

# Family hardship, family instability and children's development in the first five years of life

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# Family poverty

- Family poverty constitutes a pervasive developmental hazard, draining family resources
- Child poverty is a persistent problem, even in highly developed countries (UNICEF, 2010)
- Poverty affects families economically, socially and on an emotional level

# Family instability

- Since the 1970s family life and living conditions of parents have become increasingly diversified with fewer children living in traditional two-parent families (Kiernan, 2008; McLanahan 2009; Waldfogel et al., 2010)
- Family instability has been recognised as a salient risk factor affecting parenting effectiveness and children's adjustment especially during early childhood (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2010; Conger & Elder, 1994; McLanahan, 2009)
- Effects of family instability on child adjustment less well researched than poverty effects
- Indeed no consensus about how family instability should be conceptualised and measured (Brown, 2010)



# Previous research

- Associations between poverty, family structure and child adjustment are well established (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Osborn, 2007; Kiernan & Mensah, 2009)
- Poverty and family break-up often co-occur, making it important to assess their combined as well as separate effect (McLanahan, 2009)

➔ However, relatively little is known about the processes by which poverty or family instability affect child adjustment

# How does poverty affect children?

- Resource deprivation or investment models (Mayer, 1997; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Linver, Brooks-Gunn & Kohen, 2002)
- Family Stress models (Conger et al., 1992, 2010; Elder & Caspi, 1988; McLoyd, 1989)
- Combination of Investment and Stress Models (Linver, et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2002; Conger & Donnellan, 2007)
- Instability Hypothesis (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007)
  - Instability Resource hypothesis
  - Instability stress hypothesis (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008)
- Selection theory: role of prior characteristics, in particular education (Rowe & Roger, 1997)

# Aims of research

- Use longitudinal data with sufficient large sample size to:
  - examine how poverty affects family processes and subsequent child adjustment in infants
  - assess the relative role of family poverty and family instability affecting children's adjustment across domains
  - explore whether associations between poverty, family processes and child adjustment are mediated by experience of family instability across different family forms
  - Identify factors enabling positive adjustment in face of adversity



# Developmental-contextual perspective of family processes

- Approach inspired by Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder & Caspi, 1988; Sameroff and Rosenblum, 2006:
  - Multiple levels of influence (ranging from proximal to distal influences)
  - Linked lives
  - Development over time and in context
  - Transactions between individual and context

# Why focus on early childhood?

- Early development is crucial indicator of developmental health (Keating & Hertzman, 1999)
- In particular verbal skills and behavioural adjustment are associated with later educational and occupational attainment as well as health and wellbeing
- Early years a crucial window of opportunity for interventions (Heckman, 2006; Hertzman et al., 2010; Marmot, 2010)



# UK Millennium Cohort

- 18819 babies born into 18553 families
- Babies were born between September 2000 and January 2002 in the UK
- At time of survey most babies were 9-month old
- Follow-up study at age 36 months and 5 years

# Child outcomes

- adaptation across domains
  - Cognitive adjustment (naming vocabulary)
  - Behaviour adjustment (SDQ)
- Adjustment in one domain cannot be assumed to generalize to other domains
- Unless multiple domains are assessed, only a partial picture of adaptation can be formulated (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Masten, 2009).

# Family Poverty

- Equivalised net household income < 60% national median at 9mths, 3 and 5 years :

|                                  | N<br>(9,874) | %    |
|----------------------------------|--------------|------|
| Never poor                       | 5,930        | 60.1 |
| Once                             | 1,491        | 15.1 |
| Twice                            | 1,106        | 11.2 |
| Poor at all three<br>time points | 1,347        | 13.6 |



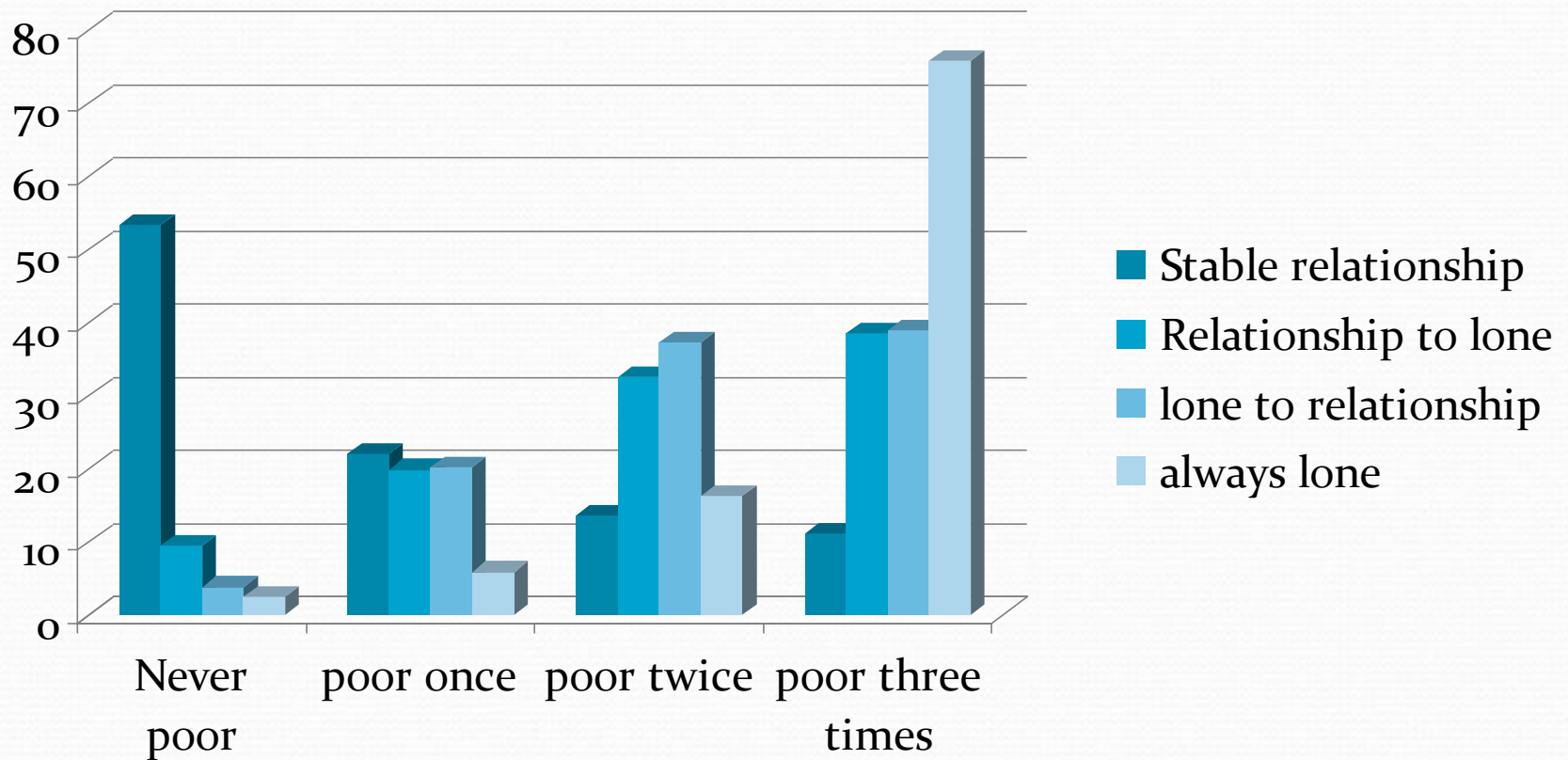
# Family Status at each sweep

|            | 2000/2<br>MCS <sub>1</sub><br>(W <sub>1</sub> )<br>% | 2003/4<br>MCS <sub>2</sub><br>(W <sub>2</sub> )<br>% | 2005/6<br>MCS <sub>3</sub><br>(W <sub>3</sub> )<br>% |
|------------|--|--|--|
| Married    | 60.5   | 65.1   | 60.9   |
| Cohabiting | 24.6   | 17.9   | 19.0   |
| Lone       | 14.5   | 16.6   | 19.8   |

# Family transitions between MCS1 and MCS3 (2000-2005/6)

|                        | N      | %    |
|------------------------|--------|------|
| Stayed in relationship | 10,930 | 75.8 |
| Relationship to lone   | 1,355  | 9.7  |
| Lone to relationship   | 792    | 4.9  |
| Stay lone parent       | 1,477  | 9.6  |

# Poverty and Family transitions





# Decomposition Analysis: Cognitive Adjustmt

What is a greater risk: poverty or family transitions?

|                             | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3         | Model 4                             | Model 5                            |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Poverty                  | sign.   |         |                 |                                     |                                    |
| 2. FamTrans                 |         | sign    |                 |                                     |                                    |
| 3. Pov + Fam                |         |         | Only pov<br>sig |                                     |                                    |
| 4. +<br>Demographics        |         |         |                 | Age,sex,bw<br>qual,work,<br>poverty |                                    |
| 5. + Own<br>characteristics |         |         |                 |                                     | Age, bw,<br>qual, cogn,<br>poverty |
| R <sup>2</sup>              | .079    | .030    | .080            | .157                                | .298                               |

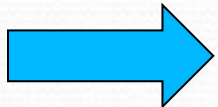


Poverty greater risk factor for cognitive development than family trans

# Decomposition Analysis: Behaviour

What is a greater risk: poverty or family transitions?

|                             | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3            | Model 4                              | Model 5                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Poverty                  | sign.   |         |                    |                                      |   |
| 2. FamTrans                 |         | sign    |                    |                                      |   |
| 3. Pov + Fam                |         |         | Pov + fam<br>sign. |                                      |   |
| 4. +<br>Demographics        |         |         |                    | Age,sex,bw,<br>qual,work<br>pov, fam |   |
| 5. + Own<br>characteristics |         |         |                    |                                      | Age, sex,bw,<br>qual, cogn,<br>pov, fam |
| R <sup>2</sup>              | .076    | .058    | .0807              | .132                                 | .152                                    |



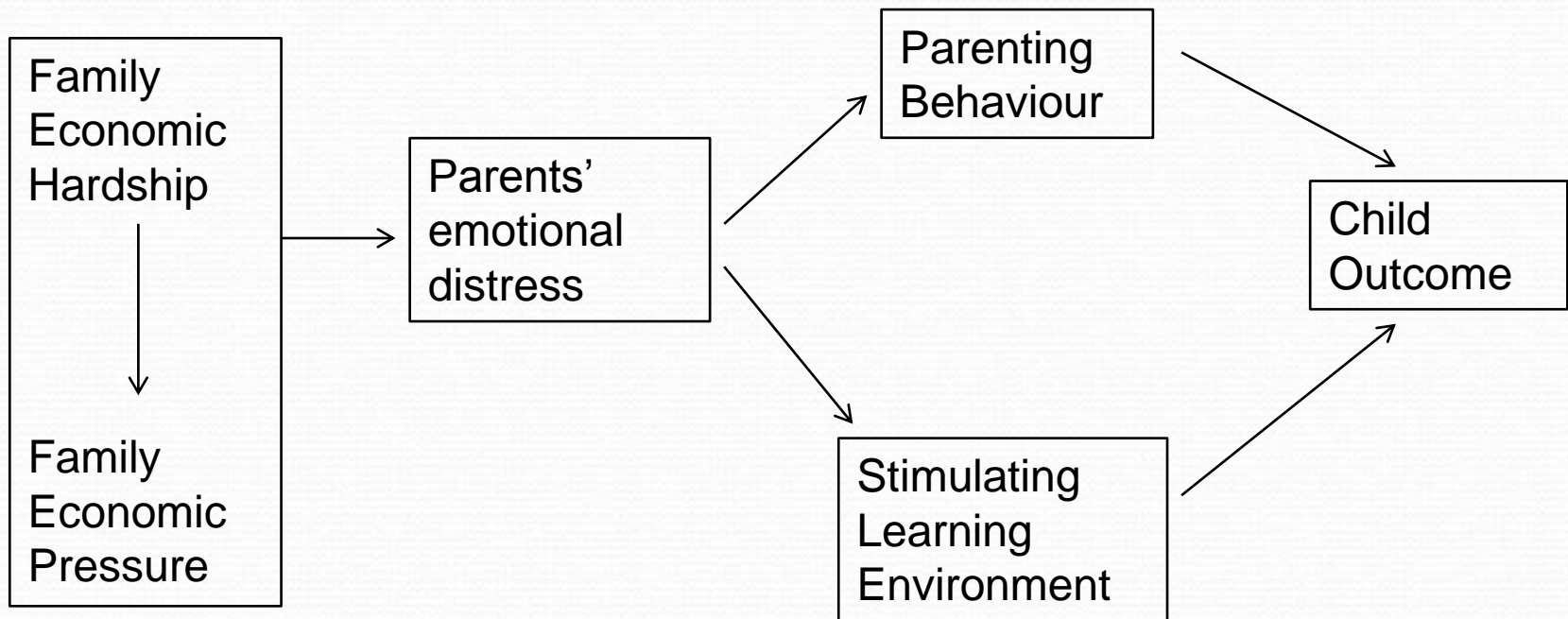
- Poverty and family transitions impact on behaviour adjustment
- Domain specific pathways



# Risk processes



# Combining Family Stress and Investment models



# Findings

- The experience of material hardship:
  - effects both cognitive and behavioural adjustment
  - can exacerbate maternal distress
  - is associated with less effective parenting
- Experiences in the family environment can mediate the influence of material hardship on child outcomes (after controlling for socio-economic background and biological risk factors)
- Different mediating processes for cognitive and behaviour adjustment

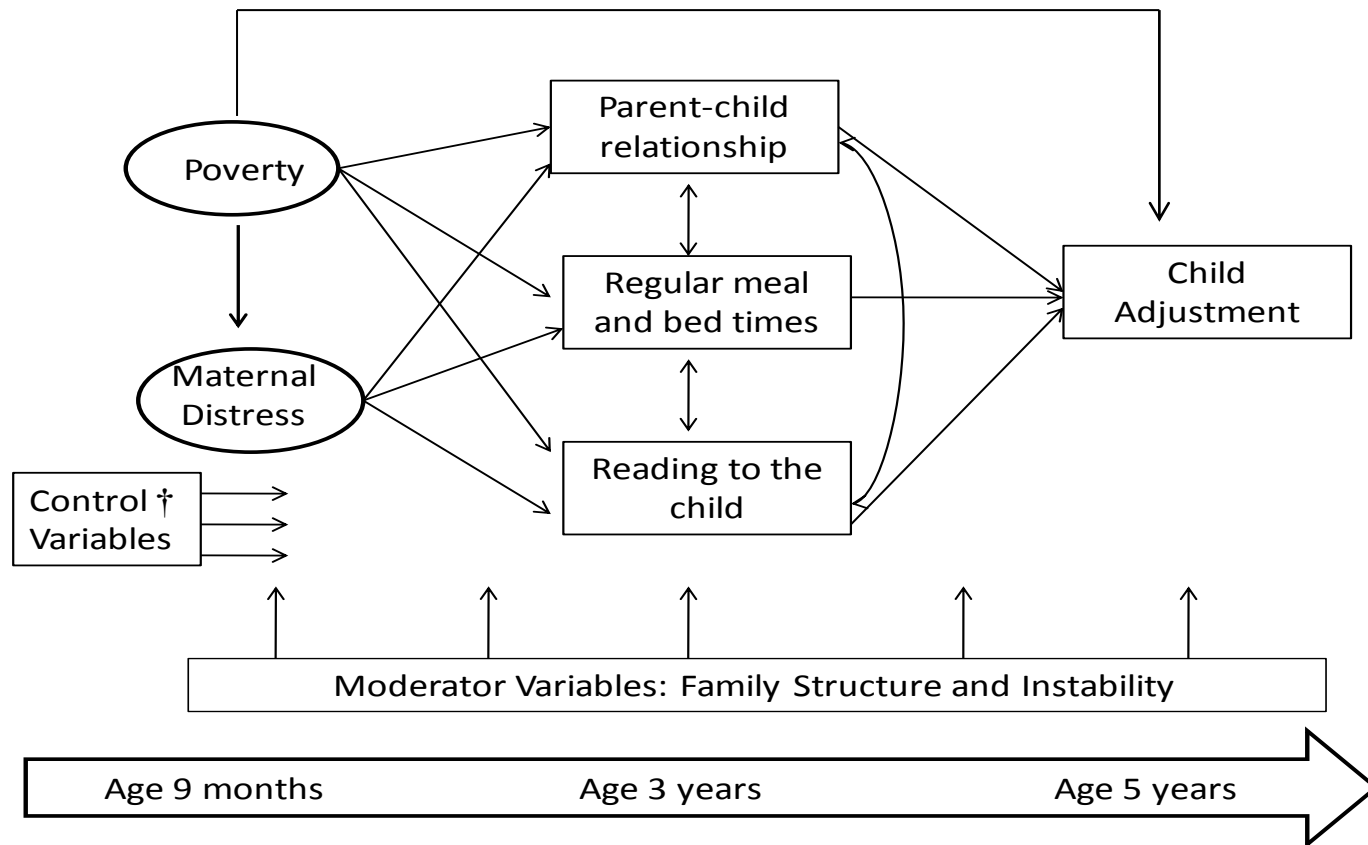
# The role of family instability

- Does the model apply in complex and changing family systems?
- Family stability in MCS by age 5 of child:

| Relationship status<br>(W1-3) | %   |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Stably married                | 59  |
| Married to lone               | 4   |
| Stably cohabiting             | 13  |
| Cohabit to married            | 6   |
| Cohabit to lone               | 4   |
| Stably lone                   | 9   |
| Lone to married               | 1.4 |
| Lone to cohabiting            | 3.5 |

Majority of children grew up in stable 2-parent families (78%), although nearly 40% were born to unmarried parents.  
About 1 in 10 children grew up with lone mother.

# A developmental-contextual model of family processes



† Control variables include: Child's birth weight, gestational age, ethnicity, child age and temperament at assessment, maternal age and education.



# Findings

- Maternal distress is crucial risk factor undermining parent-child relationship, which in turn influences child adjustment across all family types
- Levels of distress especially high among initially cohabiting or married mothers who later separated, as well as among stable single mothers
- Losing a partner is associated with loss of income
- Parental investments in children lowest among initially lone mothers, who also are poorest
- Greater adjustment problems among children experiencing change in family structure

# Conclusion

- To gain a better understanding of the impact of family instability on child adjustment, one has to take into account initial relationship status and circumstances of change (gaining or losing a partner)
  - Example: gaining a partner can improve family income, but might generate stress in mother-child relationship
  - Family context and family dynamics play crucial role in shaping family processes in addition to poverty:
- ➔ Family structure and instability moderate associations between poverty and family processes

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