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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**How Parents React to Material Hardship Found To Be Key  
To How Income Affects Children**

We've long known that children who live in families with adequate financial resources tend to do better than children who live in poverty. It's less clear why this is so.

A major new study sheds light on how family income affects children, finding that it is how parents experience material hardship—not income alone—that affects children's cognitive skills and their social and emotional competence.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, New York University, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University, is reported in the January/February 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*. The research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Researchers looked at 21,255 American kindergartners, drawing from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998-99. In the study, parents provided information about their families' economic situation, their own parenting, and their children's behaviors. Teachers provided additional information about children's behaviors in school, and children's cognitive skills were measured by standardized tests.

The study identified two ways family income affects children. First, parents who make more money are better able to buy more cognitively stimulating materials, such as books, and provide enriching experiences, such as visits to museums, that support their children's academic achievement. Second, the material hardship experienced by many low-income families, such as not having enough to eat, can lead parents to be depressed and fight with one another. This, in turn, can cause parents to show less affection toward their children, leaving the children depressed or more likely to misbehave.

By considering material hardship and family income together, the study's results challenge the well-established finding that family income is directly associated with parents' stress. The researchers found that only when increases in income were accompanied by decreases in families' experiences of hardship did income lessen parents' stress levels; added income alone was not enough. This distinction is important because the same level of family income can mean hardship in some parts of the country, such as large, urban cities, but not in other areas, such as small, rural towns.

"Our results suggest that a goal of enhancing the cognitive abilities of children from low-income families might be effectively served by interventions that provide such enriching materials or experiences when parents are financially unable to do so," according to Elizabeth T. Gershoff, the study's lead author and a professor of social work at the University of Michigan. "If the goal is reducing behavior problems, then reducing hardship through provision of in-kind goods and services, and in turn reducing parent stress, may have the greatest impact."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 1, *Income Is Not Enough: Incorporating Material Hardship into Models of Income Associations with Parenting and Child Development*, by Gershoff, ET (University of Michigan), Aber, JL (New York University), Raver, CC (University of Chicago), and Lennon, MC (Columbia University). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.