

Genes, Biological Parent Relationship Instability, and Children's Externalizing Behaviors

by

Colter Mitchell¹,
Sara McLanahan¹,
Jeanne Brooks-Gunn²,
Daniel Notterman³,
John Hobcraft⁴,
and Irwin Garfinkel⁵

¹Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Office of Population Research, Princeton University

²Teachers College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University

³College of Medicine, Pennsylvania State University and Department of Molecular Biology, Princeton University

⁴Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York

⁵School of Social Work, Columbia University

Abstract

This study addresses the relationship between family instability and child wellbeing by incorporating genetic information. Based on biological susceptibility theory, we hypothesize that children with particular genetic characteristics are more reactive to their biological parent's partnership transitions in influencing externalizing behavior than other children with different genetic makeup. We utilize data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study when the children are between the ages of 0-9. We find that both serotonergic and dopaminergic genes interact with biological father's residential changes to influence externalizing behaviors. Children with more reactive genotypes experience a larger benefit to the father entering into a residential relationship with the biological mother and are more adversely affected by the father exiting the residential relationship with the mother. These gene-social environment models are stronger for boys. These findings suggest that greater integration of social and biological information improves the family instability, genetic, and child wellbeing literatures.