

Family Income and Parental Behavior: Maternal Personality as a Moderator

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Abstract : There is abundant research showing that socio-economic status is implicated in parenting. However, additional factors such as family context, parent personality, parenting history and child behavior also help determine how parents enact the role of caregiver. Each of these factors not only helps determine how a parent will act in a given situation, but each can serve to moderate the influence of the other factors. Personality has long been studied as a factor that influences parental behavior, but it has almost never been considered as a moderator of family contextual factors. For this study, relations between three maternal personality characteristics (agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism) and four aspects of parenting (harshness, sensitivity, stimulation, learning materials) were examined when children were 6 months, 36 months, and 54 months old and again at 5th grade. Relations between these three aspects of personality and the overall home environment were also examined. A key concern was whether maternal personality characteristics moderated relations between household income and the four aspects of parenting and between household income and the overall home environment. The data for this study were taken from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD). The total sample consisted of 1364 families living in ten different sites in the United States. However, the samples analyzed included only those with complete data on all four parenting outcomes (i.e., sensitivity, harshness, stimulation, and provision of learning materials), income, maternal education and all three measures of personality (i.e., agreeableness, neuroticism, extraversion) at each age examined. Results from hierarchical regression analysis showed that mothers high in agreeableness were more likely to demonstrate sensitivity and stimulation as well as provide more learning materials to their children but were less likely to manifest harshness. Maternal agreeableness also consistently moderated the effects of low income on parental behavior. Mothers high in extraversion were more likely to provide stimulation and learning materials, with extraversion serving as a moderator of low income on both. By contrast, mothers high in neuroticism were less likely to demonstrate positive aspects of parenting and more likely to manifest negative aspects (e.g., harshness). Neuroticism also served to moderate the influence of low income on parenting, especially for stimulation and learning materials. The most consistent effects of parent personality were on the overall home environment, with significant main and interaction effects observed in 11 of the 12 models tested. These findings suggest that it may behoove professional who work with parents living in adverse circumstances to consider parental personality in helping to better target prevention or intervention efforts aimed at supporting parental efforts to act in ways that benefit children.

Keywords : home environment, household income, learning materials, personality, sensitivity, stimulation

Conference Title : ICSRD 2020 : International Conference on Scientific Research and Development

Conference Location : Chicago, United States

Conference Dates : December 12-13, 2020