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FATHERS' INDIRECT CONTRIBUTION TO CHILDREN'S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT VIA MOTHERS' PSYCHOLOGICAL PARENTING ENVIRONMENTS

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We sought to determine whether fathers' play participation exerted an indirect effect on young children's social-emotional development by supporting mothers' psychological parenting environments of depression, parenting stress, and parenting efficacy. We also identified differences by family income. Mothers responded to all measures. We sampled 72 low-income and 201 higher income Korean mothers with 3- to 5-year-old children. The results showed that fathers in higher income families indirectly contributed to young children's social-emotional development through their effect on mothers' depression and parenting stress, and fathers in low-income families indirectly contributed through their effect on mothers' depression, parenting stress, and parenting efficacy. Practical implications for improving young children's social-emotional development in each family income group are discussed.

Keywords: young children's social-emotional development, fathers' play participation, mothers' depression, mothers' parenting stress, mothers' parenting efficacy, mothers' psychological parenting environment, family income.

Social-emotional development is defined as the extent to which young children have successful social interactions with peers, siblings, parents, and other adults, and the ability to communicate their emotions effectively to achieve their goals (Squires, Bricker, & Twombly, 2005). Social-emotional competence is a significant factor in good peer relationships and socially favorable behavior

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(Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). Social adjustment in early childhood is related to children's problem behavior and social adjustment in adolescence and adulthood (Pettit, Dodge, & Brown, 1988).

The parenting environment is very important for young children's social-emotional development, because their parents are their primary social-emotional partners (K. Kim, 2011). Many researchers have conducted studies to determine the effect on young children's social-emotional development of *mothers' psychological parenting environments*, which include *mothers' depression* (e.g. Ewell Foster, Garber, & Durlak, 2008; K. Kim, 2011), *mothers' parenting stress* (e.g., Yu & Lee, 1998), and *mothers' parenting efficacy* (e.g., K. Kim, 2011; T. Moon, 2002). Within mothers' psychological parenting environments, their psychological well-being can be a resource for them to undertake better parenting (Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1993). Mistry, Lowe, Benner, and Chien (2008) measured mothers' psychological well-being by assessing their depression, parenting stress, and parenting efficacy.

We thus thought that mothers' psychological parenting environments would directly predict young children's social-emotional development. First, when mothers are depressed, there is an increased risk of their children having social, emotional, and behavioral problems (Ewell Foster et al., 2008; K. Kim, 2011). Second, parenting stress is a psychological state characterized by a belief that internal and external parenting demands exceed parents' ability to cope (Y. Moon & Min, 2008). The higher the mothers' parenting stress, the lower the child's social competence (Yu & Lee, 1998) and emotional intelligence tend to be (Lee & Seo, 2007). Third, mothers' parenting efficacy is derived from Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, and relates to mothers' confidence in their parental role and a belief that they can overcome parenting-related difficulties (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Teti & Gelfand, 1991). When parents are confident in their parenting capability, children experience stable emotional development (K. Kim, 2011), and demonstrate positive social development (T. Moon, 2002). Mothers' parenting efficacy tends to mediate the relationship between mothers' depression and children's social-emotional development (K. Kim, 2011), and mothers' parenting stress and children's social-emotional development (Chung, Kang, & Choi, 2014). There is a positive correlation between mothers' parenting stress and depression (Y. Moon & Min, 2008).

Fathers' contribution to young children's social-emotional development has also been extensively examined, namely, fathers' parental involvement (e.g. Seo & Lee, 2014), play participation (e.g., Chung et al., 2014; Han, 2006), and parent-child interaction (e.g., Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). However, few researchers have examined mothers' and fathers' combined influence on young children's social-emotional development, to understand their role as cooperative partners in the process of child rearing within the family

system. Cho (2004) showed that fathers provide the most influential support for mothers' psychological parenting environments. Therefore, we examined the possibility that fathers can also indirectly contribute to young children's social-emotional development by supporting and improving mothers' psychological parenting environments.

To determine this contribution, we focused on *fathers' play participation* as an index of their parental involvement. Play participation is the parenting duty most frequently undertaken by both parents of young children (Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). In fact, the father's domestic caring role centers on play activity (Yee, 2012). In Korean married couples, the father's role is most frequently perceived by Korean mothers as that of the children's playmate (N. Kim, 2011). Korean married women feel a high level of happiness when their children interact with their fathers (G. Han & Chang, 2011).

Fathers' play participation, as parental involvement, can contribute to young children's social-emotional development by supporting mothers in improving their psychological parenting environments. Mezulis, Hyde, and Clark (2004) reported that fathers' support and participation ameliorated mothers' depression, particularly when the children were young. Fathers' involvement in parenting also predicts young children's peer play interaction via their mothers' parenting stress (Seo & Lee, 2014). However, because Levy-Shiff, Dimtrovsky, Shulman, and Har-Even (1998) found in their longitudinal research that social support, including spousal support, was not correlated with mothers' parenting efficacy, we assumed that there was no direct association between fathers' play participation and mothers' parenting efficacy.

Another focus of this study was to determine whether family income moderates these relationships in a path model. There is evidence that children's social competence varies by family income (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007). The Family Economic Stress Model (McLoyd, 1990) provides the framework through which we can understand how economic hardship and pressure predict children's social-emotional outcomes. Mistry et al. (2008) showed that family economic pressure predicted children's social outcomes through maternal psychological well-being. In addition, fathers from higher income families engage in more play participation than do those from low-income families (Y. Han, 2006), and mothers' perceived social support is greater in higher income families (Song, Song, & Kim, 2007). When we considered the effect of family income on the relationship between mothers' psychological parenting environments, young children's social-emotional development, and the effect of family income on fathers' play participation, we concluded that family income may moderate the path relationships in our path model. For example, the incidence of depressive symptoms in mothers from low-income families increased significantly when they lacked spousal support (J. Kim, 2009). In

addition, mothers' social networks decreased their emotional distress and, in turn, enhanced positive social-emotional development in low-income children (McLoyd, 1990). Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Fathers' play participation will have an indirect positive effect on children's social-emotional development via mothers' psychological parenting environments involving depression, parenting stress, and parenting efficacy.

Hypothesis 2: Family income will moderate these relationships.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We sampled mothers from 202 higher and 72 low-income families with 3- to 5-year-old children (average age 4 years 5.73 months). We performed a second data analysis using a national Korean dataset comprising 6,923 children aged 0–18 years (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2009). The Korean Government asked mothers to complete a questionnaire to obtain these data, which are available to all Korean researchers. We obtained our final data (201 higher income families and 72 low-income families) from this dataset through the process of excluding one higher income family because of missing data. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board with which the first author is affiliated.

Across both income levels, 87 (31.9%) of the children were 3 years old, 102 (37.4%) were 4 years old, and 84 (30.8%) were 5 years old, and 137 (50.2%) were boys and 136 (49.8%) were girls. In regard to the parents' education level, 53.8% of mothers and 48.0% of fathers were high school graduates or had not completed high school, 42.4% of mothers and 41.0% of fathers were 2-year or 4-year college graduates, 2.2% of mothers and 5.9% of fathers had postgraduate qualifications, and 1.8% of mothers and 5.1% of fathers did not provide an answer. Parents' occupations were homemaker or not employed (mothers 72.5%, fathers 5.5%), laborer or technician (mothers 6.6%, fathers 23.1%), self-employed (mothers 6.6%, fathers 23.1%), office worker or engineer (mothers 5.5%, fathers 33.7%), or administrative or professional (mothers 5.5%, fathers 11.7%). We were missing data on 2.9% of mothers and 7.3% of fathers. The average monthly family income was 1,082,600 won (US$970) in low-income families (SD = US$338, range = US$90–$1,810) and 3,435,000 won (US$3,078) in higher income families (SD = US$2,364, range = US$878–$23,790). The income difference between these groups was statistically significant ($t = 11.636$, $p < .001$).

Measures

Young children's social-emotional development. We used the Korean version (K-ASQ:SE) parent-completed young children's social-emotional monitoring

system (Heo, Lee, Squires, & Lee, 2005) of The Ages & Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional (ASQ:SE; Squires et al., 2001) to measure children's social-emotional development. The 36-item questionnaire is divided into seven categories (self-control, nine items; compliance, two items; communication, three items; adjustment, five items; autonomy, two items; emotion, three items; and interaction with others, six items). Participants rated the items on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*no*) through 5 (*occasionally*) to 10 (*yes*). Cronbach's α were .72, .64, and .71 for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, respectively.

Mothers' depression. We used the Iowa Form of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Kohout, Berkman, Evans, & Cornoni-Huntley, 1993) to measure mothers' depression levels. The Iowa version is a simplified form of the 11-item CES-D and is composed of four dimensions: depressed affect, positive affect, somatic complaints, and interpersonal problems. Participants reported the frequency with which they had experienced each symptom during the preceding week on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *very rarely, once or twice per year*; 2 = *occasionally, once or twice per month*; 3 = *often, once or twice per week*; and 4 = *all the time; almost always*). Cronbach's α for the scale was .88.

Mothers' parenting stress. Mothers' parenting stress was measured with the Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1990). The PSI comprises parent domain (seven items) and child domain (five items) subscales. Sample statements are "My children make me tired and weary" and "I have given up my life to take care of my children." Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale (from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *absolutely*). Cronbach's α for the scale was .74.

Mothers' parenting efficacy. Mothers' parenting efficacy was measured with the standardized Korean version (K-PSOC; J.-M. Kim, Lim, & Heo, 2014) of the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC; Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersmann, 1978), which is a self-report scale assessing parents' efficacy in a cognitive dimension (eight items) and their frustration and anxiety levels in an emotional dimension (seven items). Sample statements are "I think that I am competent to take care of my children" and "I worry whether I can be a good parent." Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *absolutely*. Cronbach's α for the scale was .63.

Fathers' play participation. We asked mothers to respond to this measure of fathers' play participation, which was defined as the amount of time they spent playing with their children each week day. Fathers' play participation was measured on a one item 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (*do not play together at all*) through 2 (*less than 30 minutes*), 3 (*30 minutes to 1 hour*), and 4 (*1–1.5 hours*), to 5 (*1.5 hours or longer*).

Family income. Low income was defined as an average monthly income of less than 120% of the minimum cost of living per family member (1,231,924 won, US$1,104, for a family of three) in Korea in 2008. That is, low-income

families are families in receipt of welfare, who are officially monitored by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare. Higher income was defined as an average monthly income of more than 120% of the minimum cost of living per family member in Korea in 2008.

Data Analysis

We performed path analysis to test our hypothesized model, and we examined income-related differences by comparing path models between income groups. We evaluated model fit as good if it showed a small absolute fit index for χ^2 with a large probability value, a goodness-of-fit index (GFI) score of .90 or higher, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) score of .10 or lower (S. Moon, 2009). We determined whether regression coefficients were identical in both groups, performing multigroup path analysis with invariant path coefficients (Byrne, 2001; S. Moon, 2009). The significance of the total, direct, and indirect effects of the variables were tested using bootstrapping. These analyses were conducted using AMOS 20. The mediating role of the indirect effect was analyzed via bootstrapping in SPSS 22.0, by means of the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013).

Results

We developed models to test whether the same model structure was suitable for both low- and higher income families. Each single-group path analysis using free parameter estimates of the model revealed a good fit for the low-income families, $\chi^2 = 3.547$ (3), $p = .170$, GFI = .981, SRMR = .055 and higher income families, $\chi^2 = 1.279$ (3), $p = .734$, GFI = .997, SRMR = .019.

Multigroup path analysis outcomes were obtained by comparing a constrained model with an unconstrained model. The result indicated that the paths differed between income groups, as the constrained model fit was significantly worse than that of the unconstrained model, $\Delta\chi^2$ (8) = 19.905, $p = .017$. Our evaluation of alternative models, in which one path was free, indicated that the source of the between-group difference was the path from efficacy (mothers' parenting efficacy) to social (children's social-emotional development). This path was statistically significant only in the low-income group (see Table 1). As shown in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2, father (fathers' play participation) was indirectly associated with social in both low- and higher income families.

We used the bootstrap procedure with Hayes's macro (2013; see Table 2), and found that the path from father, via depression (mothers' depression), to social, and the path from father, via depression and stress (mothers' parenting stress), to social proved to be significant mediation paths in higher income families.

However, in low-income families, the paths from father, via depression and efficacy, to social, and from father, via depression, stress, and efficacy, to social were significant mediation paths. These results supported Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 1. *Effects in the Path Model*

Path	Total effect		Direct effect		Indirect effect	
	Low-income	Higher income	Low-income	Higher income	Low-income	Higher income
Father → Depression	-.338**	-.178*	-.338**	-.178*		
Father → Stress	-.019	-.154*	.078	-.096	-.097*	-.058**
Depression → Stress	.287*	.324**	.287*	.324***		
Depression → Efficacy	-.336*	-.305**	-.254*	-.249***	-.081*	-.056*
Stress → Efficacy	-.284*	-.173*	-.284*	-.173*		
Father → Efficacy	.091	.071**			.091	.071**
Depression → Social	-.240*	-.236**	-.144	-.176*	-.096	-.060
Stress → Social	.040	-.199*	.161	-.203**	-.120**	.003
Efficacy → Social	.423**	-.018	.423***	-.018		
Father → Social	.084*	.061**			.084*	.061**

Note. Father = fathers' play participation; Depression = mothers' depression; Stress = mothers' parenting stress; Efficacy = mothers' parenting efficacy; Social = children's social-emotional development. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. *Bootstrapping Results of the Indirect Effects Significant at the Confidence Level of 95%*

Higher income	Effect size [lowest limit, upper limit]
Father → Depression → Social	.017 [.002, .047]
Father → Depression → Stress → Social	.007 [.001, .019]
Father → Depression → Stress	-.054 [-.111, -.012]
Depression → Stress → Social	-.010 [-.021, -.003]
Low-income	
Father → Depression → Efficacy → Social	.028 [.007, .076]
Father → Depression → Efficacy	.102 [.043, .205]
Depression → Efficacy → Social	-.018 [-.038, -.007]
Father → Depression → Stress → Efficacy → Social	.008 [.001, .028]
Father → Depression → Stress	-.093 [-.194, -.029]
Depression → Stress → Efficacy	-.013 [-.034, -.001]
Stress → Efficacy → Social	-.121 [-.243, -.044]

Note. Father = fathers' play participation; Depression = mothers' depression; Stress = mothers' parenting stress; Efficacy = mothers' parenting efficacy; Social = children's social-emotional development.

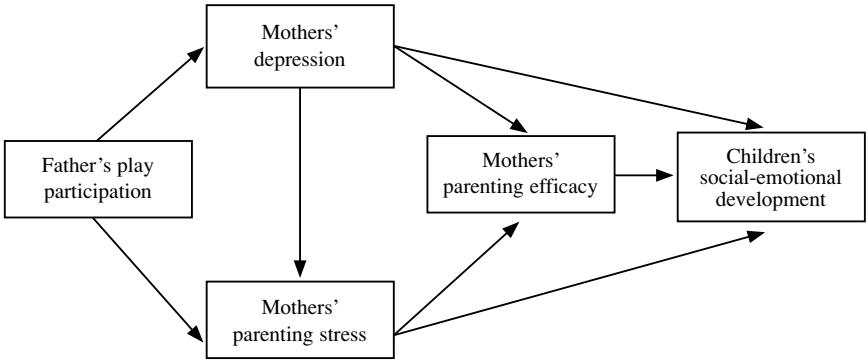

Figure 1. *Research model.*

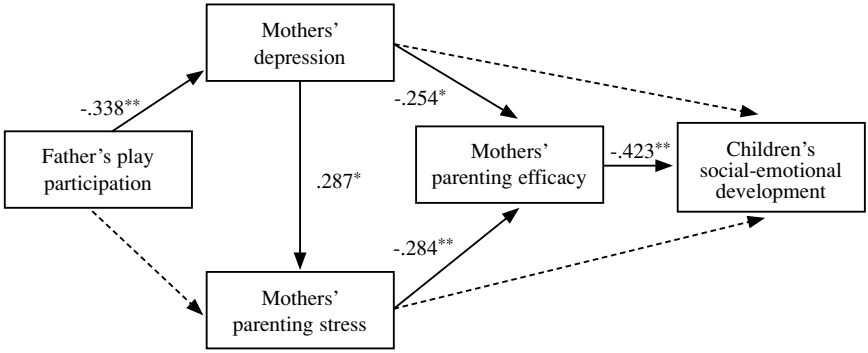

Figure 2. *Path coefficients for the low-income group.*
Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

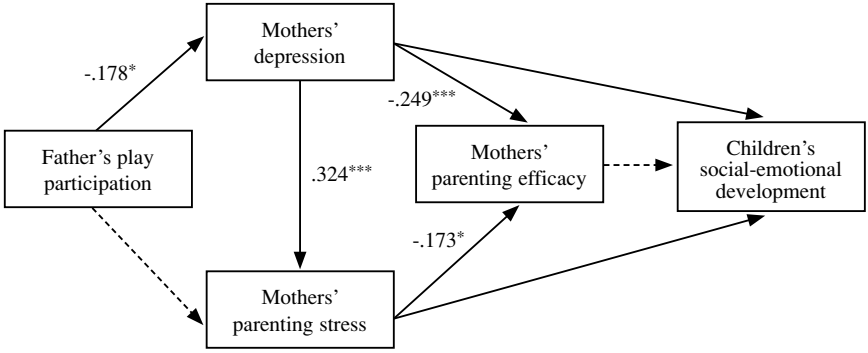

Figure 3. *Path coefficients for the higher income group.*
Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that in higher income families, greater levels of fathers' play participation were associated with relieving the depression and parenting stress of mothers, and that this fostered young children's social-emotional development. We found that the process that occurred between mothers' depression, mothers' parenting stress, and young children's social-emotional development may be found in mother-child relationships (e.g., negative and hostile response of mothers to their children) and children's learning and imitation of mothers' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral response patterns (Hammen, 2009). Previous researchers (Ewell Foster et al., 2008; K. Kim, 2011; Seo & Lee, 2014; Yu & Lee, 1998) also found that mothers' depression and parenting stress directly predicted young children's social-emotional development. Therefore, we must pay attention to the antecedent of mothers' daily levels of depression and parenting stress to at-risk young children's social-emotional development. Professional aids, such as parent education programs, are needed to help the mothers of young children to handle their negative emotions and stressors.

In low-income families, this pattern of path relationships between fathers, mothers, and young children required another mediator, namely, mothers' parenting efficacy. Parenting efficacy can play a mediating role between mothers' depression and parenting stress and young children's social-emotional development (Chung et al., 2014; K. Kim, 2011). In this study, low-income mothers' parenting efficacy directly predicted young children's social-emotional development. It is likely that young children model their mothers' pessimistic and inefficient problem-solving strategies that result from low confidence and self-worth (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Teti & Gelfand, 1991). However, as mothers from low-income families encounter numerous difficulties in their daily parenting, they experience higher levels of depression (J.-L. Kim, 2009). Also, fathers' levels of play participation are low in low-income families (Y. Han, 2006). Under these adverse circumstances, low-income mothers are apt to be exposed to successive parenting failures, which can formulate their low parenting efficacy (Teti & Gelfand, 1991).

However, it is possible that mothers' parenting efficacy can play a protective role in increasing young children's social-emotional development in these disadvantaged situations through mothers' confidence in overcoming their problems. Mothers' high parenting efficacy is the most predictive variable for children's self-efficacy in the most disadvantaged families (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001), and mothers' parenting efficacy may protect children from developing anxiety (Jones & Prinz, 2005). This may be because mothers' parenting efficacy is based on the belief that they can solve parenting-related problems regardless

of their actual problem-solving abilities (Lee & Seo, 2007). Previous researchers have indicated that the influence of negative parenting factors (e.g., poverty, low levels of social support, and depression) on parenting behavior may be mediated by cognitive factors such as parental self-appraisal and judgment of their parenting roles (Dumka, Stoerzinger, Jackson, & Roosa, 1996). Low-income mothers can be supported in developing self-confidence in their parental role through approaches such as consultation programs to alleviate their emotional distress (e.g., depression and parenting stress), and to strengthen their cognitive coping strategy for parenting-related problems.

There are some limitations in this study. First, as our research data were collected only from mothers, this may have resulted in shared method variance. Therefore, our results may not be free from reverse causal interpretation. Second, our path model did not include potential predictors such as mothers' parenting behavior. However, previous researchers revealed our path model, which was based on the direct relationship between mothers' psychological parenting environments and young children's social-emotional development, regardless of mothers' parenting behavior (e.g. K. Kim, 2011; Seo & Lee, 2014). In addition, although we assumed that fathers made an indirect contribution to young children's social-emotional development, we did not compare this with the alternative model that included fathers' direct contribution. Further, as our sample size was relatively small, some results showed low effect sizes and measurement reliability.

Our results suggest that the Korean Government should adopt a comprehensive approach and support healthy family relationships, with measures such as education for parents, high-quality childcare services, and maternal mental health care services. To overcome the risk of low social-emotional development in children from low-income families, policy makers should understand that the current Korean welfare policy, which focuses only on the provision of financial aid to low-income families, is limited in preventing social-emotional developmental difficulties in young children.

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