



GROWING UP WITH DAD

A comparison of children aged 3–5 years old living with their mothers or their fathers

**MOGENS NYGAARD
CHRISTOFFERSEN**

The Danish National Institute of Social
Research, Copenhagen, Denmark

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Mailing address:
Mogens Nygaard Christoffersen
The Danish National Institute of Social
Research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11,
DK-1052 Copenhagen K, Denmark
[email: mc@smsfi.dk.]

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After their parents' separation, 6 percent of children aged between 3 and 5 years old in Denmark live with their fathers while 94 percent live with their mothers. In this Danish study two probability samples with an equal number of residential fathers and residential mothers were selected. The research results revealed a close association between strains on parents and the well-being of their children. Parents who were not appreciated at work or unemployed were more likely to have conflicts with their children. Although one-third of the fathers had care of their children because of the mother's death or because the mother was unable to take care of the children, the fathers in the study had better jobs, less unemployment and fewer psychological problems. As a consequence they were less severe with the small children than the mothers.

Theory and themes in the study

It is estimated that about one-third of Danish children will experience the separation of their parents during childhood (Christoffersen, 1995). About 11 percent of these children live with their father after separation, but the proportion of the youngest children who live with their fathers is even lower. Only 6 percent of the 3- to 5-year-olds who live with one parent are living with their fathers, while 94 percent are living with their mother.

The present study¹ compares these two groups of children to answer the following questions. In which respects do the living conditions of children living with their fathers differ from those of children living with their mothers? Also, if there are any differences, what are the most obvious explanations?

In the ongoing debate about the care of children there are two contradictory theoretical perspectives according to Barbara Risman (1986). The first is the individualistic view, which claims the personality traits that

enable mothers to take care of their children are learned during their childhood. According to this perspective adult men have not the capacity, the ability or the motivation to take care of young children.

The other theoretical perspective is more structuralistic. The structural approach rejects the claim that sex roles are internalized as personality traits. In this perspective, fathers are able to adapt and develop the necessary abilities to look after children in an ongoing interactive process.

The study described here focused on different kinds of *actual* constraints and stresses on lone parents.² Special interest has been given to working conditions and occupational security. One of the reasons for this is that some Danish studies (e.g. Carlsen and Larsen, 1993) suggest that men's working conditions may make it difficult for them to reconcile their working life and their life as single fathers. Cultural norms may not be flexible enough and role expectations may demand that men give priority to work and not to the family. The reconciliation of work and family life for single fathers and mothers therefore was given particular attention in this study.

Methods

Approximately two equally large probability samples of children aged between 3 and 5 years old living with their fathers and mothers were drawn from national records (i.e. the personal identity register). Interviews were obtained with about 89 percent of the sample. A total of 1010 parents were interviewed by trained staff from the Danish National Institute of Social Research on the basis of standardized questionnaires.³ Thus, 478 fathers and 532 mothers were interviewed either by phone or face-to-face interviews at home.

Since the study was a cross-sectional survey on nationwide samples, it suffers from well-known weaknesses in determining cause and effect. In some medical research randomized experiments are used to test the influence of drugs and hospital routines. These methods are not available, for obvious reasons, in most social science research settings. Compensatory, logistic regression models are therefore used to control for influential confounding factors. These methods are described by Hosmer and Lemeshow (1989).

Since the decision about who is going to have custody of the child cannot be made at random, particular attention has been given to fathers who became single parents due to necessity through the death of the mother or because she was unable to take care of the child because of psychiatric illness, alcoholism, imprisonment, etc. In such cases, did the economic, social or psychological circumstances of childhood differ in form from those of other single-father families? For that reason, becoming a single parent by necessity was incorporated in the models as a possible confounding factor along with other factors.

Research results: stresses on parents and constraints on the children

One of the most striking results of the research was the close association between parental stress⁴ and constraints on the children – regardless of whether children were living with fathers or mothers. Parents were asked 12 questions about the well-being of their children. For every single one of the 12 questions, a stark association with the parental psychosomatic stress symptoms was found (Table 1).

About half of the parents had one or more symptoms either on a daily or weekly basis. In these cases relatively higher frequencies of anxiety, nightmares, psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. headaches, stomach aches) and conflicts with associates (parents or playmates) were found among their children. In addition, their children were more often isolated, lacked self-confidence, had great difficulty concentrating and were easily offended by reprimands.

Table 1 Psychosomatic problems of the parent and well-being of the child

	<i>One or more psychosomatic symptoms (%)</i>	<i>No psychosomatic symptoms (%)</i>	<i>p Fisher's test</i>
1. Child often suffers from nightmare	13	6	< .0005
2. Child often has anxiety attacks	4	1	< .0025
3. Child often suffers from stomach aches	14	8	< .006
4. Child often suffers from headaches	6	2	< .0004
5. Does the child often bite or scratch other children?	12	5	< .0001
6. Does the child often lack self-confidence?	17	8	< .0001
7. Does the child often have difficulties in concentrating?	30	15	< .0001
8. Does the child often burst into rages?	39	21	< .0001
9. Does the child lack playmates?	23	15	< .001
10. Does the child often feel lonely?	11	5	< .0007
11. Is the child sensitive to criticism or reprimands?	60	45	< .0001
12. Is the child bullied by other children?	10	3	< .0001
Number of parents interviewed	545	465	1010

Note: Symptoms of parental stress are daily or weekly experience of one or more of the following: burning or pressing pains in the upper stomach, headaches, feelings of being overwhelmed, feeling nervous and unbalanced, often feeling depressed, sad or edgy for no apparent reason.

To evaluate differences of dichotomous data between two independent samples (in this case proportions of children's negative well-being indicators among parents with and without psychosomatic symptoms), Fisher's exact probability test is used (Siegel, 1956). *p* is level of significance (see also Table 4).

An explanation could well be that even very young children are sensitive to and dependent on the emotional state of their parents – in particular when they are living with only one of their parents. They have to construct a system or frame of reference to predict and understand the emotional fluctuations of their parents – including both expressed and hidden feelings. Children become specialists in decoding the emotional climate in their own families (Harris, 1994).

From other studies evidence was found that children will also be put under pressure if they are entrusted with too much responsibility, for instance when single mothers confide in their children their financial problems (McLoyd and Wilson, 1990).

At the same time the results from the present study need careful control for potential confounders. For instance, there is evidence that parents' own psychological functioning influences their perceptions of the child's functioning.

To be appreciated at work – or unemployed

An initial assumption might be that a high degree of challenge and stimulation at work would mean that parents felt torn between the requirements of the job and consideration for their children.

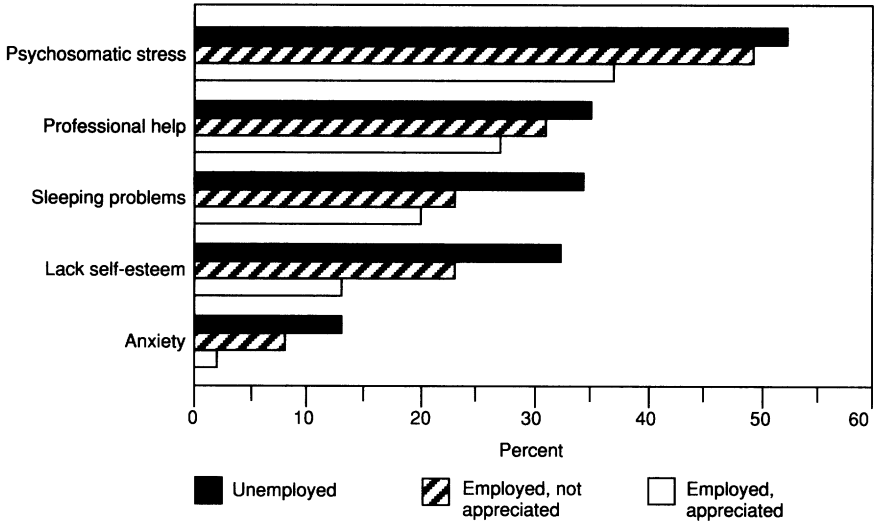
Contrary to expectations, however, several studies show that complexity of work, challenges and stimulation have a positive influence on parenting, e.g. less harsh discipline, more warmth and responsiveness. Influence at work, job autonomy or self-direction make a unique, positive contribution to parental warmth and responsiveness to the children (Greenberger et al., 1994).

A Danish study of the developmental aspects of work was recently carried out. Employees' working environment and the influence of work on health and reactions to stress were analysed. As opposed to repetitive and monotonous work, the opportunity for autonomy, education and social support from colleagues and superiors was negatively associated with psychosomatic symptoms (Thaulow, 1994).

Using questions from Thaulow's study, the relationships between adults' work and their parenting behaviour were studied in the present interview survey of mothers and fathers of children aged 3–5 years old.

The question was whether challenging jobs that are engrossing and gratifying tend to distance parents from their children or whether they tend to promote greater warmth and better moods which spill over and have positive effects on parenting.

The research results showed that parents who felt appreciated at work had fewer psychosomatic stress reactions, fewer psychological problems (sleeping problems, anxiety attacks) and higher self-esteem (Figure 1). The worst off fathers and mothers were the unemployed parents. These parents



Note: Professional help was delimited to professional help for psychiatric problems from their own doctor, psychiatrist or in hospital, etc.

Figure 1 Percentage of unemployed parents, or employed parents appreciated or not appreciated at work with various psychological problems

had more often had professional help for psychiatric problems from their own doctor, psychiatrist or in hospital, etc. Several previous studies also support the findings that unemployment is stressful for parents and has an adverse effect on their children (Christoffersen, 1994, 1996a).

Other things being equal, the mothers had more psychosomatic stress symptoms than the fathers. When gender was taken into account, having a relationship with the other parent burdened by conflict would give some prognostic information to predict psychosomatic stress symptoms. While negative reactions from associates when the parent explains that they are a single parent would add more prognostic information. Likewise, lack of self-esteem was associated to psychosomatic symptoms, other things being equal (Table 2).

Parents who felt appreciated at work were less punitive towards their children compared to other parents and especially in comparison with unemployed parents, all other things being equal, as shown by the logistic regression analysis (Table 3). But work conditions were only one among other influential factors leading to more frequent conflict between parent and child. The youngest children in the samples (3 years of age) were more frequently exposed to punishments than the older children (4–5 years old).

Only the parent living with the child was interviewed. If the non-residential parent was a source of support (e.g. lived within 15 minutes away or

Table 2 Psychosomatic symptoms of the parent and background conditions

	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Confidence interval 95%</i>	<i>p level of significance</i>
1. Women	1.56	(1.18–2.06)	< .002
2. Unemployed or not appreciated at work	1.38	(1.03–1.84)	< .03
3. A conflictual relationship with the other parent	1.81	(1.20–2.73)	< .005
4. Negative reactions of associates	2.41	(1.63–3.57)	< .0001
5. Often feel a lack of self-esteem	3.67	(2.61–5.15)	< .0001

Note: A stepwise logistic regression revealed the above variables as the best prognostic information to predict parental psychosomatic stress symptoms.

Table 3 Psychosomatic and social background for frequent punishment of 3- to 5-year-old children

	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Confidence interval 95%</i>	<i>p level of significance</i>
1. Psychosomatic stress symptoms	1.90	(1.39–2.61)	< .0001
2. Not joint custody	1.66	(1.21–2.28)	< .002
3. Unemployed or not appreciated at work	1.50	(1.04–2.17)	< .03
4. Transportation to the other parent takes less than 15 minutes	0.70	(0.50–0.97)	< .03
5. The child was 3 years old	2.27	(1.60–3.22)	< .0001

Note: A stepwise logistic regression revealed the above variables as the best prognostic information to predict frequent punishment of 3- to 5-year-old children.

the parents had joint custody), then the incidence of punishments was less frequent. The conclusions were that constraints on the single parents were associated with a higher incidence of conflicts which led to punishment of the child. When the above-mentioned constraints were taken into considerations, no differences were found between mothers and fathers.

Fathers were less harsh in punishment and made fewer disciplinary efforts than the mothers. One of the reasons for this was that fathers were far more appreciated at work, had fewer psychosomatic stress reactions, fewer psychological problems and higher self-esteem. The residential fathers had joint custody more often than the residential mothers. Other reasons were that fathers had far better and more challenging jobs, and were basically in far more gratifying situations (Table 4).

Table 4 Separated fathers and mothers living with a child aged 3–5

	<i>Fathers (%)</i>	<i>Mothers (%)</i>	<i>p</i>
A. Social background			
1. The other parent is dead	14	2	< .0001
2. The other parent is unable to care for the child (disappeared, ill, in prison, brutal or mentally ill)	19	20	–
3. Parent has no professional training	34	42	< .008
4. Parent has yearly income < 200,000 kr	46	83	< .0001
5. Parent is unemployed	20	30	< .0003
B. Personal problems			
6. Lacking self-esteem	9	17	< .0001
7. Psychiatric problems ^c	40	52	< .0001
8. Psychosomatic stress symptoms ^c	37	54	< .0001
C. Conflict/cooperation			
9. Parental relations burdened by conflict ^a	19	19	–
10. Child has joint-visiting (14–16 nights per month) ^b	16	4	< .0001
11. Joint custody ^b	59	38	< .0001
12. Child has no contact with other parent ^b	6	14	< .0001
13. No contact with ex-parents-in-law	17	26	< .002
D. Well-being of the child			
14. Child has been corporally punished at least once ^c	61	73	< .0001
15. Weekly punishments ^d	17	24	< .015
16. Child often bursts into rages	24	34	< .0009
E. Reactions of the surroundings			
17. Negative reactions	8	20	< .0001
18. Positive reactions	71	33	< .0001
Number of parents interviewed	478	532	1010

^aOnly parents with contact.

^bWidowers not included.

^cThe child was rapped on the knuckles, was smacked on the bottom, or boxed on the ear.

^dOne or more of the following happen weekly or more often: the child was physically chastised (see above); the child was sent to his room; or the child was shaken.

^eThe measures of parental psychosomatic stress were daily or weekly problems with one or more of the following symptoms: burning pressing pains in the upper stomach, headaches, feelings of being overwhelmed, feeling nervous and unbalanced, often feeling depressed, sad or edgy for no apparent reason.

^fThe parent has had professional help for psychiatric problems from their own doctor, psychiatrist, or in hospital, etc.

Unemployment among single parents

A relatively large proportion of single parents are unemployed. Using surveys of cross-sectional national samples, it was found that in 1974 11 per cent of single parents with dependent children (i.e. children under 18) were unemployed. By 1994 about 30 per cent of single parents were unemployed (Christoffersen, 1996b).

There might be several different explanations for this. First, it seems to be confirmed that unemployment – of fathers in particular – increases the risk of family dissolution. Unemployment might be one factor among others which causes divorce (Christoffersen, 1996a). Second, single parenthood might itself increase the risk of unemployment, because of the decreased number of jobs available for single parents. The growth of more atypical work arrangements such as shift work, night work or weekend work (Danmarks Statistik, 1996) has been problematic, especially for single parents.

A further obstacle for single parents seeking employment is the opening hours of public daycare centres and the lack of universal provision of public daycare for preschool children. The present study of single-parent families with children aged 3–5 years old found that a third of the families experienced difficulties because of opening hours in daycare centres.

Nevertheless, single working parents are given preference: surveys conducted in 1975, 1981 and 1989 confirmed that being a single working mother was a significant factor predicting the use of care in public daycare, e.g. creches and kindergartens (Bertelsen and Linde, 1985; Bertelsen, 1991). Preference is also given to families with an apparent need, e.g. children in need of daycare due to social or educational reasons (Koch-Nielsen, 1996).

Finally, the tax system in combination with social security benefits allocated to one-parent families (e.g. supplementary children's allowance, housing benefits) seem to make paid jobs less attractive to low-skilled, one-parent families. Calculations⁵ on the basis of cross-sectional interview surveys combined with income information, revealed that a relatively high proportion of single mothers in paid work obtained *as much as or less than* unemployment benefits (Pedersen and Smith, 1995a, 1995b).

However, they were still working. The reason might be that in the long-term they may obtain a positive surplus from paid work and they may feel it would be too risky to withdraw from the labour market (Pedersen and Ploug, 1993). In addition, unemployment might cause social isolation and a feeling of ostracization.

It is remarkable that only a few fathers in two-parent families with preschool children are unemployed, while one in five of the single fathers in the present study were unemployed. About 30 per cent of the single mothers in the study were unemployed. As to why the unemployment rate among single mothers is significantly higher, the explanation might be that fathers are more likely to have a vocational training and have undergone lengthier

training than single mothers. It is no wonder that single-father families are generally far more resourceful than single-mother families.

Are mothers always the best parents?

Concerning professional training, income level, job security and personal problems, fathers were in a relatively better position than mothers (Table 4). If the factors behind psychosomatic stress (Table 2) or the factors behind frequent punishment of the children are considered (Table 3), then children living with their fathers were in a better position than those living with their mother. Children's social networks were more likely to be intact when they lived with their father. They were more likely to be in joint custody, had more frequent contact with the non-residential parent and were less likely to have lost contact with grandparents for various reasons (Table 4).

Besides, single fathers are more likely to receive positive reactions from people whom they meet for the first time. This forms a glaring contrast to the reactions which follow when single mothers explain that they are a single parent. Most of the fathers (71 percent) have experienced such a positive reaction not once but on several occasions, in contrast to 33 percent among the single mothers (Table 4).

This also reflects the role expectations of women and men in society. The positive reactions disclose that people do not expect fathers to be able to take care of their children. In this way prejudices against fathers in general are revealed.

Discussion

Since fathers are not randomly allocated to be residential or non-residential fathers when families dissolve there will always be some selectional bias. A cross-sectional survey of single fathers, such as the present study, will encounter difficulties in generalizing these results to non-residential fathers. We cannot know – and we will never know – how the non-residential fathers would have coped if they had been living with their children as single fathers.

An insufficient method is to study the fathers who became single fathers by necessity, e.g. because of the mother's death or because the mother was unable to take care of their child because of alcoholism, psychiatric illness, imprisonment, etc. Fathers who became single fathers for these tragic reasons managed to take care of their children just as well as the other single fathers and generally better than single mothers in the same situation. The study found no income differences between the single fathers and the non-residential fathers in the sample.

In focusing on the selection bias between non-residential fathers and

residential fathers a potentially important selection process may be overlooked: the selection process between men who become fathers and men who remain childless. It seems as if the men – as opposed to the women – were chosen to be fathers because of their work abilities. Furthermore, it may be that quality employment is far more decisive for the well-being of those in one-parent families.

In several studies striking differences were found between single men and married men. Married men were more likely to have better socioeconomic conditions (education, income, professional, managerial or official occupation), and their mental and physical health were overall better than the single men (Bernard, 1972).

These overwhelming differences could be the result of a selection process, but Jessie Bernard gives an alternative explanation: marriage itself produces these differences. Contrary to women, men benefit from marriage.

The selection assumption emphasizes processes which facilitate men and women in different ways in entering the marriage and leaving the family. Accordingly, Hans Hallberg (1991) finds poor mental and physical health, and a higher mortality, among divorced middle-aged Swedish men. Divorced Swedish men are especially overrepresented when it comes to alcohol-related conditions, suicidal actions and accidents.

Marriage within the same social class

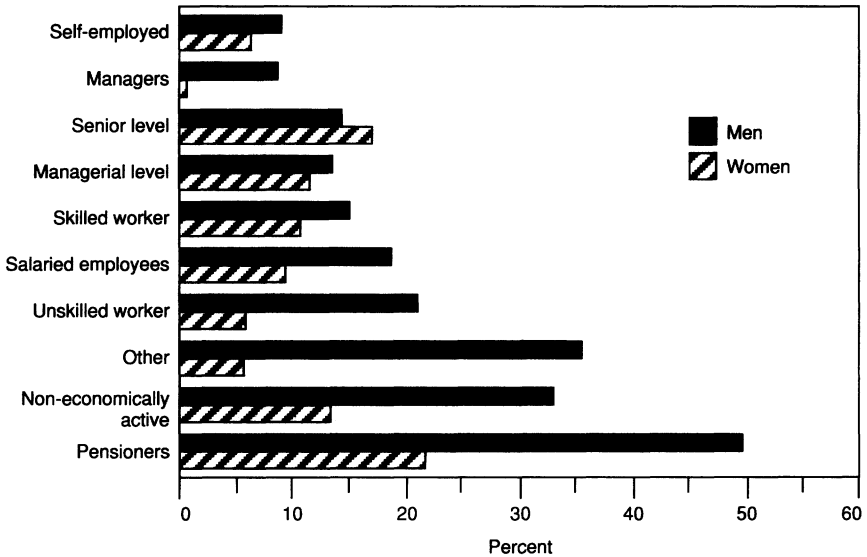
Studies of other European and Asian cultures have found that social distance between classes is maintained through different kinds of restrictions. Although there may be formal freedom of movement between classes, there are effective social barriers between the social classes which prevent marriages between classes (Goody, 1976).

Danish studies of family formation indicate the effects of such social barriers. The longitudinal study of the 1954 birth cohort reveals that the formation of couples mainly takes place between partners who have approximately the same level of education (Hansen, 1995, 1996).

Marginalized men remain childless

The distribution of biological parenthood over the past century shows that more women than men become parents. The number of children in families has decreased during the last 30 years. The net reproduction rate has been below the reproduction level for the last 25 years. Nevertheless, most women (about 90 percent) become mothers, and many men (about 80 percent) become fathers. The proportion of childless men aged 37 increased during the 1980s from 18.1 to 23.0 percent. In the same period the percentage of women with no children at the age of 35 increased from 10.7 to 15.0 percent. These data come from a longitudinal register-based study of the total population during the 1980s (Knudsen, 1993).

For men economic activities are associated with parenthood. Not all



Source: Danmarks Statistik (1997).

Figure 2 Percentage of childless men and women aged 44 years in 1993 by socioeconomic status

men are able to ‘afford’ families. In Denmark shifts in family formation patterns can be traced over time from registers of individuals’ personal identity numbers. Whether or not parents are married, the newborn children are registered with both the mother’s and father’s personal identity number. This allows researchers to follow men’s parenting trends.

Information from this source shows that unemployed men aged 44 years old are less likely than employed men of the same age to have children (Danmarks Statistik, 1997). Men with self-employed, professional and managerial jobs have high fathering rates. In the 44-year-old age bracket, the lowest rates were found among unskilled workers and especially among the non-economically active or recipients of disability pensions (Figure 2).

Quite the opposite trends were found among the vast majority of women. The higher the socioeconomic level of women in this age group, the higher the rate of childlessness – excluding the few cases of self-employed women, women working as directors, or women at the other end of the spectrum: the non-economically active women.

These results slot in with earlier Danish studies. Men who are unemployed are more likely to be single, while highly educated men are more likely to be in a couple (Knudsen, 1993; Christoffersen, 1993). Similar results were found in a study of the 1954 birth cohort when they were interviewed at 38 years old (Hansen, 1995, 1996). A possible hypothesis is that when a woman chooses a man to be the father of her children, she appears to

prefer a man who has had a longer vocational training period as opposed to one who has no skills.

Income differences between spouses

One of the reasons why we find stark income differences between mothers and fathers in families is first of all because of the relatively large group of marginalized men who never become fathers.

A cross-sectional study revealed that fathers with preschool children⁶ on average earned about 90,000 kroner *more* per year than the mothers (Christoffersen, 1990). A study⁷ of the 1995 birth cohort showed similar large income differences: 80,000 kroner per year.

Attachment to work and problems of gender inequalities

One explanation might be that women choose a father for their children according to social status. The suggestions are that men with power who earn relatively large amounts will find a partner more easily. Men who have access to resources, and consequently to social protection, are more likely to become part of a family in contrast to men who are poor, long-term unemployed and marginalized.

For those reasons, the length of education, length of vocational training and amount of income often make relatively influential differences between parents, and influence care arrangements, e.g. parental leave. The attachment to paid work formed by role expectations within the family and among others may point to different directions for fathers and mothers. Therefore, these studies highlight some of the material obstacles to reducing gender inequality.

Notes

This study has been financially supported by the Danish Equal Status Council and Ministry of Social Affairs.

1. This study has been published in Danish (see Christoffersen, 1996b).
2. Some of the parents were living in reconstituted families at the time of the interview and some children were living with a stepparent or have a stepparent in the visiting home. About as many of the fathers as mothers were living with a new partner (26 percent and 28 percent, respectively). The crucial distinction for the study was that the child was not living with both biological parents. The mean age of the children when the family was dissolved was around 2 years old.
3. We interviewed 79 percent by phone and 21 percent were interviewed at home. A review of the research comparing face-to-face interview methods with telephone interview methods showed some differences in the results of these techniques when sensitive questions dealing with subjects which could be stigmatizing were asked. The interviewer effects were more neutral when interviewing was undertaken by phone compared to face-to-face interviewing (Christoffersen, 1984).
4. Parental psychosomatic stress was measured by daily or weekly experiences of one or more of the following symptoms: burning pressing pains in the upper stomach, headaches,

feelings of being overwhelmed, feeling nervous and unbalanced, and often feeling depressed and sad or edgy for no apparent reason.

5. Transportation costs and daycare costs are not included when the parents are unemployed.

6. Preschool children include children aged between 0 and 6 years old.

7. This study is at present cross-sectional but also the first step of a longitudinal study.

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