

One in four UK children facing multiple risks to development, study finds

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(Medical Xpress) -- More than one in four UK infants is growing up in families facing multiple challenges such as parental depression and financial hardship that can have a damaging effect on children's development, new research suggests.

The study, co-authored by Dr. Ricardo Sabates from the Education department at Sussex, sheds fresh light on the number and diverse combinations of difficulties that young children have been exposed to during the first decade of the 21st century.

It also provides the first detailed analysis of the number of challenges or 'risk factors' facing children from different ethnic groups.

The 10 risk factors considered were: living in overcrowded housing; having a teenage mother; having one or more parents with [depression](#), a physical disability or low basic skills; substance misuse; excessive alcohol intake; and living in a family experiencing financial stress, worklessness or domestic violence.

Dr. Sabates and Professor Shirley Dex, from the Institute of Education, University of London, examined information on more than 18,000 families who are taking part in the Millennium Cohort Study, which has been tracking UK children through their early childhood.

They found that 28 per cent of families faced two or more of these ten risk factors. Just over four in ten children did not experience any of

these risk factors in early childhood. A further three in ten faced only one.

Previous research suggests that most children living with only one risk factor will not end up with a major developmental problem: it is multiple family difficulties that are most damaging.

As the Millennium cohort is representative of the current UK child population, the researchers estimate that approximately 192,000 children born in 2001 faced multiple challenges in early childhood. However, as many of these young children have older siblings, the total number of children at risk was considerably higher, they say.

The authors found that children facing two or more risk factors had poorer behavioural development scores at ages three and five than those experiencing one or no challenges. The vocabulary scores of children with multiple challenges were also lower and they fell further behind between ages three and five. Children in families with not only multiple risk factors but also low income fared worst across most developmental outcomes.

Dr. Sabates and Professor Dex found that high numbers of risks were relatively uncommon: about one in seven children faced two risk factors, and one in 14 was in a family with three risk factors. Less than 2 per cent of [children](#) were exposed to five or more.

The researchers found no dominant pattern of risks. For example, for families facing three risks, the most common combination was smoking during pregnancy, financial stress and teenage motherhood. However, this combination of factors applied to only 6 per cent of families living with three risks. Parental depression was the most prevalent factor overall.

The authors acknowledge that the great diversity of risk-factor combinations complicates matters for policy-makers. “It seems that there is relatively little to be gained from policy interventions that tackle clusters of disadvantage rather than individual disadvantages,” they conclude. “However, there may still be some knock-on effects from tackling some individual [risk factors](#) and disadvantages.”

More information: The initial findings of this study are reported in ‘Multiple risk factors in young children’s development’, a working paper published by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education.

Provided by University of Sussex

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