

## **Three Generation Family Households and Child Wellbeing among Fragile Families**

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### Extended Abstract

Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, this paper examines the association between living in a three generation family household and cognitive, socioemotional and health outcomes for children.

### Background and Significance

The skills acquired in the first few years of life are critical for child development. Disparities in cognitive, socioemotional and health outcomes for children have long term implications for intergenerational mobility and poverty. Families play a primary role in the development of cognitive and social skills as well as physical health. Families and households today look dramatically different from the typical family 30 years ago. Approximately 40% of children are born to unmarried mothers (Ventura, 2009), rates of cohabitation have increased and about half of marriages end in divorce (Martin et al., 2009; Cherlin, 2009; McLanahan, 2004). As a result, most children will spend some part of their childhood outside of a married two parent household. Many children will spend time in a three generation family household, where a grandparent, parent and child coreside. Over the last two decades the number of individuals in three generation family households has greatly increased, to approximately 23.5 million (Taylor et al, 2010). About 7% of all children live in three generation households (Kreider and Fields, 2005) and census data show that even more families are doubling up as a result of the current economic crisis (Census, 2010). Three generation households are also more prevalent among poor and minority households – where disparities in academic, behavioral skills and health are largest (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan, 2005; Census, 2008; Kreider and Fields, 2005). Researchers have also suggested that multigenerational bonds are increasingly more important (Bengston, 2001), yet limited research has focused on three generation family households and child wellbeing. It is important to understand if living in a three generation family household affects child outcomes in order to fully understand the wellbeing of children and intergenerational bonds more generally.

In this study I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FF) to investigate the association between living in a three generation family household and child health, socioemotional and academic outcomes at ages 3 and 5. This study addresses the following questions: 1) Is living in a three generation family household associated with child wellbeing, 2) Does the stability or length of time in a three generation family household change the association with child outcomes, and 3) Are there differences in the association by family moderators (grandparent capabilities, race, mother's age, parent's marital status)?

### Theoretical Framework

Family systems theory emphasizes how the family is a system of interlocking dyads. The dyadic relationships within the family influence each other and affect individual outcomes (Elder, 1985). Households with multiple generations have several dyads (parent-child, grandparent-child and grandparent-parent) that could potentially influence school readiness in a number of ways. Grandparent coresidence may positively affect grandchildren through economic resources – providing educational activities or materials, by providing financial assistance to parents – or by providing social resources such as communities with safe and enriching resources, increased monitoring and supervision, or assistance with parenting (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Gordon, Chase-Lansdale, Matjasko & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Coresidence with a grandparent could also negatively affect a child's school readiness if they themselves are a financial burden to the family system, are in poor health, or cause stress to the parents. In these cases, grandparents could divert resources away from the enriching child development.

Stability or duration of coresidence may also influence child outcomes. More stable or longer coresidence is likely to have a stronger influence (positive or negative) on child wellbeing. Research has shown that nuclear family instability has a negative effect on child wellbeing (Wu and Martinson 1993; Hill Yeung & Duncan 2001; Pong & Ju 2000; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Cooper et al, 2008; Cavanagh & Crissey, 2008). Transitions into and out of three generation family households may also have similar associations with school readiness. In addition, there may be reasons to believe that the association would be different for certain subgroups. Prior research has found that race/ethnicity moderates the association between living in a three generation family household and child wellbeing (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2007; Foster and Kalil, 2007). Different racial groups have different

propensities to live in three generation family households and cultural attitudes towards three generation coresidence may vary by ethnic groups. The direction of the effect of coresidence by race is not clear – and much of the differences in the effect between racial groups may be more of an indicator of the resources and capabilities brought to the family by the grandparent generation, a hypothesis that will be tested in this study.

Young mothers are another group for whom we might expect to see differences in the association between living in a three generation family household and child outcomes. Young mothers may have fewer resources available to them (socially or economically) to invest in their children. Young mothers who live with their own parents may be able to better provide for their children as they may be able to get additional support from their parents. However, if the grandparent generation is not able to provide valuable resources, differences by mother's age may not emerge. Similarly, there may be differences in the association between child outcomes and three generation family households by mother's relationship status. The propensity to live with a grandparent varies by mother's relationship status – single mothers are the most likely to live in a three generation family household. In addition, reasons for coresidence may also differ by relationship status. Married mothers are more likely to be economically stable than unmarried mothers. For married mothers, coresidence may be more about the needs of the grandparent generation than her or her child's needs. In these cases we might expect to see resources diverted away from the child to the grandparent leading to worse child outcomes. For single mothers, who are less economically well-off, living with a grandparent may provide her family with additional resources and we would expect coresidence to benefit children.

#### Prior Literature

The literature that looks at the effects of family structure (in particular single parenthood) on child outcomes is extensive and generally finds that children do better academically, psychologically and socially if they grow up in a two parent biological married family (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 1999, Cherlin, 2009). Research on three generation family households is much more limited. Much of it focuses on outcomes for mothers (e.g. Gordon, Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, and Zamsky, 1994; Unger and Cooley, 1992) or on older children (Barbarin and Soler, 1993; Deleire and Kalil, 2002; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Astone and Washington, 1994; Pittman, 2007). However, some studies have looked at the association between living in a three generation family household and early childhood outcomes and have found both positive and negative effects on children. Research finds improved cognitive scores and motor skills among children who lived in a three generation household (Pope et al, 1993; Black and Nitz, 1996) or effects only for certain racial/ethnic groups (Pittman and Boswell, 2008; Leadbeater and Bishop, 1994). A study of slightly older children found that living with a grandparent is associated with improved socioemotional wellbeing (Kellam, Ensminger, and Turner, 1977). Most of these studies are old, utilize small samples or focus on cross sectional data. As a result, these studies cannot rigorously account for selection into three generation households and cannot rule out reverse causality.

More recently, three studies have employed large data sets and used rigorous methodological approaches to account for selection bias. These studies again have found mixed results. One study found increased socioemotional behavior problems and worse self regulation among children who grew up in a three generation family household (Pittman and Boswell, 2007), another found improved cognitive outcomes for whites but not blacks (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2007), and the third found no association with behavioral or academic scores (Foster and Kalil, 2007). These conflicting findings are in part due to different samples (two of the studies combine outcomes for young children with teenagers), differing measurements of family structure (time in the household versus contact) and different moderating characteristics.

The current study improves upon prior research by focusing only on young children and applying multiple methodological approaches to longitudinal data to address selection bias. This study is the first to carefully investigate differences in the association between three generation family households and early child wellbeing by considering multiple grandparent "treatments" – stability, duration and timing; to consider child wellbeing indicators of health, socioemotional and cognitive wellbeing all together in a single study; and to investigate how the capabilities of the grandparent generation (such as education) play in changing the association with child outcomes. Lastly, this study will also investigate the role of key moderating factors (race/ethnicity, mother's age, and mother's relationship status).

## Data and Research Methods

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (FF) is a nationally representative survey of about 5000 children with follow up data collected one, three and five years after the child's birth. The FF study randomly sampled births in 75 hospitals in 20 large U.S. cities (in 15 states) between 1998 and 2000. By design, approximately three quarters of the interviewed mothers were unmarried and as a result, these data represent a relatively disadvantaged population (three quarters have no high school education). The study was designed to provide information about the conditions and capabilities of new (mostly unwed) parents; the nature, determinants, and trajectories of their relationships; and the long-term consequences for parents and children. As three generation family households are more common among low-income and minority families, these data are ideally suited for investigating the relationship with child wellbeing. One quarter of the FF sample lived in a three generation family household at the birth of the child (Pilkauskas, 2011). The rich set of control variables available in the FF's data allow for the inclusion of many covariates that are associated with three generation family households and child wellbeing. FF also collects information on the grandparent generation not found in many studies of children that will allow for the investigation of the role of grandparent capabilities.

Although the FF study collects information on many potential covariates associated with child wellbeing and family structure, a major concern in studies of family structure, and observational data in general, is selection. The types of families that select into three generation family households are likely to be quite different from families that do not. This study proposes to apply several methodological techniques to the research questions outlined above to try to get as close to a "causal" estimate as possible.

First I will estimate the association between grandparent coresidence and child outcomes using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression (or logistic regression in the case of binary outcome variables) including a rich set of control variables that associated with both coresidence and child wellbeing. Second, for outcomes where repeated measures are available over time (e.g. obesity) additional analyses will be conducted using residualized change (lagged dependent variable) and individual fixed effects models. In residualized change models an earlier measurement of the outcome variable is included on the right hand side of the equation to account for unobserved parental, grandparent or child characteristics that affected the earlier outcome to reduce selection bias due to unmeasured child and family characteristics. Individual fixed effects models help account for selection by using the individual in a previous time period as a control for themselves. Although causal estimates are not really possible in observational studies of family structure, together these three analytic techniques should provide a less biased picture of the nature of the association between living in a three generation family household and child wellbeing.

## Expected (Initial) Results

Initial analyses that investigate differences by timing, duration and stability of the three generation family household all reveal similar results – consistently living in a three generation family household has a larger impact on child outcomes than occasionally living in a three generation family household. Preliminary results also suggest that living in a three generation family household for the first three years of a child's life is significantly associated with a 3.7 point increase on the Peabody Picture and Vocabulary Test (PPVT) whereas living occasionally in a three generation family household is not associated with PPVT scores. This association is even stronger for children of white mothers (15.88,  $p < 0.001$ ). Living consistently in a three generation family household is also significantly associated with a 45% increase in the likelihood of a child being obese or overweight and this relationship is also stronger among children of white mothers whose children are 4.6 times as likely to be obese/overweight. Three generation coresidence is also associated with increased internalizing behaviors and this association is stronger for black and Hispanic mothers.

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