

Child Maltreatment in Stressful Circumstances: Implications for Parenting in Diverse Families

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Doris Duke Fellowships
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Seeking innovations to prevent child abuse and neglect

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Policy research that benefits children, families, and their communities

Background

- The families of today's children are increasingly heterogeneous, with children frequently residing in homes comprised of diverse configurations of adults who share parenting responsibilities.
 - These complex family configurations are especially common among the most disadvantaged families.
- Stressful circumstances and limited resources present challenges to healthy, positive parenting and can increase the risk of child abuse.
- If limited resources and support are associated with greater challenges to parenting, then that link may be especially pronounced in high-stress family environments.

Current Study

- This project frames processes associated with child maltreatment within this context of growing diversity in family environments and contextual stressors.
- We explore the connection between parenting and other risk and protective factors associated with child abuse across three diverse, yet high-risk, populations.

High-Stress Family Environments

Military Spouses

Sample

- Sample A: 30 female National Guard/ Reserve spouses with a child under age 5
- Sample B: Self-reports from 103 spouses 2 times during the 1st year of reintegration

Methods

- Method A: In-depth qualitative interviews
 - Thematic analyses focused on social support
- Method B: Autoregressive cross-lagged panel model examining stress-buffering and support-erosion explanatory models

Key Findings

- Formal and informal social support are highly valuable and directly related to mental health and ability to parent children.
- Spouses create their own support networks, on which they rely heavily.
- Evidence of support erosion.

Low-Income Urban Families

Sample

- Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study ($n = 4,845$ mothers)
 - Longitudinal study of a birth cohort in large U.S. cities
 - Oversample unmarried parents, 59% HS diploma, 69% African American, 57% young

Methods

- Measures of economic state and material hardship
- Mediators: Parenting stress, depression, domestic violence
- Confirmatory factor analyses
- Structural equation modeling

Key Findings

- The well-fitting mediation model indicates a contextual and complex connection between economic conditions and risk for child physical abuse.
- Maternal depression (year 5) mediates the relationship between food hardship (year 3) and risk for abuse (year 9).

Non-Resident African American Fathers

Sample

- Sample A: 110 non-resident African American fathers
- Sample B: Subsample of 8 participants from survey

Methods

- Parent predictors: Developmental history, parenting self-efficacy, parental relationship status, and co-parental alliance
- Child predictors: Age and sex
- Method A: Multiple regression and canonical correlation analysis
- Method B: Interviews to explore how predictors contribute to fathers' involvement in parenting.

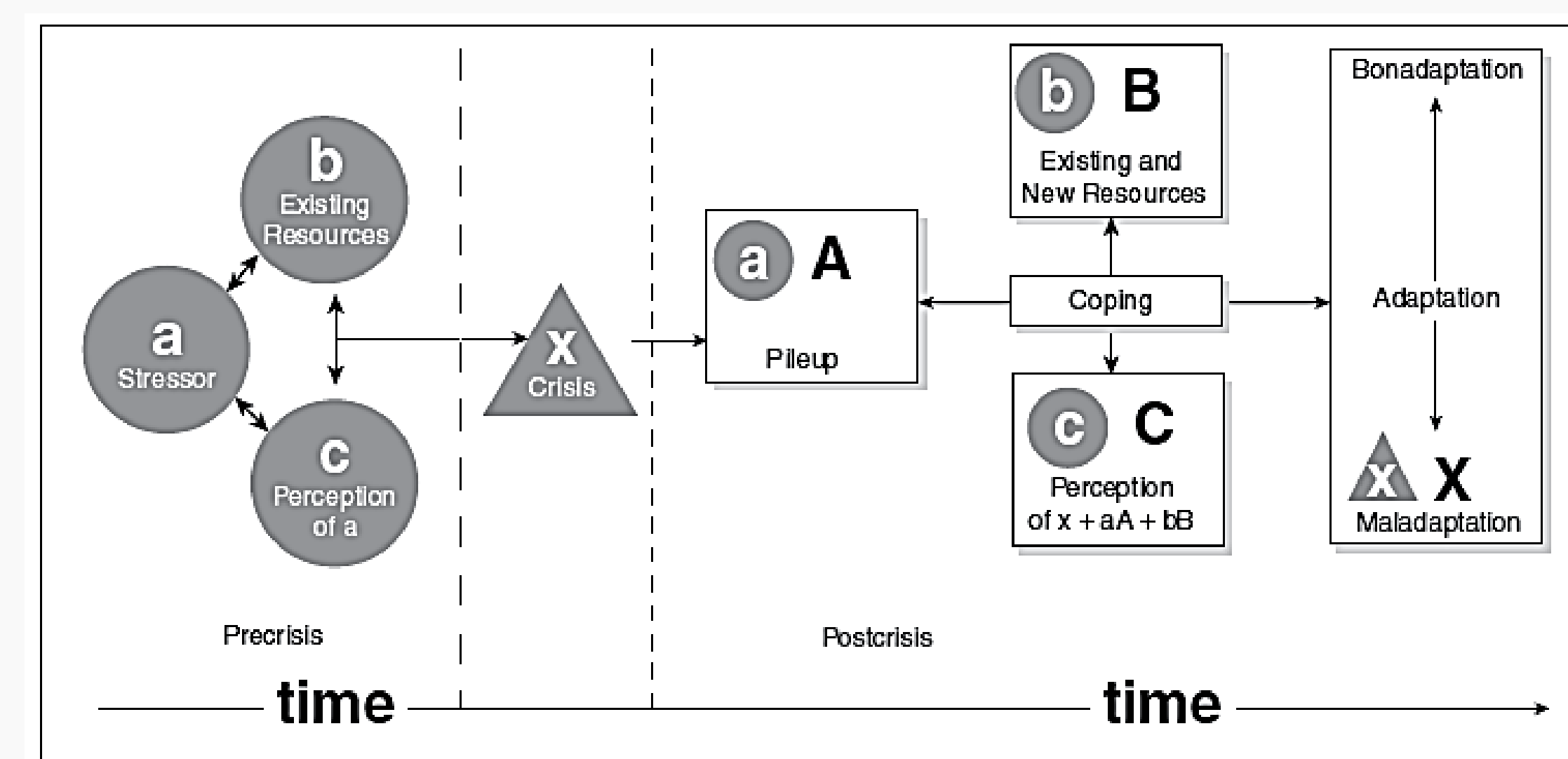
Key Findings

- Relationship with child's mother and parenting self-efficacy are strongest predictors of involvement.
- Fathers discuss a paradox between their ideological views and realities of fatherhood.

Common Threads

- Children across all of these families are at a **higher risk** of child abuse.
- All groups want to positively parent their children, but **barriers imposed by stressful circumstances** make that more difficult:
 - Having a spouse deployed in the military or returning home,
 - Serious economic hardships in meeting basic needs, and
 - Not living with children and having a strained relationship with their mother.
- Those barriers are strongly associated with compromised *mental health*.
- Household membership and home environment** are important to consider.
 - Physical separation* from fathers can be especially difficult, whether that separation is imposed by military deployment or non-residence in the household.
 - As a *socioeconomic setting*, the home environment is characterized by multiple factors ranging from income-to-poverty ratio to difficulty paying bills.
- Policy and practice should also focus **beyond the mother-child relationship**, to include fathers and structural barriers.
 - Supporting fathers who do not live with their children full-time may be especially effective for the entire family unit, relieving some of mothers' stress and protecting children against abuse.
- Policymakers and practitioners should **leverage resiliency factors**, such as:
 - Military spouses' pre-existing informal social support networks,
 - Easily remedied material hardships in paying for food and medical care, and
 - African American fathers' desires to break cycles of fatherlessness.

Double ABCX Model of Family Resilience



Source: McCubbin and Patterson 1983.

Unique Challenges

- Certain types of parents face **distinct barriers**.
 - Military spouses interact with the military bureaucracy, in addition to the stress of having their husbands away and potentially in danger.
 - Non-resident fatherhood is especially common among African American men, as is other economic challenges such as unemployment and incarceration.
- Different types of policy interventions and programs** may be necessary to assist these groups.
 - Military spouses need additional social support that combines formal and informal sources.
 - Low-income urban families need economic assistance to improve their conditions.
 - Non-residential African American fathers need programs aimed at parenting behavior while acknowledging challenges they face in meeting the demands of fatherhood.