hurt young children’s adjustment.

Today’s Focus: Risk and Resilience

- Child temperament
  - Effortful control
  - Negative emotionality

- Do low effortful control and high negative emotionality pose a risk to children during welfare and work transitions?
Welfare, Children, & Families
A Three City Study

www.jhu.edu/~welfare
Principal Investigators

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Research Questions

- Do mothers’ welfare and work experiences relate to preschoolers’ adjustment, controlling for children’s effortful control and negative emotionality?

- Do low effortful control and high negative emotionality pose a risk to children during welfare and work transitions?
Survey

- Wave 1 data, collected in 1999
- 90% of 40,000 households screened
- 2402 children and mothers interviewed and assessed for 2.5 hours (82% completion rate)
- Total response rate: 74%
- Half of children 0-4 years of age, half 10-14 years of age
- Wave 2 data, collected in 2000-2001
- 88% of families participated in Wave 2
Embedded Developmental Study

- Children ages 2-4 asked to participate
- 626 interviews with mothers (85% response rate)
- 93% of these mothers agreed to participate in videotaped assessments of mother-child interaction and children’s effortful control
- Current sample n≈445
Sample Characteristics

Maternal characteristics

- Mean income-to-needs ratio = 0.85
- 28% married
- 43% less than high school degree

Child characteristics

- Mean age = 3.5 years
- 46% girls
- 38% African-American
- 53% Hispanic
- 5% White
- 4% Asian or biracial
Welfare Groups

- Welfare Non-Entrants
- Stable Welfare Recipients
- Welfare Leavers
- Welfare Entrants
Employment Groups

- Not in the Work Force
- In the Work Force
- Job Loss
- Job Entry
Developmental Outcomes

- Cognitive Achievement
  - Woodcock-Johnson Revised
    - Reading skills (Letter-Word Identification)
    - Quantitative skills (Applied Problems)

- Behavior Problems
  - Child Behavior Checklist

- Social Competence ($\alpha = .77$)
Measure of Negative Emotionality

- Emotionality, Activity, Sociability, and Impulsivity (EASI) Temperament Scale
- Negative Emotionality ($\alpha = .69$)
  - Child gets upset easily
  - Child tends to cry easily
  - Child is easily frightened
  - Child has a quick temper
- Maternal-reported questionnaire
Measure of Effortful Control

- Battery of Inhibitory Control Tasks (Kochanska et al., 1996)
- Videotaped observations of children’s delay of gratification
- Snack Delay
  - Behavioral code ($\kappa = .69$)
  - Latency to eat ($icc = .98$)
- Gift Wrap
  - Behavioral code ($\kappa = .62$)
  - Latency to turn ($icc = .80$)
  - Latency to peek ($icc = .94$)
- Effortful Control composite ($\alpha = .87$)
Analytical Strategy

- OLS lagged models that control for children’s outcomes at wave 1

- Child Outcome_{2i} = B_0 + B_1 \text{Mothers’ Welfare}_{1,2i} + B_2 \text{Mothers’ Employment}_{1,2i} + B_3 \text{Child Outcome}_{1i} + B_4 \text{Demographics}_{1i} + B_5 \text{Human Capital}_{1i} + B_6 \text{Child Characteristics}_{1i} + \epsilon_i

- Welfare and employment interaction terms
Main Effects Results: Importance of Child Factors

- Leaving welfare and getting a job not linked to preschoolers’ adjustment
- But, effortful control modestly linked to higher quantitative skills and to fewer behavior problems
- Negative emotionality modestly related to lower reading skills and marginally associated with worse behavior
Welfare Interactions: Low Effortful Control as a Risk Factor

- **Welfare Entrants**
  - Effortful control positively linked to quantitative skills and social competence
  - Effortful control negatively associated with behavior problems

- **Stable Welfare Recipients:**
  - Similar pattern as welfare entrants
Welfare x Effortful Control Interaction Effect on Total Behavior Problems

Probability of Borderline or Clinical Classification

Total Behavior Problems

Effortful Control

- Welfare Non-Entrants
- Welfare Recipients **
- Welfare Leavers
- Welfare Entrants +
Welfare x Effortful Control Interaction for Quantitative Skills

- Welfare Non-Entrants**
- Stable Welfare Recipients*
- Welfare Leavers
- Welfare Entrants***
Work Interactions: Low Effortful Control as a Risk Factor

Job Loss

- Effortful control negatively associated with behavior problems
- Effortful control positively linked to reading skills
Work x Effortful Control Interaction for Total Behavior Problems

Probability of Borderline or Clinical Classification

Total Behavior Problems

-0.15
-0.05
0.05
0.15
0.25
0.35

Out of Work Force
In Work Force
Job Entry
Job Loss*

low
high

Effortful Control
Work x Effortful Control Interaction for Reading Skills

[Graph showing the interaction between work and effortful control on reading skills.]

- Out of Work Force
- In Work Force*
- Job Entry +
- Job Loss**
Discussion

- Effortful control and negative emotionality were salient for children of
  - Welfare entrants
  - Stable welfare recipients
  - Mothers who experienced job loss

- Moving onto welfare and leaving a job as signs of family crisis

- High self-regulation may be a protective factor

- Or, self-regulation drives mothers’ welfare and work decisions
Limitations

- Non-experimental design
- Only 3 cities
- Booming economy of the 1990s
- Relatively short time frame
- Time varying omitted variables
- Small number of families moving onto welfare and leaving work
Conclusion

- Importance of risk and resilience perspective in the study of welfare reform
- Only welfare reform study that includes observational measures of self-regulation
- Findings are preliminary and require replication
Future Plans

- Opportunities for further study with new funding from NICHD, Casey Foundation, & Searle Fund for Policy Research

- Currently in the field for Wave 3
  - 6-10 years of age
  - 16-20 years of age

- Future directions
  - School component: Teacher interviews, school records
  - Long-term repercussions of welfare reform
  - Longitudinal analyses of self-regulation over 3 time points