

Research-to-Results ^{Brief}

Child **TRENDS**

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DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES AND CHILD OUTCOMES: THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR MOTHERS

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OVERVIEW

Raising children is a challenge for parents from all walks of life. However, parents who experience social and economic disadvantages face particular challenges in trying to meet the needs of their children. Some of these parents have support in rearing their children, but many do not. This Research Brief takes a close look at the link between the emotional support that mothers receive—or do not receive—in raising their children and their children’s development. To address this question, Child Trends analyzed available data from the 2007 National Survey of Children’s Health.

Our analyses found that emotional support matters, even when family structure, income, gender, race/ ethnicity, and child age are taken into account. Overall, we found that children and adolescents from disadvantaged families were less likely to engage in externalizing (acting out behavior) and display depression symptoms (sadness, feelings of worthlessness or withdrawn behavior), or to have been retained in a previous grade, when their mothers reported having emotional support with childrearing. These children and adolescents were also more likely to display social competence and school engagement than were their counterparts whose mothers did not report having emotional support. Similar patterns were found among children in more socially and economically advantaged families.

Results from our study suggest that emotional support for mothers may serve to protect children in both disadvantaged and advantaged families from negative outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Research finds that children from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience negative academic, social, and psychological outcomes.¹ For example, children living in single-parent and/or low-income households are more likely to exhibit problem behaviors and depressive symptoms and are less likely to display social competence than are children who grow up in more fortunate circumstances.² Similarly, children whose parents did not complete high school are less likely to do well in school,³ and more likely to drop out of school than are

children whose parents have higher levels of education.⁴ Still, many children in such situations manage to do well in life. While some of the critical supports needed by these children require private or public investments, other important supports may be more readily accessible; emotional support for parents would be one good example.⁵

Considerable research has focused on support given to children, but it seems equally important to examine support systems for parents, specifically mothers. Research finds that when mothers have emotional support (i.e., *relationships that provide security, intimacy, and reassurance*),⁶ they are less likely to experience stress.... more likely to demonstrate confidence, to be well-adjusted, and to employ effective discipline strategies.^{7,8} Because parenting is a critical pathway by which children develop and excel, available emotional support for mothers can guard against negative outcomes among disadvantaged children by fostering positive parent well-being. To date, however, very little research has tested the salience of emotional support for mothers among disadvantaged groups.

Child Trends sought to fill this knowledge gap by examining data obtained through telephone interviews with the parents or guardians of a nationally representative sample of 67,388 children and adolescents (aged six to 17) from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health. This large sample size enabled us to examine how the availability of emotional support for mothers affects the relationship between different types of disadvantaged families and an array of child outcomes.

CURRENT ANALYSES

Drawing on these data, we analyzed the association between five child outcomes (three negative and two positive) and three types of family disadvantages to determine if the association varied by the presence or absence of emotional support to mothers. Specifically, we explored whether emotional support for mothers buffers the relationship between negative outcomes (e.g., externalizing, depression symptoms, and grade retention) and family disadvantages (e.g., living with a single parent, having a mother who did not complete high school, and being in a household with an income below the poverty line). We also explored whether the relationship between positive outcomes (e.g., social competence and school engagement) and family disadvantages held when emotional support was present. See the overview of National Survey of Children's Health on page 7 for a full description of the variables that we considered.

FINDINGS

The results of our analyses are detailed in Table 1. As shown in the table, the overwhelming number of statistically significant associations point to the importance of emotional support in enhancing the positive outcomes of children and youth in disadvantaged families. Almost without exception, when emotional support is present, parents report more favorable outcomes for their children. In contrast, when emotional support is absent, parents report less favorable outcomes for their children. (This pattern holds even when controlling for child gender, child age, race/ethnicity, family income, and family structure; multivariate analyses not shown).

Figures 1-3 illustrate the associations for disadvantaged families that we found in our analyses. All of the differences are statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

FIGURE 1: Child’s School Engagement by Presence of Maternal Emotional Support by Type of Family Disadvantage

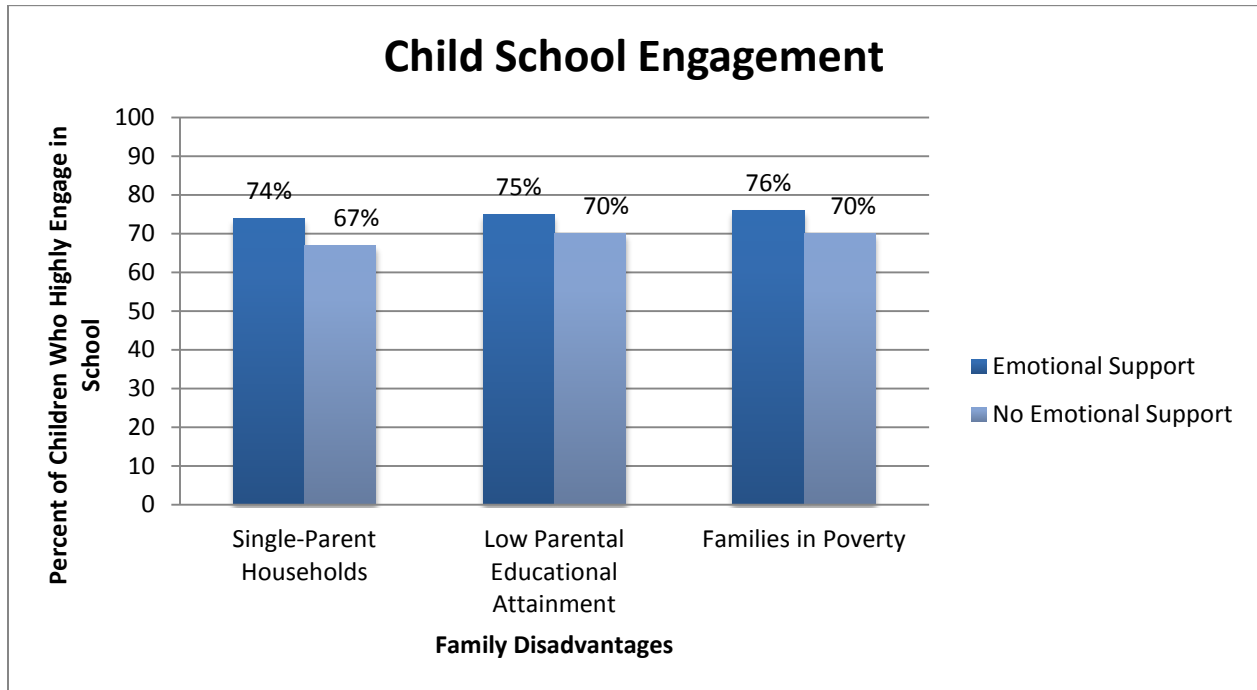
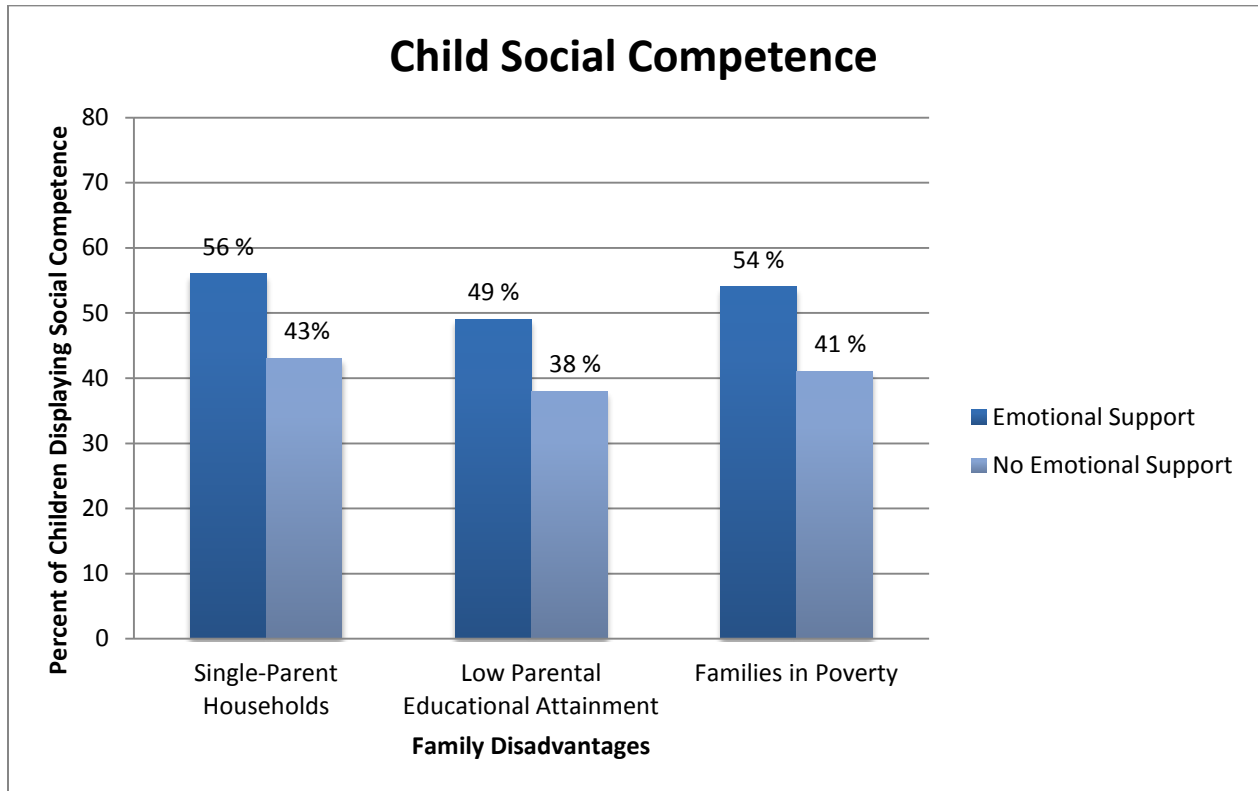


Figure 1 depicts children’s engagement in school across three measures of family disadvantage. It shows that, in each group, children were significantly more likely to be described as highly engaged in school when emotional support for their mothers was present. Specifically, among single mothers, those who reported having emotional support had children who were significantly more engaged in school. Similarly, among mothers with low levels of education, those who reported having emotional support were more likely to have children who were engaged in school. Also, among mothers in families with incomes below the poverty line, those who reported having emotional support were more likely to have children who were engaged in school.

FIGURE 2: Child’s Social Competence by Presence of Maternal Emotional Support by Type of Family Disadvantage



A similar association was found for child social competence. Figure 2 depicts children’s social competence for the same three measures of family disadvantage. Again, children whose mothers reported that they had emotional support were more likely to display social competence than were children whose mothers did not report having that support. This pattern held among single mothers, mothers with low levels of education, and mothers in households with incomes below the poverty line.

FIGURE 3: Child’s Depression Symptoms by Presence of Maternal Emotional Support by Type of Family Disadvantage

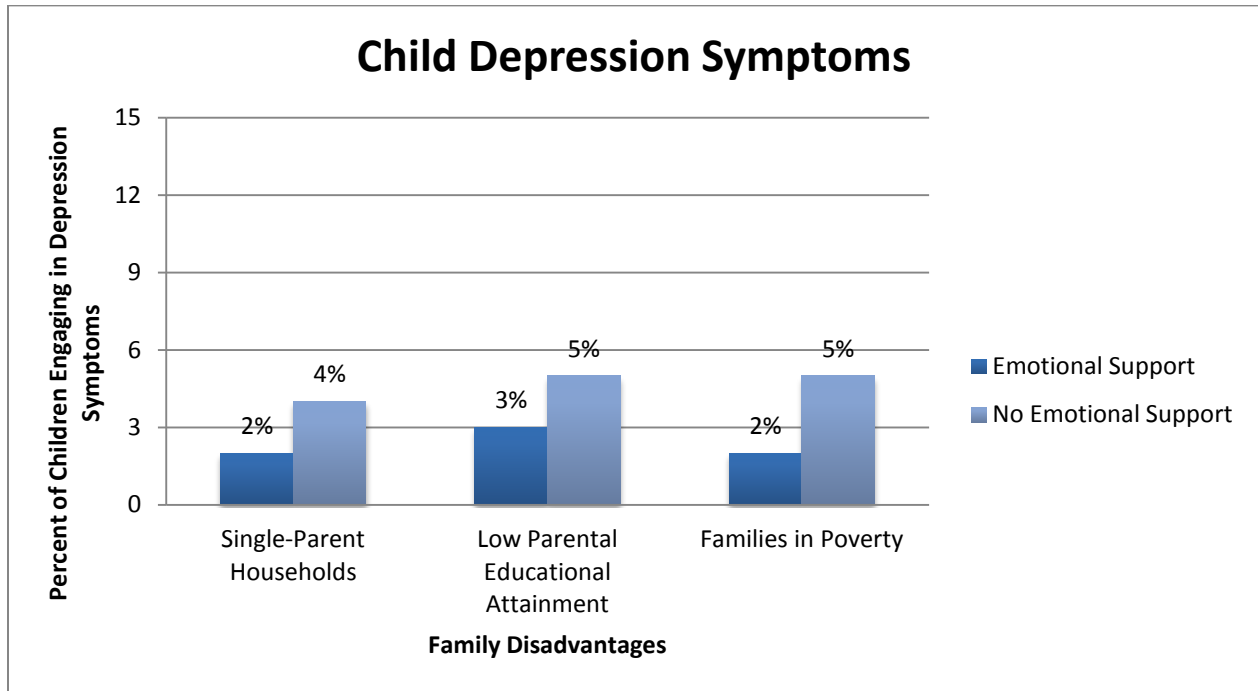


Figure 3 illustrates our findings on a negative measure—children’s depression symptoms—within the three family disadvantage subgroups. As seen in the figure, in each subgroup, children were less likely to display withdrawn behavior, feelings of worthlessness or sadness if their mothers had emotional support. For example, children from single-parent and impoverished households where mothers had emotional support were half as likely to be described as showing depression symptoms than were children whose mothers reported that they lacked emotional support (4 percent vs. 2 percent, and 2 percent vs. 5 percent, respectively).

CONCLUSION

Overall, our analyses indicate that children and adolescents have better social and behavioral outcomes when mothers have emotional support with childrearing. This finding suggests that emotional support for mothers can act as a buffer against negative child outcomes and can promote positive child development outcomes. These findings are consistent across two positive outcomes (children’s social competence and school engagement) and three negative outcomes (externalizing, depression symptoms, and grade retention). Specifically, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to display social competence and school engagement when their mothers have emotional support. In addition, children in disadvantaged households who mother’s have emotional support are less likely to engage in externalizing and display depression symptoms, as well as to repeat a grade.

The results of our analyses highlight the value of finding ways to ensure that mothers in disadvantaged families and communities get the emotional support that they need to make parenting more manageable and to help increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for their children

The data used in our analysis are cross-sectional, that is, taken at one point in time rather than over a long period. Because of this limitation, results of the analyses discussed in this brief provide only a snap-shot of the association between emotional support and family disadvantages and outcomes among children and adolescents and cannot assess cause-and-effect. Our research also was limited by the fact that mothers reported on both emotional support and child outcomes, and by the lack of information about who provided the emotional support to mothers that they reported, the duration of the support, or the extent of the support. These kinds of data would allow us to get a fuller picture of maternal emotional support. Nevertheless, the associations reported in this brief are statistically significant and substantively important, and remain consistent when accounting for social and economic factors.

In sum, our findings suggest that one of the pathways through which children from disadvantaged—as well as advantaged—backgrounds succeed and flourish is the emotional support available to their mothers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE USED FOR THIS BRIEF

The **2007 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)** is a national telephone survey involving 91,642 interviews completed between 2007 and 2008. One child under the age of 18 was randomly selected in each household as the subject of the survey. The most knowledgeable parent or guardian of the child served as the respondent. Data were collected by the Maternal Child and Health Bureau in collaboration with the National Center for Health Statistics. We restricted the sample for our analyses to cases in which the respondent was either a biological, step-, foster or adoptive mother of a child aged 6-17. The initial NSCH was fielded in 2003, and another wave has been fielded in 2011. The following measures were used in this brief:

Measure of Maternal Emotional Support

Is there someone that you can turn to for day-to-day emotional help with (parenthood/raising children)? [yes or no]

Measures of Family Risks

Single Parent Households

Low Parental Education Attainment [mother educational level only]

Family Income Below Federal Poverty Level

Measures of Child Outcomes

Externalizing (Acting out)

Please tell me if this statement was never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or always true for [CHILD'S NAME] during the past month.

[He/She] argues too much.

[He/She] bullies or is cruel or mean to others.

[He/She] is disobedient.

[He/She] is stubborn, sullen, or irritable.

Depression Symptoms

Please tell me if this statement was never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or always true for [CHILD'S NAME] during the past month.

[He/She] feels worthless or inferior.

[He/She] is unhappy, sad, or depressed.

[He/She] is withdrawn, and does not get involved with others.

Social Competence

Please tell me if this statement was never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or always true for [CHILD'S NAME] during the past month.

[He/She] shows respect for teachers and neighbors.

[He/She] tries to resolve conflicts with classmates, family, or friends.

[He/She] gets along well with other children.

[He/She] tries to understand other people's feelings.

School Engagement

Please tell me if this statement was never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or always true for [CHILD'S NAME] during the past month.

[He/She] cares about doing well in school.

[He/She] does all required homework.

Grade Retention

Since starting kindergarten, has [he/she] repeated any grades? [yes or no]

Statistical Controls

Child Gender [male/female]

Child Age [6-17 years of age]

Race [White, Black, Latino, Other]

Family Structure [single parent households, biological or adoptive two parent households, and step-parent households]

Table 1: The Association Between Family Characteristics and Five Child Outcomes by Whether the Mother Reported Receiving Emotional Support with Childrearing

Externalizing: Percent Exhibiting Externalizing (Acting Out Behaviors) "Usually or Always"

	Single- Parent House hold	Two- Parent Household	Mother Completed Less Than High School	Mother Completed High School or More	Family Income Below Poverty Threshold	Family Income Above Poverty Threshold
Emotional Support	10.70%	6.10%	12.60%	6.60%	11.30%	5.60%
No Emotional Support	16.30%	12.60%	14.10%	14.30%	17.10%	11.50%

Internalizing: Percent Exhibiting Depression Symptoms "Usually or Always"

	Single- Parent House hold	Two- Parent Household	Mother Completed Less Than High School	Mother Completed High School or More	Family Income Below Poverty Threshold	Family Income Above Poverty Threshold
Emotional Support	1.60%	0.50%	2.50%	0.70%	1.60%	0.50%
No Emotional Support	4.30%	3.10%	5.30%	3.20%	4.90%	2.60%

Social Competence: Percent Exhibiting Socially Competent Behavior "Usually or Always"

	Single- Parent House hold	Two- Parent Household	Mother Completed Less Than High School	Mother Completed High School or More	Family Income Below Poverty Threshold	Family Income Above Poverty Threshold
Emotional Support	56.20%	65.80%	48.60%	64.90%	54.40%	66.90%
No Emotional Support	43.00%	49.60%	38.20%	49.00%	40.60%	52.80%

School Engagement: Percent Exhibiting High School Engagement

	Single- Parent House hold	Two- Parent Household	Mother Completed Less Than High School	Mother Completed High School or More	Family Income Below Poverty Threshold	Family Income Above Poverty Threshold
Emotional Support	74.40%	83.90%	74.90%	82.50%	76.10%	83.80%
No Emotional Support	66.80%	75.20%	69.80%	71.80%	70.30%	72.20%

Grade Retention: Percent Retained At Least Once Since Kindergarten

	Single- Parent House hold	Two- Parent Household	Mother Completed Less Than High School	Mother Completed High School or More	Family Income Below Poverty Threshold	Family Income Above Poverty Threshold
Emotional Support	13.90%	6.50%	21.10%	6.70%	15.10%	5.30%
No Emotional Support	18.50%	13.10%	20.90%	14.10%	19.90%	11.10%

Note: All results are statistically significant (p <.05), except for the cell shaded in grey.

Source: 2007 NSCH, analyses by Child Trends

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