

Dorsey, S. & Forehand, R. (2003). The relation of social capital to child psychosocial adjustment difficulties: The role of positive parenting and neighborhood dangerousness. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 25*(1), 11-23.

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The authors of this study hypothesized that social capital would have a direct influence on lowering the levels of adjustment problems among children living in dangerous neighborhoods. Exploring the relationships between social capital, positive parenting, and children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors, the authors found that social capital is related, although not directly, to children's adjustment problems through positive parenting and the creation of safe neighborhoods.

Social capital is defined as the ability of individuals to group together to implement goals and achieve tasks that would not be possible by one person only. A primary characteristic of social capital is its dynamic structure, "created by the formation of trust, sharing, and opportunities" (p. 12) among groups of individuals. In this study, social capital includes relationships among neighbors that provide both formal and informal supports. For example, formal supports may include the willingness of a neighbor to provide transportation in an emergency, whereas informal supports are less visible. Informal supports may include the degree to which neighbors collectively monitor and supervise each other's children, or a willingness among neighbors to work toward a common goal (e.g., neighborhood clean-up committees).

Subjects of the study were 130 African American mothers and one child per household, living in low-income neighborhoods in New Orleans. Eighty percent of mothers were single, and 42% had not completed high school. Mothers were an average age of 37, and children were an average age of 13. About half (51%) of youth were boys. A range of instruments to capture *social capital* asked about the mother's perceived support for work and parenting, the availability of that support, informal childcare supports, levels of social cohesion and trust among members of the neighborhood, as well as risks and dangers in the neighborhood. *Positive parenting* skills were measured with the Interaction Behavior Questionnaire (IBQ), the Monitoring and Control Questionnaire (developed for this study), and the Laxness and Overreactivity subscales of the Parenting Scale; these instruments captured the quality of the mother-child relationship, the mother's ability to monitor her children's activities, and to enforce appropriate and consistent discipline. Finally, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) measured child externalizing and internalizing *adjustment problems*.

Social capital was directly associated with positive parenting and with lower levels of neighborhood dangerousness, but was not directly related to fewer child adjustment problems. According to the authors, social capital appears to work *indirectly* toward reducing child adjustment problems, insofar as "mothers who have access to higher levels of social capital are more successful in their efforts to engage in positive parenting behaviors that, in turn, relate to lower levels of child psychosocial adjustment problems" (p. 20). Additionally, "social capital provides further benefits for children in that neighborhoods with high levels of this resource are typically less dangerous, thereby lessening the link between danger and child psychosocial adjustment problems" (p. 20). The authors

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also found that mothers of younger children exhibited more positive parenting skills than mothers of older children, and mothers having low incomes or less education had children with more adjustment problems than did other mothers.

Limitations to this study include the fact that all respondents were mothers, and that the children in this sample did not have severe emotional and behavioral problems (as measured by the CBCL). Regardless of these limitations, the study contributes to an understanding of the indirect role that social capital may play in mitigating child adjustment problems. The authors call for the development of programs that build social capital in dangerous neighborhoods, because "projects that contribute to our knowledge of how social capital can be developed in neighborhoods may lead to viable prevention and intervention programs for children at risk for psychosocial adjustment problems" (p. 21). For more information on the role that family and peers may play in reducing the effects of dangerous neighborhoods on children's mental health, see *Data Trends* #28.

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