

SPOTLIGHT ON FACULTY RESEARCH

A Q & A with Assistant Professor Stephanie M. Curenton on her forthcoming article, “Distinguishing Maltreating Versus Nonmaltreating At-Risk Families: Implications for Foster Care and Early Childhood Education Interventions,” to be published in *Families in Society*.

Q. How did you become interested in the topic of child maltreatment?

I became interested in this topic because my colleague from Florida State University, Lenore McWey, approached me about collaborating on a research paper. Dr. McWey is the expert in child maltreatment issues. My primary research interests are in education policy using a life-span developmental framework, meaning the participants in my studies span age ranges from infancy through young adulthood. Because education policy--like most policy issues--exists within an inter-related network of other policies, a mental health issue such as child maltreatment can have important implications for education policies. So the topic of maltreatment is interesting to me because it is related to broader education issues for young children.

Q. What are the typical explanations for the factors which are associated with maltreatment? What were your findings?

Child maltreatment is categorized as child neglect, which is the most prevalent form of maltreatment, and child abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, and sexual abuse). There are numerous studies that report the most stringent and repeated factors associated with child maltreatment are having a family history of abuse/neglect, high levels of parenting stress, and low socioeconomic status (SES).

In this article we examine two factors--parenting stress and low-SES status. Our findings indicate that when dealing with a low-SES population it is imperative to screen for parents' actual stress because it is this factor that distinguishes maltreating low-SES parents from non-maltreating low-SES families. Our results highlight the point that we cannot make generalizations about children's safety based on SES. We have to do further screening about parenting stress with individual families so that loving and nurturing low-SES parents are not stigmatized and subject to undue suspicion because of their economic status. SES is only a *risk factor*, it's not a diagnosis.

Q. Tell us how these findings can be used to prevent child maltreatment in the future.

These findings have implications for the prevention of child maltreatment because they address three levels of intervention. First, these findings have implications for primary interventions in the form of education policy initiatives like the *Strengthening Families Initiative* (www.strengtheningfamilies.net) that aims to educate teachers and child care providers about effective ways to reduce child abuse and neglect by supporting families, accurately identifying suspicions of maltreatment, and empowering teachers to report it. Primary interventions such as *Strengthening Families* build knowledge not only among education personnel, but also the general population because the information and strategies the teachers and child care providers learn eventually trickle down to parents.

Another intervention implication pertains to early childhood education programs, which are secondary interventions aimed at families that might have demographic characteristics associated with child maltreatment, such as living in poverty. There has been quasi-experimental research (see Reynolds & Robertson, 2003) showing that low-income families whose children were enrolled in early childhood education programs had fewer substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect. Our study offers support to this prior research because it shows enrollment in Head Start was associated with non-clinical levels of parenting stress. Our research is not experimental, so we cannot prove the Head Start program was the protective buffer. Nonetheless, it behooves us to design additional studies to investigate whether there is a causal link. If additional studies using other early childhood programs could replicate the Reynolds and Robertson (2003) findings then we can prove that early childhood programs can boost school readiness *and* protect children.

Lastly, this work has implications for tertiary interventions, like in-home family therapy treatments, with families who have been identified as having clinical levels of parenting stress. This research is especially helpful to social workers because it highlights the need to look beyond SES status and actually screen families for stress since having a clinical level of parenting stress is what distinguishes maltreating from non-maltreating low-income parents.

Q. What is next for you in terms of your future research on this topic?

In my research, I investigate education policy at the child level, the teacher workforce level, and the program/policy level. I have a few projects underway at the child level, and these all examine children's school readiness in terms of language or social-emotional skills. At the teacher workforce level, I am collaborating work with my colleague, Laura Justice from Ohio State University, to experimentally evaluate how professional development trainings for teachers result in better student achievement. At the program/policy level, I am working with Diane Schilder from the Education Development Center to determine how the impact of state pre-K expansion affects other early education sectors, namely Head Start and child care.

This is actually a great time to be doing early education policy work because the Obama Administration is extremely supportive of early childhood education. Obama has

demonstrated his support by appointing as his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who was a strong proponent of expanding early childhood education efforts in Chicago Public Schools. He has also shown support by including funding for early education programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and by including additional funding for these programs in his Presidential budget. Obama gets it! He is the first president to ever articulate a “Zero to Five” comprehensive education plan, which includes funding for nurse-home visiting programs as well as Early Learning Challenge Grants for states. He truly has what one CNN reporter called a “cradle to career” approach to education (see <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/10/obama.education>). He has heard the voice of the early childhood community, and I am grateful to be working in field at this time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie M. Curenton has been recognized as a national leader in the early education field through her appointment to the governing board of the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (NAEYC). Dr. Curenton studies the development of low-income and minority children within various ecological contexts, such as parent-child interactions, early childhood education programs, and related state and federal policies. She has been the principal investigator on a National Research Council Pre-doctoral Fellowship from the Ford Foundation and several university-funded research projects. She now serves as the co-director for a federally funded study with the Education Development Center, Inc., (EDC) that investigates the impact of pre-K expansion on child care for low-income families. Dr. Curenton earned her PhD in Developmental and Community Psychology from the University of Virginia.

To visit Dr. Curenton’s faculty Web page, click [here](#)