Maternal and Paternal Parenting Behaviors and Socioeconomic Disparities in Child Well-Being

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Parental socioeconomic status is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of children's cognitive and social development. By age 5, children with highly-educated parents have reading scores 1.2 standard deviation units higher than children with less-educated parents, and this difference persists throughout the school years. Although smaller in magnitude, by age 5, there is also a significant gap of .25 and .29 standard deviations on children's externalizing and internalizing behavior scores, respectively (Magnuson, Waldfogel and Washbrook 2012). While there are many possible factors, differences in parenting behaviors and the home environment have been identified as an important pathway to understand the socioeconomic gradient in academic achievement (e.g., Lareau 2003). Less well understood, however, is the extent to which parenting behaviors are also related to the socioeconomic gradient in children's socio-emotional well-being. In this paper, I shed new light on how differences in parenting may contribute to socioeconomic disparities throughout childhood and across multiple dimensions of child well-being. Since early child behavioral problems have been shown to predict a host of later outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, these early disparities may point to even greater inequality in achievement, attainment, and family formation over the life course.

Background

Parental behaviors and the quality of parent-child interaction are key resources that promote child well-being. Parents' accessibility, time with children, and engagement in child activities and institutions facilitate the development of skills, behaviors, and attitudes that are associated with academic achievement (Thomson, Hanson and Mclanahan 1994). Additionally, children with warm and supportive parents tend to have more positive social behaviors and do better in school (Carlson and Corcoran 2001). As such, social class differences in parenting behaviors may be a key mechanism in the intergenerational transmission of social (dis)advantage. Indeed, ethnographic work by Lareau (2003) and others highlight significant social class differences in parenting practices with respect to parent-child verbal interactions, parental involvement with schooling, and children's leisure time. Highly-educated parents are more likely to engage in "concerted cultivation" as well as use an authoritative parenting style than less educated parents. These differences in parenting behaviors account for much of the SES gaps in early childhood achievement (Bodovski and Farkas 2008).

Research examining the role of parental behaviors in linking parental SES to child well-being has focused almost exclusively on parenting practices most strongly associated with school achievement: parental education expectations, parental school involvement, and children's leisure activities. As such, less is known about how other related parenting behaviors, such as engagement in child activities, parenting stress, and cooperative parenting mediate SES gaps in cognitive development, and especially socio-emotional well-being. A long line of literature finds, net of maternal education, that lower-quality parenting, defined by high maternal stress, low engagement, and less cooperative parenting is associated with compromised child development (Waldfogel, Craigie and Brooks-Gunn 2010). Presumably social class differences in exposure to these types of parenting behaviors may partially account for the SES gradient in cognitive and

socio-emotional development. By examining additional types of parenting behaviors, this research can provide a more complete understanding of the ways in which socioeconomic differences in parenting parents shapes the SES gradient across a range of child outcomes.

Current research on how parenting is related to SES gradients in child well-being has also ignored the specific contribution of fathers. Due to the focus on educational outcomes, the vast majority of research on SES differences in parenting practices relies on data from longitudinal education surveys (e.g., NELS and ECLS-K). These surveys gather information from a single household informant, usually the mother, on all parenting practices without distinguishing between mothers, biological and social fathers, or other family members. High quality father-child interactions and authoritative parenting practices by resident and non-resident fathers are associated with higher levels of child well-being above and beyond mother's involvement (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, Sarkadi et al. 2008). Although there is inconsistent evidence on SES differences in fathering behaviors among resident fathers (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004), education is an important factor in whether fathers live apart from their children, and if so, if they have contact with their non-resident children (Cooksey and Craig 1998). As such, SES differences in access to fathers and in fathering behaviors may be an additional mechanism linking parental education to child well-being.

In this paper, I provide new information on how parenting behaviors contribute to SES disparities in child well-being in two ways. First, I use a broader set of parenting behaviors than prior research and examine socio-emotional and behavioral problems. I also include a measure of cognitive development for comparative purposes; a lot it known about how parenting behaviors and cognitive development are related, yet this relationship has not been examined using the same parenting measures or data set as in this study. Second, I include the specific contributions of resident and non-resident fathers as potential mechanisms linking parental SES to child well-being. In doing so, this study advances research on socioeconomic variation in the nature of parenting and how it contributes social inequality.

Data and methods

Data for this study come from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, a longitudinal study of births (with an oversample of nonmarital births) that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in large U.S. cities. The study includes 4,897 births (3,710 unmarried and 1,187 married), and the weighted sample is representative of births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Baseline interviews with mothers and fathers took place in 75 hospitals in 20 cities (in 15 states) just after the baby's birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted about 1, 3, 5, and 9 years after the birth. Children's development and well-being were assessed in separate in-home follow-up interviews at the 3-, 5-, and 9-year survey waves. Of mothers who completed the core survey, approximately 78% completed the in-home survey at 3-years, 81% at 5-years, and 89% at 9-years.

I examine children's well-being as measured by mother-reported internalizing and externalizing behavior problems and child-demonstrated cognitive skills. At the 3-, 5-, and 9-year in-home follow-up surveys, mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL); the CBCL includes separate questions about children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems and is used to create behavioral problem scales. For each item, mothers are asked how true each behavior was of the child on a scale of 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true/often true*). I measure children's behavioral problems as the age-specific mean of all items on each scale. Externalizing behavior consisted of 22 items at 3 years (a=.88.), 30 items at 5 years (a=.86), and 35 items at 9 years (a=.91). Internalizing behavior consisted of 25 items at 3 years (a=.82), 22 items at 5 years

(*a*=.76), and 21 items at 9 years (*a*=.84). To measure children's cognitive skills, I use results from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT). The test provides an estimate of receptive vocabulary for Standard English and academic readiness. The PPVT is administered to children aged three or older; I use raw PPVT scores from the 3-, 5-, and 9-year in-home surveys. Not all children completed the PPVT (even if their mother completed the in-home survey); 71%, 78%, and 92% of children whose parent completed the in-home survey also completed the PPVT at the 3-, 5-, and 9-year in-home surveys, respectively.

Parental socioeconomic status is measured using maternal education as reported in the baseline survey: less than high school, high school, some college, and bachelor's degree or more. In over half of the sample, mothers and fathers have the same level of education and there are very few cases where mothers and fathers have very different levels of education, thus for simplicity I rely on mother's education.

Parenting behaviors are captured using mother's and father's responses to several questions at each wave. With respect to maternal/paternal parenting behaviors, mothers/fathers provide information on the frequency with which she/he engages in several child activities (e.g, singing, reading stories) during the week; I use age-specific means on items related to playing and teaching activities to *measure maternal/paternal engagement*. The *parenting stress* is measured by mother's/father's report of difficulties with being a parent; at each wave, responses to four items are averaged, with lower levels corresponding with higher levels of parenting stress. In addition, I also include two mother-reported measures of father involvement: *Father's accessibility* to the child is measured by how often the father spent one or more hours a day with the child in the past month and fathers' *shared responsibility* for child-related tasks captures the average score across three items. High-quality parenting also requires coordination between parents, thus I include a measure of co-parenting; the scale is created by averaging mother's reports across six items. I also include a measure of whether the father is co-resident at each wave and if non-resident, if he has seen the child in the past 30 days. Fathers who have not seen the focal child are given the lowest score on all parenting behavior scales.

I will also include a number of potential confounders related to parenting practices and SES disparities in child well-being such as, maternal age at birth, relationship status at birth, race, immigrant status, maternal and paternal self-reported physical and mental health at baseline, and multi-partner fertility.

Analytic strategy

I begin by describing mean differences in child well-being across ages 3, 5, and 9 as well as in maternal and paternal parenting behaviors by maternal education. I then use random effects models (with pooled data across the 3-, 5-, and 9-year surveys) to examine the relationship between maternal education and child well-being, and the extent to which differences in parenting behaviors can account for maternal education disparities in child well-being, net of previously mentioned confounders. For each child outcome, I will run four models. In Model 1, I will regress child well-being on maternal education, including control variables. In Model 2, I will add maternal parenting behaviors. In Model 3, I will remove maternal parenting behaviors and add paternal parenting behaviors. In Model 4, I will include both maternal and paternal parenting behaviors. By comparing change in the SES gradient across models, these analyses will allow me to examine how overall differences in mother's and father's parenting uniquely contribute to social class differences in child well-being. Due to high rates of union instability, I include a control for father co-residence and whether the father has seen the child in the past month in all models. I will also run models separately by resident and non-resident fathers because the relationship between father's involvement and child outcomes may depend on father's resident status (Carlson 2006).

Preliminary results

Consistent with past research, I find disparities in children's well-being by mother's education. At age 3, children with highly educated mothers have externalizing scores .17 points lower, internalizing scores .19 points lower, and PPVT scores 18 points higher than children with less educated mother; by age 5 the behavioral differences narrow slightly to .13 and .08, respectively, and the PPVT score gap increases to 21, and at age 9 the differences are .06, .02, and 27, respectively. I also find a notable SES gradient in all parenting behaviors, such that more highly-educated mothers are more engaged, have lower levels of parenting stress, and report that fathers spend more time with children as compared to less-educated mothers. Children with highly-educated mothers also have fathers who report being more engaged. In preliminary multivariate analysis, I find that accounting for parenting behaviors modestly reduces the SES gradient across all child well-being measures, although the SES gradient remains significant for all child outcomes. Differences in maternal parenting behaviors contribute more to explaining the SES gradient in child outcomes than paternal parenting behaviors, however, differences in father co-residence and father contact appear to be particularly important.

As I move forward with this research I will examine the specific contribute of each dimension of maternal and paternal parenting behaviors in accounting for the SES gradient in child well-being, net of confounders. I will also compare results for those in father-resident and father-non-resident families as only controlling for residence status may mask differences in fathers parenting behaviors. Additionally, for fathers who have not seen the focal child in the past month, I will examine multiple ways measuring their fathering behavior. Currently, these fathers have the lowest score on all paternal behavior measures. I will conduct analyses with and without these cases to ensure that the potentially least involved fathers are not driving the results. Finally, I will need to incorporate changes in family structure household composition. Family instability is stressful for children and influences child outcomes. Since mothers with lower levels of education are more likely to experience union instability, the SES gradient in child well-being may be a reflection of family instability. By comparing the results for all children to those raised in stable family arrangements I can more directly isolate how parenting behaviors influence the SES gradient in child well-being.

While much is known about how parenting behaviors contribute to SES gradients in cognitive development, differences in parenting is an important yet understudied aspect of SES gradients in children's socio-emotional and behavioral problems. Early behavior is important and behavioral problems in childhood predict disadvantaged outcomes later in life (McLeod and Kaiser 2004). Through this study, a more complete understand of the different ways in which parents' education and behaviors intersect to shape child well-being can be developed.

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