

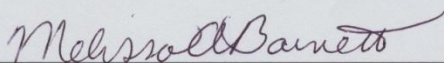
Positive Parenting and Contextual Instability Influence on Children's
Social Competence

Author (s): Geena Sethi

Dr. Melissa Barnett

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Geena Sethi

X  _____

Dr. Melissa Barnett

Abstract

Children are exposed to many different forms of instability such as economic, geographic and family instability. These forms of instability may present risks to children's social development. This study considered the potential buffering role of positive parenting practices on children's social competency, in the face of instability among a community sample of 53 families with children in the 4th – 6th grade. Findings do not suggest a buffering affect of positive parenting practices on children's social competency, although a negative correlation between geographic instability and children's social competency was found.

Positive Parenting and Contextual Instability Influence on Children's Social Competence

Instability is referred to as disruptiveness in the structure or organization of any particular functioning system. The origins of instability vary, and depending on the nature of the system in place anything may serve as a source of instability. Specifically in childhood development, common sources of instability have been identified as residential changes, parental illness, parental romantic (relationships), relationship transitions, and changes in caregivers (Forman & Davies, 2003).

A large factor of instability is the inability of anyone to predict when it will occur. Many events which contribute to instability in childhood, such as parental illness and changes in caregivers, cannot be avoided. When parents fall ill they must take the necessary amount of time to recover and other care givers may need to step in facilitate caring for children in the mean time. Other events, such as geographic instability, often include premeditation and can often be avoided or achieved in such a way that it causes minimal detrimental effects on the children involved.

It has been shown that children are best adapted when they are staying in the home they are accustomed to with their parent who has historically been the primary parent; this phenomenon is referred to as geographical stability (Farrell et al., 2005). This idea revolves around the preservation of the geographic location in which the child is reared as well as preservation of the geographic location of the parent(s) and/or caregiver(s) which had previously watched over and provided for the child. This can also include places at which the child spends a significant portion of time such as daycare or school locations. Therefore, geographic instability can be defined as deviations from a child's usual place of residence as well as deviations from the usual parent(s) or caregiver(s) which the child has grown accustomed to.

Parental practices are viewed differently than geographic instability and do not refer directly to the location of the parent or care giver but rather to the quality of the parenting that they can offer to the child being reared. Although it is defined and looked at separately, parenting instability cannot be completely isolated from geographic or any other form of instability since it has been shown that negative parenting such as harsh parenting or maladaptive parenting habits are able to increase a child's vulnerability to other forms or sources of instability as well as broaden the impact of other negative events in the child's life (Ackerman et al., 2011). Although parental instability may stem from many factors within the parent themselves such as emotional distress, drug and/or alcohol abuse, mental illness, or parent's perception of effectiveness, a particular focus on parenting types and parenting strategies will be implemented to determine the direct effect of the parent or caregiver's parenting style on the child being reared.

Parenting as a whole can be looked at as the normal variation in a parent's behavior in relation to controlling and teaching the child being reared; the two main components looked at when determining parenting style are parental responsiveness and parental demandingness (Darling, 2011). Parental responsiveness, also regarded as parental warmth, refers to "the extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality, self-regulation, and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children's special needs and demands" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). Parental demandingness refers to "the claims parents make on children to become integrated into the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys" (Baumrind, 1991, pp. 61- 62). From these two key components of parenting, positive parenting can be described.

Positive parenting can be viewed as acts and interactions which foster learning through the use of rewards and praise. When children exhibit behaviors which their parents endorse

parents may reward their child's behavior with additional privileges or verbal praise such as "Good job" or "I like it when you ..." in reference to the specific behavior displayed by the child. Parents utilizing these parenting practices are engaged and involved in their children's lives. Parents may also choose to respond to behaviors displayed by their children with negative parenting. This type of parenting is displayed through both verbal and physical punishment for negative behavior that parents do not wish to endorse nor see again. In response to these unfavorable behaviors parents may physically strike their child, remove privileges, use verbal reprimands, or any possible combination of the three to discipline their children.

Economic instability is also a prominent form of instability which affects families. To be differentiated from poverty, economic instability is defined by an unpredictable and/or continually changing socio-economic standing. This sort of economic hardship has been shown to influence outcomes of children through its effect on the emotional health of parents, their depressive symptoms and parenting behavior (Conger et al., 1992). Therefore this form of instability appears to have an indirect affect on the social outcomes of children, through the quality of the parent. Parents subjected to high levels of economic strain usually utilize less positive parenting practices than parents who do not suffer from as much economic strain (Conger et al., 1992).

Unfortunately, high levels of instability in a child's life can often hinder optimal social and psychological development. Prepubescent children as well as children in the midst of puberty are particularly sensitive to high levels of instability. It is still unsure whether instability faced in the past could affect the development of a child later on in life (Ackerman et al., 2011). An interesting phenomenon in relation to instability over time and its affect on child development is the affect of father-absence. Children being raised in a father-absent environment

face a great deal of instability as they only have one parent present consistently upon which they can rely. The father-absent scenario places the majority, if not all, of the responsibility of providing for and educating the children on the mother. With only a mother consistently dedicated to a child it is easy to see how any internal parenting instability such as emotional instability within the mother would be magnified without a father parent to dilute the mother's affect on the children being reared in the father-absent environment. Additional instability such as that resulting from economic stress or strain may result from only one parent provider being present to provide for the children.

This instability has been shown to affect the development of males and females differently. Sons reared in a father-absent environment were shown to display stereotypically masculine behavior during childhood while daughters from these environments are known to be more likely to be sexually promiscuous during their adolescence. Interestingly these effects in the children's development are correlated directly with the length of time in which the instability has been present. "Early separation from fathers had more severe effects than late separation." (Hetherington 313-326).

The length of time of which the instability occurs in a given environment is a prominent factor in the development of the children reared in that environment. Therefore the parenting style that a child experiences is also one of the largest factors also affecting the child's development, since the parenting style is persistent for several years during which the child matures into an adult themselves. Children reared in negative environments by parents whom are either not responsive enough or demanding enough are not destined to follow any particular developmental pathway since social support systems also play a large factor in childhood development as well.

Positive social support has been shown to be a very effective resource for all individuals in the face of stress or instability; this is referred to as the buffer hypothesis. This states that individuals with stronger support systems are less affected by psychosocial stress than individuals who do not have strong social support (Baum, Taylor, and Singer, 1984). Social support in the forms of siblings, friends, and community can greatly buffer against the developmental affects of negative parenting, but it is still unclear if strong positive parenting can also serve as a buffer to the negative effects stemming from other instability that is present in a child's life.

Positive parenting practices can be depicted as a combination of both maternal investment and positive parenting. Mothers scoring high on measures recording positive parenting practices display large amounts of investment in their children as well as readily demonstrate positive forms of parenting. It has already been seen that children reared in homes with low instability and high positive parenting are likely to have positive outcomes while those children who are reared in environments with high instability and positive parenting practices are very likely to have negative developmental outcomes. What then, is the outcome for children who are reared in environments with high instability as well as high levels of positive parenting practices?

To characterize an environment high in both instability and positive parenting practices on a child's development the details of the environment as well as the development of the child would have to be analyzed. A sample size of children in the 4th – 6th grade, as well as their mothers, was used. The home environment in which the child is being reared in will be determined as well as whether the parenting style being implemented is a source of social buffering against instability. The goal of this study is to consider whether high levels of positive

parenting practices can serve as a buffer to the negative effects stemming from instability that is present in a child's life. I hypothesize that positive parenting practices will buffer children's social competency against three forms of contextual instability: economic, geographic, and family instability.

Methods

Participants:

A total of 53 families participated in this study. The families were made up of 53 mothers ranging from the ages of 25 to 50 years old, and 53 target children ranging from the ages of 9 to 11 years of age. Of the 53 target children, 26 were male and 27 were female. The present analyses only considered data from mothers and target children. Of the mothers whom participated 42.70% identified themselves as belonging to the Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. Of the single language homes, 56.60 % were English speaking only and 5.70% were Spanish speaking only; 37.7% of the total families participating were multilingual households. Families representing both Middle and Working classes were present, with annual incomes ranging from \$ 4,800 to \$ 64,000 a year.

Recruitment:

The children who were targeted in this study were in the 4th – 6th grades at two different elementary schools in a single urban school district. Each child was given a letter to take home to their parents. By returning the form completed parents gave permission to be contacted later, by phone, for more information. A follow up call scheduled an interview time at which the questionnaire would be administered.

Procedure:

The interviews of both the children and parents were conducted privately. Only the interview and the participant were present during the time the questionnaires were administered. Both male and female children were interviewed by female interviewers while only male children were

interviewed by male interviewers. All mothers were interviewed by females. Mothers chose to be interviewed in either Spanish or English while all children were interviewed in English.

Mother interviews were usually conducted in about an hour and a half while the child interviews were conducted in roughly one hour. Children were allowed to choose a compensation prize from a selection of books provided. Mother participants were given twenty-five dollars as compensation for their time while father participants were given thirty-five dollars as compensation due to the additional measure which resulted in a longer questionnaire for father participants.

Mother Reported Measures

Positive Parenting Practices. ($\alpha=0.75$); Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (Frick, 1991) 12-items total were used from 2 subscales (positive parenting and maternal involvement) to determine the degree of positive parenting present. This was measured using a 5 point scale described by the choices Never (0), Almost Never (1), Sometimes(2), Often (3), or Always (4).

Mothers reported on items such as the following:

“You reward or give something extra to your child for obeying you or behaving well”

“You compliment your child when he/she does something well.”

Economic Strain. This questionnaire is designed to measure the economic strain on the family household. ($\alpha = 0.76$; Conger & Elder, 1994). Additionally, measured are used to compare the present economic situation to the economic standing the family had one year prior. This questionnaire can also then be used to assess the economic stability of the family. Each first two

measures were conducted using a 5 point scale, although they differed for each question, while the third question possessed a 4 point scale.

“Compared to 1 year ago, would you say that your standard of living today is:”
A lot Worse (0), A little worse (1), the same (2), a little better (3), or a lot better (4)

“During the past year, how hard has it been to pay your bills?”
Very hard (0), pretty hard (1), sort of hard (2), a little hard (3), not at all hard (4)

“During the past year, how much money did you usually end up with each month?”
A lot left over (0), some money left over (1), just enough to make ends meet (2), not enough to make ends meet (3)

Geographic Instability Mothers reported the total number of residential moves and school changes their child had experienced as a result of moves.

“It looks like TC has moved ___ times to a different home. Is that right?”

“It looks like TC has changed schools ___ times since Kindergarten?”

Child Reported Measures

Child Social Competence. ($\alpha = 0.68$) 5-items were used to determine how children rate their own social competency. Each question contained two parts, each of which was measured on a different binary scale. The first portion of the question was answered by either Really True for you (1) or Sort of True for you (2). The second portion of each question was then answered by either Sort of true for you (3) or Really True for you (4).

“Some kids find it hard to make friends” (first portion)

BUT

“Other kids find it's pretty easy to make friends” (second portion)

Family Routine. (Int. $\alpha=0.78$) This is a modified measure from a Family Routine Inventory (Ross & Hill, 2000). Higher scores indicate the presence of more regular routines within the family. Children used the following 3 point scale to answer questions: Not True (1), Sometimes True (2), Always True (3).

“When I’m getting ready for school at home in the morning, we have a normal routine.”

Results

Regression models analyzing the buffering affect on child social competency by positive parenting practices from economic, family, and geographic instability did not reveal any significant values amongst any of the variables analyzed and shown in Table 3. These results did not support the hypothesis that positive parenting practices can serve to buffer against the negative effects of contextual instability on child social competency. Amongst all the variables used in this study, a significant negative association between geographic instability and children's social competency was found and can be seen in Table 1.

Additional results were obtained, an R-squared value of 0.147, and adjusted R-squared value of 0.086 (Shown in Table 2), and an F value of 2.412 (Shown in Table 3). This showed that results amongst families which participated varied by 0.147 and that the portion of this variance which was accounted for by the variables being analyzed in this study was 0.086. This shows that a great deal of variance present in this sample was due to other factors other than the forms of contextual instability that were analyzed in this study.

Discussion

It has been suggested that positive parenting practices can provide a buffering effect against the negative effects of contextual instability on the social competency of children. However, this claim did not appear to be supported by the data collected during this study. In reference to the sample population used, this suggests that a buffering affect was not measured on the social outcomes of children in the 4th – 6th grades, by positive parenting practices used by their mother caregivers.

Amongst all the variables used in this study, a significant negative association between geographic instability and children's social competence was found and is shown in Table 1. This indicates that when children experience larger quantities of residential moves and school changes resulting from those moves, they report feeling less competent in their social interactions with peers.

With the only significant correlation found being between geographic instability and child social competency, it can be determined that mothers' positive parenting practices did not protect child social competency from the risks presented by the forms of contextual instability analyzed in this study. This was shown by only a small percentage of the variation present being accounted for by the variables in Table 2, which represented geographic, economic, and family instability. Other variables, not looked at in this study, were therefore responsible for the remainder of the variation present.

This implies that child social competency is a complex character that may be influenced by a wide variety of factors. One worth mentioning in relation to the Buffer Hypothesis is the presence of other forms of social support, other than that received from the mother. If children

have more elaborate sources of social support than the affect of positive parenting practices performed by the mother would not have as strong of a buffering effect on that child's social competency as would the mother's affect on a child lacking other forms of social support. Children with less social support are more greatly affected by the psychological stress associated with contextual instability; therefore the positive parenting practices of the mothers of these children affect them more strongly than children who have other forms of support. In children who do have more elaborate social support systems, the negative effects of contextual instabilities are already being buffered by these sources of social support (Baum, Taylor, and Singer, 1984). This is why the effect of the mother's positive parenting practices may not seem as strong.

Limitations:

The small sample size (N=53) of the present study limited the statistical power to detect associations among the focal variables. Due to the methods of recruitment used to gather participants, the generalizability of these findings is also rather low. This focused on a narrow age range amongst the child participants. The reason that only mothers were used as parent participants has to do with the lack of fathers in the majority of families whom participated. This exclusive focus on mothers' parenting behaviors also reduced the generalizability of this study onto families with different structures.

Future Directions:

A larger, longitudinal study with more diverse participants should be conducted. By utilizing a sample population which better represents the human population than the sample used in this study, any resulting findings would be able to be generalized onto many subgroups which exist within the larger population.

Future studies could include the effects of negative parenting practices and support provided by other family members to best understand the influence that parenting and instability may have on children's social competency. Analyses could also be expanded to explore the extent to which the findings apply across child gender, ethnicity and family composition. Other child characteristics such as academic achievement could also be considered.

By conducting a longitudinal study which revisits child participants later on in life, more accurate child social outcomes could be discovered and measured during different stages in the child's growth and development. The strength of positive parenting practices as a buffer against contextual instability in relation to child social outcomes at different stages of their growth could also be assessed.

Acknowledgements

The Family Factors and Human Development Study was conducted by Dr. Melissa Barnett and Dr. Bruce Ellis in conjunction with a team of graduate and undergraduate students. Partial funding of this study was also provided by the Norton Endowment for Fathers, Parenting, and Families.

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Appendix

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Variables

	1	2	3	4
1) ChildSocCom	-			
2) GeoInstab	-0.36*	-		
3) EconInstab	0.13	-0.04	-	
4) FamRoutInstab	0.15	0.09	0.15	-
Mean	14.83	0.00	4.32	2.40
S.D	3.84	0.89	1.95	0.26
*p < 0.05				

Table 2

Regression Coefficients of Variables

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.383 ^a	.147	.086	3.78110

Predictors: (Constant), FamRout_Child, econByparent, instabByparent

Table 3

ANOVA^b

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	103.451	3	34.484	2.412	.080 ^a
	Residual	600.462	42	14.297		
	Total	703.913	45			

a. Predictors: (Constant), FamRout_Child, econByparent, instabByparent

b. Dependent Variable: SocCompC

Table 4

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	10.599	5.816		1.822	.076
	econByparent	.204	.288	.102	.711	.481
	instabByparent	-.494	.197	-.360	-2.507	.016
	FamRout_Child	1.432	2.379	.086	.602	.551

Dependent Variable: SocCompC