

# In low-income families, shared parental responsiveness helps kids

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When both mothers and fathers in low-income families are responsive to the needs of their children, good things happen, a recent study found.

And the good news is that this shared parental responsiveness was found in many families studied, said study co-author Joyce Y. Lee, assistant professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

"It is a very encouraging finding," Lee said.

"You can imagine that living in poverty, facing material hardship and other disadvantages could put stress on a relationship that could be negative for [children](#). But that's not what we found."

Results showed that both [mothers](#) and fathers showed moderate levels of responsiveness to their children and that this shared responsiveness was linked to higher levels of prosocial behaviors in children and increases in receptive language.

The study was published in the journal *Family Relations*.

Data from the study came from the Building Strong Families project and included a racially diverse sample of 1,173 families from low-income contexts. Data were collected in eight cities across the United States between 2005 and 2011.

Trained researchers observed mothers and fathers in each [family](#) separately as they interacted with one of their children, whose average age was between 3 and 4. They measured parental responsiveness on several dimensions, including the ability to respond appropriately to the child's behavior, demonstration of positive feelings toward the child, and quality of the parent-child relationship.

The researchers found that the more that both parents showed higher levels of responsiveness, the better that the children were rated by their mothers for pro-social behavior, such as showing affection to other children.

Children in the study were also given a test for receptive language—the ability to recognize words. This test has been shown to relate to early school readiness.

Findings showed that shared parental responsiveness was related to higher scores on this test, Lee said.

"It was very exciting for us to see that when [low-income parents](#) engage in this mutually agreed upon way of positively parenting, there are clear benefits to their children," she said.

Another positive finding was that it didn't matter if the father lived with the mother and child—as long as both [parents](#) showed responsiveness, the child reaped the benefits.

"There is often this belief that if the father is not in the home, he must be absent and that's terrible for the child," Lee said.

"That's not what we found. Parents can still coordinate how they respond to their children and work together for the good of the child."

The results suggest ways to support [low-income families](#) to help them raise their children—even if the father is not living with them.

"Parenting programs could prioritize specific strategies for promoting shared parental [responsiveness](#) among mothers and [fathers](#) who are no longer romantically involved," Lee said.

"That can help foster the well-being of their children."

Co-authors on the study were Shawna J. Lee and Olivia D. Chang of the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan; Kaitlin P. Ward, who did this work while at the School of Social Welfare at the

University of California-Berkeley; and Garrett T. Pace of the School of Social Work at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

**More information:** Joyce Y. Lee et al, Shared parental responsiveness among fathers and mothers with low income and early child outcomes, *Family Relations* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/fare.12913](https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12913)

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