

## Explaining Variability in Children's Aggressive Behaviors after Family Instability

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Although living in two-parent low-conflict married households is considered optimal for children's wellbeing, it is increasingly less common in the United States. Over the last few decades, there has been a shift in family formation and family structure and, consequently, in the living environments of children, with almost 40% living with unmarried cohabiting parents and 26% living with single mothers.<sup>i</sup> One reason married families are considered optimal for children's wellbeing is because they tend to be more stable than other types of families.<sup>ii</sup> Family stability is positively linked with children's adjustment and positive development whereas family instability – in the form of a break-up or when a parent's new partner moves into the home – is consistently linked to children's social maladjustment.<sup>iii</sup> Aggressive behaviors (AB), one type of social maladjustment, have been a focus of this research because they influence multiple domains of children's development throughout childhood. While AB peak in toddlerhood around 3 years and typically decline as children enter school,<sup>iv</sup> children who continue to exhibit AB in school are at risk for school failure and later behavioral problems.<sup>v</sup>

One limitation of the current literature is that it is unclear *why* family instability is so stressful for children. This is important because the “why” questions address points of intervention and help explain variability in families' and children's (mal)adjustment to instability. According to ecological theories like family systems,<sup>vi</sup> there are two main mechanisms we would expect to account for the stress children experience when their parents' relationships change: changes in family functioning and environmental stress. Economic stress is a particularly salient environmental stress when examining family and child wellbeing because it is related to primary psychological/human needs, such as feeling (in)secure that one's housing, food, and other basic needs can be met. The current study tests these mechanisms by examining whether changes in family functioning and changes in economic stress explain why family instability is linked with children's social maladjustment.

We explore whether two measures of family functioning explain children's maladjustment under conditions of family change – co-parenting support and father involvement. Parents who support each other in their roles as parents (co-parenting support) have children who have fewer behavioral problems.<sup>vii</sup> In contrast, children whose parents undermine each other and are in conflict in their role as parents (co-parenting conflict) are at risk for behavioral and emotional problems.<sup>viii</sup> Studies have found that the quality of the co-parenting relationship is similar for both cohabiting and married couples when parents remain together,<sup>ix</sup> but it changes when couples separate. A review of the literature found that unmarried couples who have separated are, on average, less supportive of each other's parenting than unmarried couples who remain together.<sup>x</sup> Moreover, co-parenting support declines when there is a new partner in the household.<sup>xi</sup>

In addition to the co-parenting relationship, fathers can have a profound influence on their children's development.<sup>xii</sup> Involved fathers spend time with their children, engage in positive interactions, and are responsible for their financial and emotional wellbeing.<sup>xiii</sup> Developing nurturing and long-lasting positive relationships with children is easier when fathers reside with their children. When fathers become nonresident, as is the case when parents separate, father involvement is likely to decline.<sup>xiv</sup> However, it is possible that a father maintains frequent and high-quality involvement with this child after separating from the mother. Father involvement is therefore more independent from instability than father residence.

We also explore two measures of environmental (socioeconomic) stress – changes in income and economic hardship. In the last decades, poverty in the US has become increasingly stratified by marital status. Children from cohabiting families are 263% more likely to live in poverty than children from married families,<sup>xv</sup> and similar research comparing married to unmarried (cohabiting and single) families finds that unmarried ones are 500% more likely than married families to live in poverty.<sup>xvi</sup> Moreover, socioeconomic status (SES) has been established as an important explanation for why family structure is linked to problematic social behaviors throughout childhood and adolescence.<sup>xvii</sup> There are multiple

reasons to expect that low-SES leads to child maladjustment, including limited access to schools, stressful and dangerous neighborhood environments, harsh parenting practices, and insecurity about where food or shelter will come from in the future.<sup>xviii</sup>

Although this literature tends to link family structure at one point in time with SES, it is reasonable to expect that a change in family composition is also linked to decreased household income and increased perceptions of economic hardship. When parents break up, family income is reduced and the resident parent is likely to experience economic stress from trying to work while taking care of a child (or paying for child care) on a lower income. Even when mothers re-partner they may still be at an economic disadvantage compared to when they were married; research finds that cohabiting couples generally do not pool their resources,<sup>xix</sup> which may mean that children do not benefit from two incomes even if their mothers re-partner (but do not marry).

### **Analytic plan**

The current study uses Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing data, a national data set that follows a cohort of 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Mothers and fathers were interviewed at their child's birth and at 1-, 3-, 5-, 9-, and 15-years-old. Questions about the biological parent's relationship, work history, economic and demographic characteristics, social support, and other relationships were asked at each wave. Measures of child behavior were available starting at wave 3.

We will use difference-in-difference (DID) models to assess the mediating pathways by which family instability from birth to 9-years-old is associated with children's AB from toddlerhood to adolescence. DID is a within-subjects latent difference score model and is preferred to latent growth curve modeling when change may be different during different phases of the study because DID models allow for different trajectories of change in independent, mediating, and dependent variables over time.<sup>61</sup> For example, family instability modeled from a child's birth to his first year is different from the family instability modeled during early childhood from 1 to 3 years. Developmental theory suggests that instability experienced early in life is more stressful than instability experienced later in life. Alternatively, it is possible that very recent family instability is associated with short-term behavioral problems, but children eventually adjust. Examining the impact of instability at different points in time allows us to explore whether the timing of instability shapes children's social adjustment. This not only allows for the differing intervals of time between waves of the FFCW data, but also differences in trajectories of instability expected for different developmental milestones or time points. Moreover, a DID model can assess within-subject change over time, which minimizes between-subject sources of confounding influence.

### **Measures**

Dependent variable. *Children's aggressive behaviors* (AB) at 3, 5, and 9 years will be measured with the aggressive subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). The CBCL is widely used in research and has acceptable validity and reliability ( $\alpha = .87$ ) in population samples.<sup>xx</sup>

Independent variable. *Family instability* will be measured with variables that assess change in the mother's residential relationships at each wave: mothers' baseline coresidential status, contemporaneous coresidential status, and the number of changes in coresidential status between waves. Because the children in this study live with their mothers, whether or not the mother has a new partner moving in and out of the house shapes the child's family context.

Mediating variables. *Co-parenting support* will be assessed by mothers at each wave with 6 questions about whether they felt supported by their child's biological father in their role as mother using a 4-point scale: 1 = *always*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *rarely*, or 4 = *never*. *Father involvement* will be coded from fathers' reports; they were asked how many days per week (0-7) they engage in activities with their child. This scale provides information on the frequency and types of activities fathers do with their children such as engaging in play, engaging in cognitive stimulating activities (e.g., reading), and

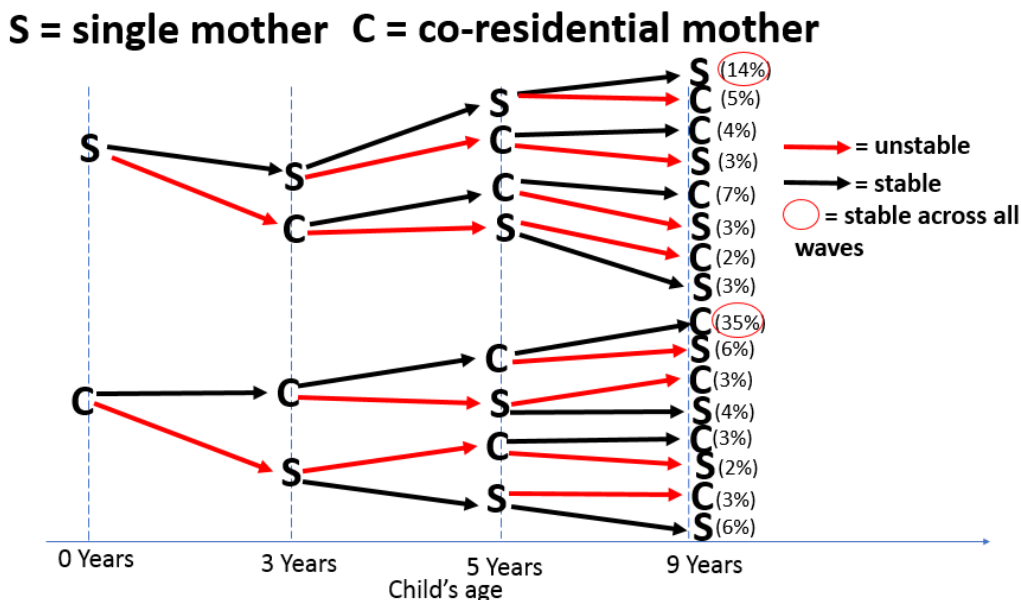
care giving (e.g., putting child to bed). *Mother's household income* is categorized as poverty, low-income, middle-income, or high-income. Mothers also report the number of *economic hardships* they experienced in the last year. A maximum of 13 hardships is achieved by answering yes to each question, such as "In the past 12 months were you ever hungry but didn't eat because you couldn't afford enough food?"

For each of the variables above, change scores will be modeled by first computing the variables as defined above and then calculating the difference between variable scores at each wave. This results in a total of 4 change scores (i.e., change from birth to 3 years; 3 years to 5 years; 5 years to 9 years; 9 to 15 years) for all variables but AB. Data on AB are collected at 3, 5, 9 and 15 years, resulting in three change scores. We will control for maternal ethnicity, education, age, and depression, child gender and age, and couple relationship quality.

**Preliminary results**

Preliminary descriptive analyses find wide variability in children's experiences of family instability over their early years. By the time children are 9-years-old, about half of the sample experienced instability. Among those experiencing family instability, fewer than 10% experienced any one type of instability, suggesting that family instability is not a one-size-fits all context for children's development (see figure 1). We examined mean aggression scores when children were 15 years old based on children's instability "paths" throughout childhood depicted in Figure 1. We found, as expected, that mothers reported the fewest aggressive behaviors when children had stably coresidential parents from birth to 9 years. Mean aggression scores also suggest that in general, living with two parents in the early years is protective, even when children later experience instability. Mothers reported their children had the most aggressive behaviors when children lived with their single mother for most of their life, but their mother moved in with her partner when the children were 9-years-old. This suggests that more instability is not necessarily stressful for children. What seems to be most liked with aggression is a *recent* change in mothers' residential relationship status, particularly changing from a single parent family to a two parent family. Next steps for the analysis include assessing the mediational pathways through family functioning and economic stress.

Figure 1. Percentage of children experiencing family (in)stability from birth to 9 years



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