

Partnership Instability and Changes in Mothering Behaviors with Young Children

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Abstract

It is increasingly common for children to live in unstable family arrangements. Research suggests that each maternal partnership change a child is exposed to has a negative effect on child well-being. Social stress theory posits that partnership transitions are associated with changes in resources and family processes which alter the mother's capacity to care for her child, thus leading to negative outcomes for children. No study, however, has directly tested whether these child outcomes are driven by *changes* in mothering behaviors, as theory suggests. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, we estimate HLM models to determine the effect of partnership transitions on changes in mothering behaviors, including caregiver stress and engagement, between the child's birth and age 5. Additionally, we examine the extent to which changes in mothering behaviors may be due to changes in economic resources and emotional support from the exiting or entering biological or social father. The results will further our understanding of why family instability negatively affects children.

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Extended Abstract

It is increasingly common for children to live in complex, unstable family arrangements which are often negatively associated with healthy child development. Nearly 2 out of 5 children are born to unmarried parents who are either single or in cohabiting unions that are generally short-lived. Over half of all children will experience at least one change in their family structure during childhood; indeed, half of children born to urban single mothers experience 3 or more maternal partnership transitions between birth and age three. Each change in partnership has potentially cumulative, negative effects on children's health and socio-emotional well-being.

Social stress theory posits that partnership transitions, particularly chronic instability, are associated with concomitant changes in resources and family processes which alter the mother's psychological functioning and her capacity to care for her child. In turn, these negative mothering behaviors are posited to lead to negative outcomes for children.

Although several studies have identified an association between partnership instability and negative outcomes for children across the early life course, few studies have directly tested whether these outcomes are driven by changes in mothering behaviors, as theory suggests. A few studies have examined the mediating role of mothering behaviors, but only two studies have predicted mothering behaviors or maternal stress as a function of family structure instability, and no study has examined changes in mothering behaviors. This study seeks to advance our understanding in this area.

We use data from the Fragile Families Study to determine the effect of partnership transitions on changes in mothering behaviors between the child's birth and age 5. Mothering behaviors include the mother's perception of the difficulties or rewards of parenting (maternal

stress) and her daily interactions with her child (maternal engagement). Close attention will be paid to the timing of the relationship change and the short and long-term effects on mothering.

Additionally, we examine the mediating role of concomitant changes in economic resources and emotional support from the exiting or entering biological or social father. Paternal influences on mothering behaviors have largely been ignored in the literature. Finally, we estimate how these associations are moderated by the type of the relationship (marital, cohabiting, dating, or single) that the mother is exiting or entering.

We begin by establishing that each partnership transitions a mother experiences between her child's birth and age 5 is associated with a change (increase) in maternal stress and (decline) in maternal engagement. We estimate conventional Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) which account for differences in intercepts (levels) as well as slopes (changes). Importantly, we model differences in the levels of mothering behaviors at child age 1, controlling for both background characteristics of the mother, partnership instability that occurs between the child's birth and age 1, as well as subsequent partnership changes. This explicitly tests whether there is selection into various relationship types, and models such possible bias. In addition, we model changes overtime in mothering behaviors as a function of family structure states (separate groups for stable two-biological parents, single, social parents??) and family instability. We measure instability as both the sum of all transitions between birth and age 5, as well as categorically to account for whether the mother experienced one, two, three, or four or more transitions. Table 1 provides a template for the associations we will test. In addition, we will examine how economic and social resources change in response to partnership transitions, and how these changes in resources mediate the effects of partnership instability on mothering behaviors.

We then use piecewise HLM models (in which the slope is estimated in segments rather than continuously), to pay close attention to the timing of the transitions to better understand the extent to which changes in mothering co-occur with partnership transitions and whether these effects persist. Most effects should fade out as families adjust to new norms and routines, but the effects may accumulate for those who continue to have transitions.

The results of this study will provide a better understanding as to why family instability negatively affects children's well-being, and will provide insights as to how public policies may support families as they become increasingly complex and less stable.

Table 1

HLM Models predicting mothering behaviors with relationship statuses and number of partnership transitions between birth and age 5.

	Maternal Stress		Maternal Engagement	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
<i>Intercept at Child Age 1 (i.e. initial level of mothering behaviors at child age 1)</i>				
(Stable Married birth-5)	X	X	X	X
Stable Cohabiting birth-5	X	X	X	X
Stable Dating birth-5	X	X	X	X
Stable Single birth-5	X	X	X	X
Number of Partnership Transitions	X		X	
One transition				
Two transitions		X		X
Three transitions		X		X
Four + transitions		X		X
Baseline controls (including rel status at birth)	X	X	X	X
<i>Slope between Child Age 1 and 5 (i.e. changes in mothering between child age 1 and 5)</i>				
(Stable Married birth-5)	X	X	X	X
Stable Cohabiting birth-5	X	X	X	X
Stable Dating birth-5	X	X	X	X
Stable Single birth-5	X	X	X	X
Number of Partnership Transitions	X		X	
One transition				
Two transitions		X		X
Three transitions		X		X
Four + transitions		X		X
Baseline and time varying controls (including rel status at birth)	X	X	X	X

