Welfare Reform and Parenting: Reasonable Expectations

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SUMMARY

Although the primary goals of federal welfare reform legislation were to move welfare mothers into the workforce and reduce births outside of marriage, promotion of responsible parenting was also an important underlying theme. Parenting is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, however, encompassing a wide range of functions related to nurturing, discipline, stimulation, values, activities, and routines. This article provides a framework for assessing the impact of welfare reform on various dimensions of parenting, with the following key findings:

- Many aspects of life affect parenting and child development, such as parent characteristics, child characteristics, family economic resources, family structure, parental mental health, marital or partner relationships, and the quality of parents’ kin and social networks.
- About two-thirds of states are using federal welfare funds to promote better parenting through programs such as home visits to new parents and parenting classes, but virtually no state parenting programs have been evaluated.
- Welfare reform appears to have limited effects on parenting. The only dimension of parenting significantly affected by some welfare demonstration programs was parents’ choice of child care settings and extracurricular activities for their children.
- The programs with the greatest positive impact on parenting were those with more generous work supports and more flexible work requirements. Not only did these programs lead to different choices concerning child care and activities for preschool and school-age children, but they also resulted in more stable marriages and less violence between partners, which also could lead to improved parenting.

The authors conclude that many important aspects of the connection between welfare reform and parenting have yet to be examined, and that further research is needed to identify the ways states’ welfare programs can promote better parenting.

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Welfare reform in the 1990s—beginning with state waivers and culminating in the federal welfare reform law enacted in 1996—represents the most wide-ranging change in policies for low-income families since the first federal welfare program began in 1935. (See the article by Greenberg and colleagues in this journal issue.) Although the primary goals of reform were to move welfare mothers into the workforce and reduce births outside of marriage, promotion of responsible parenting is an underlying theme in many of the law’s provisions.1

The law does not specify what constitutes responsible parenthood, but about two-thirds of states are using federal welfare funds to promote better parenting practices as part of their new welfare programs.2 In addition, policymakers argue that parental employment, family income, and family structure all have significant implications for parenting. For example, proponents of welfare reform believe that if mothers leave welfare for employment, they will be better parents because they will provide better routines and serve as better role models for their children. Similarly, those who view welfare reform as a pathway out of poverty argue that increased economic resources will lead to better parenting. Finally, those who champion welfare reform as a way to promote marriage believe that married parents are more effective than single parents.

In policy debates over welfare reform, parenting tends to be discussed simplistically. A more thoughtful discussion requires a better understanding of what shapes parenting. In reality, parenting is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that ignites controversy in scientific and policy circles but is also a very personal, private experience. This article provides a framework for assessing the impact of welfare reform on parenting. The first section reviews the scientific literature describing the multiple dimensions of parenting and discusses how each dimension is linked to child development. The second section presents a model that synthesizes research evidence about key factors believed to influence parenting. The third section summarizes what has been learned to date about the direct and indirect effects of welfare reform on parenting. A final section discusses the limitations of current studies, and the areas where further research would be most helpful in understanding how states’ welfare reform programs could more effectively support positive parenting practices.

Dimensions of Parenting and Links to Child Outcomes

Extensive research supports the widespread belief that parenting does, in fact, have an important influence on developmental outcomes for children and adolescents.3 Box 1 displays six key dimensions of parenting that are interrelated yet distinct. Each dimension affects parenting styles, and therefore child outcomes, in unique ways.

Box 1

Dimensions of Parenting

- **Warmth and responsiveness**: Parents express love and affection and are responsive to their child’s needs and requests.
- **Control and discipline**: Parents outline specific rules and expectations and enforce them consistently. As a child grows and matures, parents continue to set limits, but allow for more autonomy in the child’s world.
- **Cognitive stimulation**: Parents ensure that their child has materials that are stimulating; parents are verbally engaging and actively teach their children key concepts.
- **Modeling of attitudes, values, and behaviors**: Parents discuss their values, convey their attitudes, and act toward their child and others in the way they want their child to act.
- **Gatekeeping**: Parents serve as links to the environment, influencing which family and friends their child interacts with and what outside activities and programs they become involved in. Parents become involved in school and other community activities to maintain connection with the child and outside influences.
- **Family routines and traditions**: Parents create a daily routine as well as family traditions that help structure a child’s expectations for the day as well as promote knowledge of cultural and family heritage.
Although the primary goals of reform were to move welfare mothers into the workforce and reduce births outside of marriage, promotion of responsible parenting is an underlying theme in many of the law’s provisions.

**Warmth and Responsiveness**
Infants and toddlers whose parents are consistently warm and responsive develop “secure attachments” to their parents and rely on parents or “attachment figures” as a “secure base” from which to explore the environment. These secure attachments at a young age provide an important emotional foundation for later development and help promote healthy peer relations and fewer problem behaviors in childhood and adolescence. Children and adolescents whose parents are warm and supportive also have higher levels of self-esteem and social competence as well as lower levels of depression, anxiety, and problem behaviors.

**Control and Discipline**
Parents’ discipline style and level of supervision are key to children’s healthy development. Parents need to take children’s age and developmental level into account when deciding how to approach discipline and supervision. Younger children need more structure and boundaries to keep them safe, whereas older children should be granted more autonomy as they mature and transition into adulthood. Parents who provide firm, consistent limits and rules teach children what type of behavior is socially acceptable and how to regulate their own behavior. These children fare better in school and with their peers. Parents who know where their teenagers are and set limits such as curfews, but who also grant some autonomy, have adolescents with fewer behavior problems, including lower levels of drug and alcohol use, school suspensions and expulsions, and police involvement. “Authoritative parents”—those who are warm but firm—have children who do better on virtually all developmental outcomes compared with children whose parents are low on either warmth or control. These links have been found across different countries and socioeconomic and cultural groups.

**Cognitive Stimulation**
The stimulation provided by parents is especially important for infants, toddlers, and young children. Children show higher levels of cognitive functioning and school achievement in early and middle childhood when parents are more verbally engaging and provide more cognitively stimulating toys, activities, and interactions. During the school years, parents’ active involvement with their children’s homework and schools is related to better academic achievement.

**Modeling**
Whether consciously or unconsciously, parents model behavior for their children every day. Modeling encompasses a broad array of experiences, and children can learn both positive and negative behaviors through witnessing adults’ responses to a variety of situations. For example, when a child witnesses domestic violence or excessively harsh punishment of a sibling, that child is more likely to act aggressively toward others. In contrast, when children see their parents displaying considerate, empathic, or moral behavior, they learn to consider what is right and wrong and how others will respond to their actions.

**Gatekeeping**
Parents serve as gatekeepers to the world for their children. They decide what neighborhood the family will live in, and they provide access to community organizations, such as child care settings, parks, and playgrounds, as well as opportunities to interact with neighbors, peers, and kin. As children grow up, parents continue to influence who their children’s friends are, as well as whether children will be involved in extracurricular activities and after-school programs. These gatekeeping activities are related to children’s social and academic competence, as participation in activities outside the home promotes more positive peer interactions, greater feelings of self-worth, and advances in learning. Adolescents are more likely to take initiative outside the family than are young children, but many adolescent decisions are still influenced by family life.

**Family Routines and Traditions**
Parents also influence their children by providing structure in their daily lives. Children who come from families who have a regular, predictable routine and
time together are believed to do better than those whose family life is less organized,\textsuperscript{25,26} although research on this dimension is limited. Parents also affect their children by initiating and maintaining familial, religious, and cultural traditions. When parents engender an understanding of the family’s cultural and ethnic heritage, children develop a stronger sense of ethnic identity,\textsuperscript{27} which is associated with both cognitive and social competence.\textsuperscript{28–30}

**Determinants of Parenting**

To understand how welfare reform might affect parenting, an overview of the key factors that influence parenting is essential. Figure 1 presents a model of these factors, illustrating the complexity of the connections between these factors and parenting, and the relationships among the factors themselves. The model shows that parenting is affected by many aspects of life: parent characteristics (such as personality, cognitive abilities, and level of education); child characteristics and the shared genes between parents and children; family economic resources (including income from work and/or welfare); and family structure and size. These four determinants are seen as influencing the three others—parental mental health, marital or partner relationships, and the quality of parents’ kin and social networks—which in turn influence parenting and child development.

**Parent Characteristics**
The first determinant in the model is the parent’s personal characteristics, which potentially influence every other determinant as well as parenting. Parents’ characteristics encompass a wide variety of attributes, including the parent’s own experience of being parented, age and education level, cognitive ability, personality, and other traits. Parents tend to model their own parents’ child-rearing practices, including both supportive or more harsh parenting.\textsuperscript{31,32} Parenting patterns also are influenced by parents’ mental frameworks or “internal working models,” which are based on and adapted from experiences with their own parents.\textsuperscript{5} In addition, parents with higher intellectual ability and levels of education, and those with positive personalities, tend to display more effective parenting.\textsuperscript{33,34} For example, such parents tend to be more responsive to children’s emotional needs, engage their children more, provide a more cognitively stimulating environment, and explain their punishments.

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**Figure 1**

**Determinants of Parenting Model**

- **Parent Characteristics**
  - Family economic resources
  - Family structure/size

- **Distal Influences on Parenting**
  - Parental mental and physical health
  - Marital/partner relationship quality
  - Kin and social networks

- **Proximal Influences on Parenting**
  - Family economic resources
  - Family structure/size
Single mothers tend to have less positive interactions with their children and provide less firm and consistent discipline as compared with mothers in two-parent households ... primarily because single mothers have more stressors in their lives.

**Child Characteristics**
Children influence their parents through their personalities, temperaments, and special needs. If a child has a difficult temperament or personality—crying or complaining much of the time—the parent is more likely to respond negatively, providing harsher punishment and fewer positive interactions than if a child is more easy-going. This pattern could cause developmental problems. The child’s innate characteristics, however, do not set in stone how the child will develop. Although the debate over “nature versus nurture” has been an intense focus of scientific research for most of the past century, current research shows that children’s development is shaped by a complex interaction of genetic and environmental influences. Thus, although a child with a difficult temperament presents a challenge and a risk, effective parenting can shape such children to become more socially competent and pleasant. In other words, children do indeed influence how parents respond to them, but parents also have a role in shaping children’s behavior and development.

**Economic Resources**
Family economic resources, including income from employment as well as other sources, such as welfare, influence parenting both directly and indirectly. Like many parents who are single, those facing economic hardships tend to be less effective because they have more stressors in their lives and thus are likely to have greater psychological distress. Low-income parents have been found to use less effective parenting strategies, including less warmth, harsher discipline, and less stimulating home environments.

**Family Structure and Size**
Family structure and economic resources have interrelated effects on parenting, as households with one parent, rather than two, have fewer economic and emotional resources. Single mothers tend to have less positive interactions with their children and provide less firm and consistent discipline as compared with mothers in two-parent households. This is primarily because single mothers have more stressors in their lives, poorer mental health, and no spousal or partner support. In addition, children with more siblings have fewer financial resources available to them as well as less time with and attention from parents. Depending on their ages, however, older siblings may help care for younger siblings.

**Parents’ Mental and Physical Health**
Research evidence is very strong regarding the link between parental mental health and the ability to parent effectively. Parents who are experiencing psychological distress, whether diagnosed as a mental disorder or not, are less likely to be warm and supportive of their children and are less effective in monitoring their children or providing consistent discipline. The association between parental physical health and parenting is less well established, with some indication that disability or poor physical health may lead to more family stress and parental depression, which in turn may lead to less effective parenting.

**Quality of Marital/Partner Relationships**
Similarly, the quality of the parent’s relationship with a spouse or partner as well as the size and supportiveness of kin networks have direct links to parenting effectiveness. The marital relationship is often considered the cornerstone of good family functioning, and a positive marital relationship is associated with more positive parenting. Conversely, chronic parental conflict is considered to have serious adverse effects on child development, causing more negative parent-child relationships and less consistent and effective discipline and monitoring of children. The most extreme form of parental conflict is domestic violence, a phenomenon associated with poor mental health and compromised parenting.

**Kin and Social Networks**
Others with strong networks of positive social support from friends and extended family are more effective parents. However, if interactions with kin generate conflict, or if kin are excessively demanding of parents’ time and energy, such negative relationships...
can lead to higher levels of stress and depressed mood,\textsuperscript{57,58} both of which are linked to more disruptive parenting. Determinants of parental mental health, quality of marital/partner relationships, and kin and social networks are interrelated and influence one another as well as affect parenting.\textsuperscript{59}

Although this model of the determinants of parenting is based on the most current developmental literature, it has limitations. Much of the research reflects findings from samples that were not randomly selected and, in many instances, included primarily white, middle-class families. In addition, no definitive statement can be made that these determinants cause the differences in parenting. For example, it is not possible to hold everything constant in a family to evaluate whether one factor influences parenting independent of other factors, or to randomly assign children to parents. Moreover, while this model may be relevant to most families, further research is needed to determine the extent to which the model applies to ethnically and culturally diverse, low-income families.\textsuperscript{60,61} Finally, some areas of research rely heavily on maternal self-report, which may be biased by the mother’s view of the world or her own psychological health. Nevertheless, the model provides a useful framework for analyzing how welfare reform may affect parenting.

**Parenting and Welfare Reform**

The federal welfare reform law of 1996 was couched in broad language: “The promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children.”\textsuperscript{1} As a result, the scope of programs implemented under welfare reform is wide-ranging, and nearly every factor illustrated in the Determinants of Parenting Model (Figure 1) could be affected. The challenge is to specify how the changes under welfare reform are affecting parenting, either directly or indirectly, based on findings from relevant research.

**Direct Effects on Parenting**

Many states are using welfare funds to implement initiatives designed to improve parenting directly, such as providing home visits to new parents or requiring certain welfare recipients to attend parenting classes.\textsuperscript{2} (See the appendix at the end of this article for three examples of welfare-supported programs that are intended to help improve parenting.) Assessments of these initiatives are quite limited. In the scientific fields, however, several theoretically based programs to improve parenting have been developed and evaluated. Studies have shown that these interventions are most successful when children are having socioemotional or developmental problems.\textsuperscript{34}

In such situations, parents are motivated to change their parenting practices to help their children. Furthermore, the interventions tend to be provided in small groups led by professionals with extensive training in child development and expertise in parenting and family issues. Such interventions can result in long-lasting improvements in parents’ knowledge and attitudes, use of appropriate discipline, and parent–child interactions.\textsuperscript{62}

In contrast, parenting programs that target low-income families tend to be broad in scope and have multiple goals, such as promoting job readiness and increasing access to social services. These programs generally have only modest effects on parenting that lessen with time.\textsuperscript{63,64} Several factors influence the effectiveness of such programs. Better outcomes are more likely when professionals, rather than paraprofessionals, meet with the participants, when families can expect more frequent contact, and when parents participate more fully in the intervention (for example, they miss fewer meetings and follow through on tasks expected to be done outside of meetings).\textsuperscript{65} Effects are
If maternal employment decreases psychological distress, this could result in increased parental warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate control ... [but] if maternal employment increases mental health problems, then parenting would be more harsh, less responsive, and less consistent.

Indirect Effects on Parenting
Programs designed to achieve the primary goals of welfare reform—to move welfare mothers into the workforce and reduce births outside of marriage—are likely to influence parenting indirectly, as they affect several of the key determinants of parenting such as family economic resources, parents' mental health, and partner relationship quality (see Figure 1). In fact, many policymakers expected that by promoting employment, earnings, and marriage, parenting practices would improve.

Most studies focusing on welfare reform's broader goals have not collected data on the potential impacts on parenting, either positive or negative. However, several large-scale studies currently under way in various states include components specifically designed to illuminate how the welfare reform law has affected families and parenting, and preliminary findings from these studies are emerging. For example, the Three-City Study will provide detailed information about any changes that occur in parenting practices as families transition on and off the welfare rolls. (See Box 2.) Some clues are also provided by the findings from several experiments or demonstrations begun in the early to mid-1990s that implemented various programs with features similar to current welfare reform policies. (For a detailed description of these studies, see the article by Zaslow and colleagues in this journal issue.) What can be gleaned from existing research about how changes in employment, earnings, and marriage under welfare reform may affect the various dimensions of parenting is summarized below.

The Connection between Employment and Parenting
Welfare reform has been galvanized by the opinion that employed mothers are better parents than mothers on welfare. The positive scenario is that mothers who move from welfare to work will have better mental health, leading to improved parenting. The underlying hypothesis in this scenario is that when mothers find employment challenging and rewarding, they will provide more cognitive stimulation to their children. Policymakers have also contributed considerable rhetoric to the notion that employed mothers will be better role models for their children, and that employment per se will lead to more predictable, organized daily routines at home. If maternal employment decreases psychological distress, this could result in increased parental warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate control.

The counterhypothesis is that mothers who leave welfare for employment will feel more stressed and have worse mental health. Others in poverty, most of whom are single, may find it difficult to balance employment, especially full-time work, and child rearing. The tedium and low levels of complexity in low-wage jobs may be linked to lower levels of cognitive stimulation at home. Time spent at work, combined with changing, off-hour, and inflexible work schedules, may mean less supervision and monitoring of children, the inability to respond to the erratic demands of parenting (such as teacher meetings and doctor appointments), and a lower likelihood of establishing and maintaining predictable family routines. If maternal employment increases mental health problems, then parenting would be more harsh, less responsive, and less consistent.

Psychological and sociological studies show that employed mothers have better mental health than stay-at-home mothers, but this literature focuses primarily on the middle class. Moreover, it is just as likely that mothers with good mental health are better able to
seek, find, and keep jobs outside the home as it is that employment promotes mental health.73 These studies indicate that the quality of parenting is similar for employed and nonemployed mothers, but again, this conclusion is biased toward the middle class and is not really relevant to mothers who are required by welfare policies to be employed in low-level jobs that offer little flexibility. Within the limited available literature, there is some indication that employed single mothers may provide a more cohesive, stimulating, and organized family environment, and place more emphasis on the value of education when compared with unemployed single mothers.74,75 However, parenting by mothers on welfare, compared with parenting by mothers who are poor but not on welfare, has not been a central focus of research.

Results from the experimental studies of seven welfare-to-work demonstrations show only limited effects of employment on a mother’s mental health and parent-

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**Box 2**

**Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study**

The Three-City Study is an ongoing research project in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio designed to monitor the impact of welfare reform on the well-being of children and families. Parenting is a key focus across all three components of the study.

The main component consists of an in-person survey of approximately 2,400 families with children ages 0 to 4, or ages 10 to 14, in low-income neighborhoods. (About 40% of the families were receiving cash welfare payments when they were interviewed initially.) In this survey, mothers report on their parenting practices and discipline style, their family routines, and the cognitive stimulation provided within the home. For families with young adolescents, the teenager reports on closeness and conflict within the mother-child and father-child relationship as well as the level of parental monitoring.

The second component consists of an embedded developmental study (EDS) of families from the main survey with children ages 2 to 4. Supplemental data are gathered about these families through videotaped assessments of children’s behavior and mother-child interactions, which are then coded for maternal responsiveness and emotional expression, and through observations of child care settings. More in-depth interviews with the mothers provide further reports of activities they do with the children as well as the type of punishment used. In addition, biological fathers are asked about their parenting styles and the activities they have shared with their children.

The third component is an ethnographic study of about 215 families residing in the same neighborhoods as the survey families, using in-depth interviewing and participant observation. Within the ethnography, interviewers take a broad perspective on parenting, inquiring into a range of processes that affect the transmission of values and expectations from parents to children. Through loosely structured conversations with the mothers, the ethnography focuses primarily on the parenting domains key to understanding the ways in which economically disadvantaged children from various ethnic and racial groups navigate multiple contexts such as home, school, and neighborhood. Issues of racial socialization, parental monitoring strategies, and socialization for achievement and social mobility are also explored.

The main survey was conducted in 1999. Follow-up interviews with these families and those in the EDS sample were conducted approximately 18 months after the initial survey, and will be conducted again at the 5-year mark. Also at the 5-year mark, a second sample of about 1,250 families, including young parents who are encountering the welfare system for the first time under the new rules, will be selected and interviewed. Families in the ethnographic study are followed for 12 to 18 months and periodically thereafter. As of October 2001, six reports had been released summarizing the findings across the various components of the study, and more were planned.

For the most part, research on welfare-to-work programs suggests that requiring employment neither benefits nor harms parenting.

In two studies (New Chance and Canada’s Self-Sufficiency Project), mothers who were required to participate experienced higher levels of depression and stress than those who were not required to participate. In another study (New Hope), parents in the experimental group reported modest increases in time pressure, but less stress and greater optimism about achieving life goals than did parents in the control group, perhaps due in part to the intensive case management provided. But a synthesis of findings across all seven programs found that mothers who participated in work preparation activities or who were employed showed no differences in depression, self-esteem, mastery, and financial strain, compared with mothers in the control groups.

These experimental studies also found minimal effects of employment on all dimensions of parenting except gatekeeping. Across all seven programs, there were very few differences between mothers in the program groups and those in the control groups with respect to warmth, control, cognitive stimulation, family routines, or harsh parenting. In an embedded observational study of parenting and child outcomes in the New Chance demonstration, mothers in the experimental group showed slightly lower levels of harsh treatment, and slightly higher levels of emotional support, with mixed effects on cognitive stimulation. These improvements in parenting did not translate into better child outcomes, however. In the New Hope study, mothers in the experimental group showed slightly increased supervision and control, but the effect was modest. Although more in-depth measurement of parenting practices might have found greater differences, and not all dimensions of parenting were assessed, these studies indicate that employment or employment preparation did not lead to major improvements or problems in most dimensions of parenting in these families.

Gatekeeping is the one important exception to this pattern. Superior gatekeeping was found in four of the seven demonstrations (New Hope, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, Florida’s Family Transition Program, and Canada’s Self-Sufficiency Project). Mothers in the experimental groups were more likely to enroll their preschool and elementary-school-age children in formal child care programs than were mothers in the control groups. In two of these demonstrations, program mothers were also more likely to enroll their children in after-school programs and extracurricular activities. It makes sense that mothers who are required to work 20 to 30 hours per week would increase their use of child care, especially if child care assistance is provided. But in these demonstrations, the mothers in the experimental groups enrolled their children in formal child care, which is likely to be more structured than informal settings and provide better preparation for success in school. (For further discussion of this topic, see the article by Fuller and colleagues in this journal issue.)

For the most part, research on welfare-to-work programs suggests that requiring employment neither benefits nor harms parenting. The major exception is that mothers who are required to work in some programs seem to be better gatekeepers and are able to find potentially enriching opportunities for their preschool and elementary-school-age children. However, this improved gatekeeping may be related as much to increased income as to maternal employment, as discussed below.

The Connection between Increased Economic Resources and Parenting

A second theme in welfare reform policy is the view that when parents are employed full time, family incomes should be higher than when the parents are on welfare, and that higher incomes will lead to better parenting. Recent analyses show that poverty has indeed decreased since the federal welfare reform law was passed, although the booming economy in the 1990s was also a factor, along with many federal and state initiatives to “make work pay.” (See the article by Zedlewski in this journal issue.) The connection between a family’s economic resources and parenting, however, is complex.
In the Minnesota demonstration, many mothers in the optional employment and financial incentives subgroup decided to work part time or reduce their work hours, and most of the positive effects on child outcomes occurred within this subgroup.

Considerable psychological and sociological research shows that poverty is linked to a higher likelihood of problematic parenting and negative outcomes for children (such as lower levels of cognitive achievement and increased levels of behavioral problems and delinquency). But few studies have examined whether parenting improves as families manage to increase their income to just above the poverty line. Also, families’ level of income (especially at or just above the poverty line) and source of income (welfare versus employment) have rarely been disentangled in nonexperimental studies.

However, three recent experimental programs that increased work supports for poor, employed families shed light on this question. In all three demonstrations (New Hope, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, and Canada’s Self-Sufficiency Project), mothers in the program groups successfully increased earnings compared with mothers in the control groups, although many still had incomes below the poverty line. Because gatekeeping (that is, use of child care and after-school programs) was the only dimension of parenting that improved among the program groups, evaluators concluded that increased resources, not the experience of employment itself, caused this result.

Moreover, preschool and elementary-school-age children of the mothers in the demonstration program groups generally fared better developmentally than children of the mothers in the control groups. The lack of improvement in other dimensions of parenting (such as warmth, control, cognitive stimulation, routines) indicates that children’s experiences in child care and after-school programs likely accounted for the positive outcomes.

Additional insights are provided in the Minnesota demonstration that included a subgroup of mothers with optional, primarily part-time, employment, plus financial work incentives. Although the effects were modest overall, this subgroup of mothers had significantly lower levels of depression and harsh parenting than did mothers in the control group. Many mothers in the optional employment and financial incentives subgroup decided to work part time or reduce their work hours, and most of the positive effects on child outcomes occurred within this subgroup, as opposed to the subgroup required to work 30 hours per week with the same financial incentives. Thus, the positive pathway between increased income and better parenting seems to occur when mothers can choose the number of hours they work.

With respect to adolescents, however, evidence suggests that those in families with increased economic resources may, in fact, do worse. Because of fairly low response rates in this age group, these findings should be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, in the two evaluations that included data about adolescents (Canada’s Self-Sufficiency Project and Florida’s Family Transition Program), adolescents in the program groups had lower levels of school achievement; in one study, they also had higher levels of problem behavior. The evaluators speculate that the mothers’ employment requirement in these demonstrations may be linked to worse parenting of adolescents (that is, lower levels of supervision and monitoring, and less engagement in school and homework activities), despite the increase in income. (For other possible explanations, see the article by Zaslow and colleagues in this journal issue.)

In sum, the research suggests that the effects of employment and work support programs on income in poor families can have a positive impact on several domains of parenting and child outcomes. In addition, evidence from some experimental demonstrations suggests that increased income and employment are both required for positive impacts on parenting and child outcomes to occur. Thus, if families’ economic resources do not increase in the move from welfare to work, parenting and child outcomes are not likely to improve. Furthermore, emerging evidence indicates that positive impacts are maximized when parents...
experience increased resources but are not required to work full time. This finding comes from only one study, and further research along these lines is needed.

The Connection between Family Structure and Parenting

Finally, the third theme of welfare reform relevant to parenting is that married parents are more effective than single parents. The preamble of the 1996 welfare reform law states that marriage is “an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children” and that “the prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and the reduction of out-of-wedlock births are very important government interests.” As discussed in the articles by Greenberg and colleagues and by McLanahan and Carlson in this journal issue, states were given great latitude under the law to design programs to meet goals involving family structure, such as promoting marriage and reducing nonmarital births. Whether such programs lead to improved parenting, however, is unclear.

Most of the psychological and sociological research finds that children show more competent and healthy development in married families with two biological parents than in single-mother families or stepfamilies. This is largely due to higher economic and parenting resources in married families. However, the research literature primarily uses national samples representing the full range of incomes, or samples of convenience that favor the middle class. Research is needed that examines the role of marriage in parenting within low-income families. For example, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study examines the links among cohabitation, diverse forms of father involvement, and parenting. (See the article by McLanahan and Carlson in this journal issue.) To date, few nonexperimental studies have examined whether efforts to promote marriage lead to better parenting in the low-income population.

Moreover, the experimental demonstrations did not focus on the relationship between family structure and parenting, and so have little data to offer on this subject. Findings from the Minnesota study indicate that program participants with increased income from employment and work supports are more likely to marry if single, more likely to stay married if already
The existing research suggests that an important way states’ welfare reform programs can promote better parenting is through better work supports.

married, and less likely to experience domestic violence. But no data were collected on parenting or child outcomes in the two-parent, married families; thus, no links can be established between marital stability, marital quality, and parenting. This is an important direction for future research.

Only recently, a few states have decided to promote marriage using federal welfare funds. Some evidence from model intervention programs indicates that such endeavors facilitate positive marriages and lead to better parenting. But these studies were generally small, and focused on more affluent rather than low-income families. This is another important area for future research, possibly finding some common ground between liberals and conservatives in forging policies to promote healthy marriages that lead to better parenting.

Similarly, to help reduce out-of-wedlock births, some states have implemented family cap provisions that prohibit increases in welfare benefits when an additional child is born. One research study tested the effects of the family cap provision on nonmarital birth ratios, and suggested that the caps may be related to a 5% to 9% decrease in nonmarital birth ratios. However, to date, no research has examined this aspect of welfare reform on parenting. Family structure, family size, and adult relationships and their effects on parenting are important topics for future research.

Summary and Future Directions

Overall, studies of welfare reform show few dramatic impacts on parenting. Given the complexity of the Determinants of Parenting Model, this is not surprising. Parenting practices are not easy to change. It may be unreasonable to expect major changes in parenting as a result of welfare reform when the primary goal of reform is to move mothers into the workforce, not to provide parenting services.

At the same time, many possible connections between welfare reform and parenting have yet to be examined. Although many states have funded initiatives to improve parenting through home visits and parenting classes, such efforts are largely unstudied. But previous research on similar programs for low-income families showed few, if any, long-term effects on parenting. Similarly, research indicates that welfare reform has had little indirect impact on parenting. One exception is gatekeeping—that is, employed mothers enroll their children in more formal child care and after-school care programs, which may provide better preparation for success in school.

The indirect effects of welfare reform are difficult to analyze, however, and there are many gaps in the research. In terms of dimensions of parenting, welfare reform research has targeted warmth, control, cognitive stimulation, and, most recently, aspects of gatekeeping. Modeling and family routines are understudied, and no research has addressed cultural, religious, and ethnic identity formation. In terms of determinants of parenting, most welfare reform research focuses on economic resources (parental employment, welfare status, and income) and parents’ mental health. Very few studies have addressed family structure, family size, or the quality of the parent’s relationships with a spouse or partner and other adults and kin. Ethnic and cultural influences on parenting deserve a stronger focus in the literature as well.

More research also is needed on the effectiveness of activities within the welfare office that could have positive effects on parenting. For example, as suggested by findings from the New Hope study, case management can serve as an important form of social and functional support for parents by providing useful information, practical advice, and contacts. The role of intensive case management as a strategy for improving parenting deserves greater attention. (See the article by Zedlewski in this journal issue.) In addition, many families remaining on the welfare rolls face significant barriers to employment, such as physical disability, substance dependence, domestic violence, lower cognitive ability, and serious mental health conditions. These bar-
riers to employment also could result in problematic parenting. Implementing procedures to screen for such barriers and assist families in accessing specialized services is likely to result in improvements in parenting and child outcomes. To date, no evaluations have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of states’ procedures for identifying these barriers or helping such families access needed services, but these efforts also deserve attention in research on welfare reform and parenting.

Meanwhile, it is important to note the limitations of the available research. Many studies predate the 1996 federal welfare reform law, so the findings may not fully apply to current welfare policy environment. For example, the demonstration projects reviewed in this article provided more generous work supports than are typically provided by today’s state policies. Also, the research generally did not examine such policies as sanctions and time limits. A small embedded study within one demonstration examined the impact of sanctions on parenting and found no negative effects, but initial reports about sanctioning since the 1996 law was enacted suggest that sanctioned families are among the most disadvantaged and face numerous barriers. Similarly, only one demonstration project has evaluated the impact of time limits on families. In this study, families who hit the time limit and had to leave the welfare system did not seem to fare worse than families who left for other reasons. Clearly, more research on the effects of sanctions and time limits on parenting is needed.

Finally, the measures of parenting in most welfare studies are unavoidably lean. In large part, this is due to the wide scope of the studies, with sample sizes ranging from approximately 600 to 3,000 families. Within these design constraints, most studies relied on parents’ reports of their parenting styles or practices, rather than more in-depth or observational assessments, which, though more valid, are time-consuming, difficult to administer, and expensive.

Nevertheless, the existing research suggests that an important way states’ welfare reform programs can promote better parenting is through better work supports. Findings from the demonstration programs indicate that more generous work supports appear to result in improved gatekeeping for preschool and school-age children (though not for adolescents). That is, parents who accrue more economic resources due to program financial supports tend to involve their preschool and school-age children in extracurricular activities and more formal child care settings. Further, evidence suggests that the most positive outcomes for children occur when mothers work a reduced number of hours, made possible by financial incentives. The demonstrations that provided stronger work supports also resulted in more stable marriages and less violent marital and partner relationships, which are likely to have a positive influence on parenting.

Welfare reform by no means assures that a family will live above the poverty line. In fact, many families participating in demonstration projects with generous supports have not escaped poverty. Moreover, although work supports may continue to help families leave welfare, this does not guarantee an improvement in parenting. The fact that children living in poverty, especially pervasive poverty, are more likely to experience developmental problems remains an important issue facing the nation.

The authors are deeply grateful to the Joyce Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for their support. They also wish to thank Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Andrew Cherlin, Rebekah Levine Coley, Greg Duncan, Martha Moorehouse, Robert Moffit, and the journal’s editors for their insightful comments.


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69. M orch, P.A., Huston, A.C., Duncan, G.J., et al. How welfare and work policies affect children: A synthesis of research. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., 2001. These random-assignment studies provide a very strong basis for assessing the impact of the reform packages. A key strength of these experimental demonstrations is that participants were randomly assigned to a program or experimental group that received the new welfare reform package or to a control group that continued to live under the old AFDC regulations. In other words, any differences in parenting found between the participants in the experimental versus the control groups are more likely to be due to the impact of the welfare reform package than to preexisting differences in the families.

70. Much of the available research focuses mostly on mothers, and that is the focus in this article as well. See the article by M. Clanahan and Carlson in this journal issue for a more detailed discussion of fathers as parents.

71. This has been referred to as the “stimulation hypothesis.” See Zaslow, M.J., Dion, M.R., Har, E.C., et al. Program impacts on parenting behavior during the first half-year of an educationally-focused welfare-to-work program. Unpublished manuscript. 2000.


77. Three of the demonstration programs (New Chance, Teenage Parent Demonstration, and the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies) required mothers in the experimental groups to participate in education, training, job readiness, and job search activities; and four (New Hope, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, the Family Transition Program in Florida, and the Self-Sufficiency Project in Canada) required mothers in the experimental groups to work 30 hours per week. The Minnesota program required mothers to work only 20 hours per week if they had children age 6 or younger. For further details, see the article by Zaslow and colleagues in this journal issue.


82. See Zaslow and colleagues in this journal issue.

83. For a description of these programs, see Box 1 in the article by Zaslow and colleagues in this journal issue.

84. These two demonstrations, New Hope and the Self-Sufficiency Project, were the exceptions. Most of the demonstrations showed no significant differences in the use of extended-day programs or extracurricular activities. In one other demonstration (the Minnesota program), fewer children in the experimental program were enrolled in lessons, clubs, and activities. See note 68, Morris, et al., for more details.


88. See the article by Zaslow and colleagues in this journal issue.


92. Also, in the New Hope demonstration, mothers who were already working full time when randomly assigned to the program group showed better parenting (higher warmth and supervision) two years later than control group mothers did, and they tended to decrease their work hours. See note 79, Bos, et al.

93. The study that found higher levels of problem behavior was Canada's Self-Sufficiency Project. See note 78, Morris and Michalopoulos.


95. See note 1, U.S. House of Representatives, pp. 6, 9.


98. See note 91, Miller and Gennetian.


Innovative Uses of TANF Funds to Provide Parenting Supports

These program profiles were prepared by Kate Boyer, Ph.D., senior researcher, and Catherine Lawrence, C.S.W., research associate, of the Rockefeller Institute of Government as part of the Institute’s project, “Beyond Symbolic Politics.”

Program name: Teen Living Program
State: Massachusetts
Coverage: Statewide
Program goals: Provide shelter and services for young mothers and their children
Service population: Pregnant or parenting teens who receive TANF
Funding sources: TANF and other state funds

Description: The 1996 federal welfare reform law requires teen mothers under age 18 to live with their parents (or in another adult-supervised setting) to receive TANF cash assistance. Teen mothers who cannot live with their parents in Massachusetts have an alternative—a “second chance” home. Twenty-one homes across the state offer shelter and intensive support programs to 120 teen families. Each home has its own unique atmosphere, but all provide two-generational programs for teen mothers and their children. These programs not only assist with child care, education, and job training, but also help the young women develop concrete parenting skills and the ability to advocate for their own and their children’s needs. The homes are popular with young mothers: There is a list of teens waiting to enter the homes, and some teens stay voluntarily beyond age 18.

Results: The program has shown some positive results. According to a report from the Social Policy Action Network, the young mothers in a similar program in New Mexico had a 2% rate of repeat pregnancy. In contrast, teen mothers have a repeat pregnancy rate of 50% within two years in the general population. Also, according to a report from the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, teen mothers participating in the program showed significant improvement in parenting skills, especially in displaying positive, nurturing interactions with their children, and in managing their children’s health needs, such as keeping immunizations current. The mothers also fared better than average in continuing education and training, even after leaving the homes.

Program name: Nurse-Family Partnership  
State: New York  
Coverage: First begun in Elmira, New York, this program has been replicated in 23 states  
Program goals: Decrease the percentage of children in low-income families that experience physical, psychological, or emotional abuse  
Service population: Low-income, first-time mothers  
Funding sources: Initially funded from research grants, this program is beginning to utilize funds from TANF, Medicaid, and child abuse prevention funds. TANF funds have been used to support the program in six states.\(^a\)

Description: Under the Nurse-Family Partnership program, registered nurses work intensively with first-time mothers during pregnancy and afterward until the child reaches age two. The program builds confidence and skills in areas ranging from maternal and child physical health to caregiving, building and maintaining support networks, and achieving economic self-sufficiency. Because the program relies on the establishment of a trusting relationship between nurse and family, efforts are made to hire nurses who share the same racial and/or ethnic background as the families they serve. Over the past 20 years this program has been rigorously tested and refined. Those wishing to replicate the Nurse-Family Partnership program are required to follow a specific protocol that preserves the original program design, and program implementers are provided with specialized training and visit-by-visit guidelines.

Results: The Elmira, New York, program has been the subject of a long-term clinical trial. Results show that children who participated in the Nurse-Family Partnership program had 56% fewer visits to the emergency department during their second year of life compared to children in a control group. In the third and fourth years of life, participants had 40% fewer physician visits than the control group. Over their first 15 years of life, children in the nurse-visitation program also had 54% fewer verified reports of child abuse and/or neglect than did children in the control group.

For further information: See the National Center for Children, Families, and Communities Web site at http://www.nccfc.org.

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Program name: Kinship and Family Empowerment Services  
State: Colorado  
Coverage: El Paso County  
Program goals: Prevent foster care placements  
Service population: Child-only TANF cases  
Funding sources: TANF

Description: In El Paso County, approximately 30% of TANF cases are “child-only” cases. These children often live with a relative, generally a grandparent, who does not receive TANF cash assistance. A special unit funded by TANF supports these caregivers so children do not have to enter the foster care system. This integrated unit, called the Family Support Team, provides short-term family preservation services to families receiving TANF or other forms of public assistance as part of an overall effort to better serve families with both child welfare and financial assistance needs. For many caregivers, this support is financial; some receive supplemental payments or one-time emergency grants. Others receive help with services they may not have been aware of, such as child care or health care. Still others seek emotional support. A key element of kinship support is a bimonthly “Grandparents raising Grandchildren” group. Many of these grandparents have lost their social network due to the arrival of a toddler or a teen in their lives and are parenting in isolation. The support groups not only combat that isolation, but also help prevent crisis situations by educating grandparents about the developmental and emotional needs of the children in their care. Many of these grandparents want to “parent differently” the second time around. As they grieve the loss of their idyllic grandparent role, they also learn concrete skills for helping their grandchildren heal from past parental neglect or abuse. In addition to the support groups, the program also sponsors biannual community events attended by hundreds of caregivers. These events honor the role caregivers play, and offer workshops on topics such as age-specific parenting skills, legal issues for caregivers, and dealing with media violence and safety issues around the home.

Results: The department is just beginning an evaluation of these new services, launched in July 1997, but thus far, the program appears to be achieving its goal. Of the 450 kinship families identified, only two have had a child placed in foster care.

For further information: See the El Paso County Department of Human Services Web site at http://www.co.el-paso.co.us/humansvc/keepingfamiliestogether.asp.

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\(^a\)The six states where local agencies have used TANF funds to support the program are: California, Colorado, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota.