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**Research Report**

## Improving Parental Roles and Education for Early Childhood Development

KDI Focus, No. 79

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Korea Development Institute (KDI), Sejong

*Suggested Citation:* Kim, Inkyung (2017) : Improving Parental Roles and Education for Early Childhood Development, KDI Focus, No. 79, Korea Development Institute (KDI), Sejong, <https://doi.org/10.22740/kdi.focus.e.2017.79>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/200880>

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February 2, 2017 (No. 79, eng.)

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## Improving Parental Roles and Education for Early Childhood Development\*

**Inkyung Kim**, Fellow at KDI

“Spurred by the recent series of child abuse cases that have been brought to light, the Korean government released a parental education package to promote the participation in and effectiveness of parental education programs. Early childhood linguistic and socio-emotional development are related to parental role indicators such as maternal depression, parental stress and style and the home environment. As such, to improve parental roles, it is important to enhance the use and effectiveness of parental education materials by integrating resources such as booklets and videos at different ministries and provide parents with the necessary skills that are in line with the child’s age and situation. Furthermore, it is necessary to expand parental education programs with expert counselling and guidance to help parents cope with their respective child care needs and improve their parenting skills.”

### I. Introduction

Reflecting the changes in people’s life cycles, parental education covers pregnancy, birth and child rearing, treatment for postpartum depression, child development, parent-child attachment, parenting knowledge and skills necessary for each stage of child

\* Written based on Kim, Inkyung, *Determinants of Child Development in Korea and Policy Implications*, Policy Study 2016-01, Korea Development Institute, 2016 (in Korean).

**In response to the series of child abuse cases that have been brought to light, the government released measures to promote parental education.**

development, among others. And in response to the series of child abuse cases that have been recently brought to light, the Korean government released a parental education package in March 2016 to promote the participation in and effectiveness of parental education. The package contains programs that enhance access to and the specialization of such learning as well as those that strengthen life cycle-based education. To improve the quality of education, the government is also preparing a standard parental education program and planning to integrate and manage experts from different ministries and centers.<sup>1)</sup> Additionally, “parental education week” was designated in 2016 to introduce a wide array of educational programs.<sup>2)</sup>

**To promote participation and interest in parental education, it is important to clarify the relevance of the parental role in child development.**

For these efforts to attract nationwide support and be effective in improving parents’ capabilities, it is first necessary to clarify the relevance of the parental role in child development to gather a broad consensus regarding the significance of the former. In particular, if the parental role is found to be related to early childhood development, it would be desirable to improve the parental role at the earliest possible stage in order to maximize the follow-up education. This is because the development of cognitive and socio-emotional abilities is most active during early childhood (Naudeau *et al.*, 2011). And based on the accumulated cognitive skills during this important stage, children will go on to develop and acquire new knowledge and skills (Francesconi and Heckman, 2016).

This study empirically analyzes the relationship between parents’ role and child development from birth through to early childhood, and based on the results, implications are presented for the parental role as well as measures to improve parental education.

## **II . Empirical Analysis Results on the Correlation Between Parents’ Role and Early Childhood Development**

### **1. Definition of the ‘Parental Role’**

**The parental role can be measured via maternal depression, parenting stress and styles, paternal involvement in child care and home environmental stimuli test results.**

Indicators for parental roles adopted in this study are maternal depression, parenting stress and style, paternal involvement in child care and home environmental stimuli test results included in the Panel Study on Korean Children.<sup>3)</sup>

Maternal depression is measured by the intensity of anxiety, helplessness, irritability and sadness while parenting stress arises when parents are insecure in their roles, or financially or physically exhausted due to child rearing. Parenting style is evaluated by the degree of responsiveness and demandingness. Responsiveness is measured by: how affectionate parents are towards their children; how sensitively they respond to their children’s needs;

1) Joint task force of relevant ministries, “Parental Education Measures to Prevent Child Abuse and Promote Family Relationships,” press release, Mar. 29, 2016 (in Korean).

2) Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, “Being Good Parents Starts with Parental Education,” press release, May 9, 2016 (in Korean).

3) Panel Study on Korean Children (tool profile), [http://panel.kicce.re.kr/kor/publication/01\\_02.jsp](http://panel.kicce.re.kr/kor/publication/01_02.jsp), last access: Nov. 22, 2016 (in Korean).

how important parents deem communication is with their children; and how much they encourage and respect their children's independence. As for demandingness, it refers to the level of emphasis placed on children by parents with regards to complying with the rules (Cho *et al.*, 1999). In the Panel Study on Korean Children, maternal responsiveness from birth to 35 to 43 months is measured by how well and affectionately mothers' respond to their children's needs while that for older children is assessed by how actively and respectfully mothers engage in play and communication. Meanwhile, paternal responsiveness is measured by how warmly fathers' respect their children's demand for independence after 35 to 43 months. The degree of demandingness is considered high when children are rigidly disciplined without excuses and they well comply with the rules set by their parents. In this study, children 35 to 43 months and over are subject to this measurement.

Paternal involvement in child care is determined by how frequently fathers purchase necessities and toys and how often they physically care for and play with their children and teach them basic life habits. Indeed, while responsiveness and demandingness, in terms of parental behavior, measure the quality of parental attitude, the degree of paternal involvement in child care shows the quantity of paternal care.

Lastly, the home environmental stimuli test evaluates: the amount of learning materials at home; whether there is sufficient space for safety and activities; how much the parents encourage linguistic development; the parents' linguistic and emotional reactions; presence of stimuli for acquiring knowledge and skills; whether there is role playing; exposure to diverse experiences; and acceptance of negative behavior. Learning materials and the physical environment are seen as environmental elements that support smooth parent-child interaction, while other factors are used as indicators to identify how the interaction promotes child development. Thus, in the empirical analysis, learning materials and the physical environment are classified as 'physical elements' while the others are classified as 'interaction.'

The results of the above indicators are averaged and analyzed to identify the relationship between the average parental role and early childhood development.

## 2. Early Childhood Linguistic Development

The level of early childhood linguistic development was assessed using receptive and expressive vocabulary test scores; the former refers to the child's ability to understand what is being said while the latter refers to the ability to convey thoughts into proper words (Kim, 2000).

<Table 1> shows the relationship between early childhood vocabulary and parents' education level and household income, along with the parental role. Among the variables for parental role, interestingly enough, fathers' high parenting stress is positively related to

**<Table 1> Factors Related to Early Childhood Linguistic Development**

Development test		Expressive vocabulary	Receptive vocabulary	
Age (months)		35-43 months	60-66 months	
Parental role variables	Maternal depression		-	-
	Parenting stress	Maternal	-	-
		Paternal	-	(+)
	Parental style (responsiveness · demandingness)	Maternal	(until 35-43 months) (+): responsiveness↑ demandingness↑	-
		Paternal	-	(from 35-43 months) (+): responsiveness↑ demandingness↓> responsiveness↑ demandingness↑> responsiveness↓ demandingness↑
	Paternal involvement in child care		-	-
	Home environment	Physical element	-	-
		Interaction	-	(+)
Education level	Maternal	(+)	-	
	Paternal	-	(+)	
Household income		-	-	

Note: Child development test scores are standardized into z-score ((raw score-sample mean)/sample standard deviation). They are then estimated by applying OLS after controlling variables in this table plus mothers' working hours and school attendance and work experience post-marriage, children's age (months) and history of accidents, hospitalization and illness, the number of months of using child care centers, educational institutions and caregivers, whether the child's weight was low at birth, birth order, gender, parents' age, age (months) at which breastfeeding stopped, and whether the grandparents live together. Finally, the estimated coefficient signs of parental role, parents' education level and household income are marked with statistical significance at the 5% level: (+): positively related, (-): negatively related, -: not related, ↑: high, ↓: low and >: relevance comparison.

Source: Calculated by author using the Panel Study on Korean Children (1st-6th).

**Early childhood linguistic ability is related to fathers' parenting stress, parental style and interaction capability and their education level.**

children's receptive vocabulary. To look into why, this study decomposed parenting stress into uncertainty in the parental role, financial burden of child rearing and lack of rest, and another regression analysis was conducted.

The results show that fathers' lack of confidence in the parental role has a strong positive relationship with their children's receptive vocabulary. It is likely that as children grow older and enter school age, fathers feel stressed and use stronger education stimuli to enhance their children's receptive vocabulary. It is a known fact that fathers tend to use adult language more often than mothers in conversations with their children, meaning that the father's influence on their children's linguistic development is much more significant than the mother's (EBS, 2013). Meanwhile, children's receptive vocabulary is negatively related to fathers' financial burden from child rearing and there is no statistical significance with fathers' insufficient rest.

**However, no relevance has been observed between early childhood linguistic ability and household income.**

Furthermore, high levels of responsiveness and demandingness is positively related to children's expressive vocabulary until 35 to 43 months with regards to maternal parental behaviour while high responsiveness and low demandingness is most strongly (positively) related after 35 to 43 months with regards to paternal parental behavior. This is followed by high responsiveness and demandingness and low responsiveness and high demandingness.

&lt;Table 2&gt; Factors Related to Early Childhood Socio-emotional Development

Development test		Negative peer interaction	Internalized problematic behavior	Externalized problematic behavior	
Age (months)		35-43 months	60-66 months	60-66 months	
Parental role variables	Maternal depression	(+)	(+)	(+)	
	Parenting stress	Maternal	(+)	(+)	(+)
		Paternal	(+)	-	-
	Parental style (responsiveness · demandingness)	Maternal	(until 35-43 months (-): responsiveness↑ demandingness↑ > responsiveness↓ demandingness↓	-	(after 35-43 months (-): responsiveness↑ demandingness↓ > responsiveness↑ demandingness↑
		Paternal	-	(after 35-43 months (-): responsiveness↑ demandingness↓	(after 35-43 months (-): responsiveness↑ demandingness↓
	Paternal involvement in child care	-	-	-	
	Home environment	Physical element	-	-	-
		Interaction	(-)	-	(-)
Education level	Maternal	-	-	-	
	Paternal	-	-	-	
Household income		-	-	-	

Source: Ibid., &lt;Table 1&gt;.

However, fathers' frequent involvement in child care, the amount of learning materials at home and sufficient and safe play space are found to be irrelevant to children's linguistic development. Smooth parent-child interaction at home is found to be positively related to children's receptive vocabulary. Meanwhile, mothers' high education level is positively related to expressive vocabulary and fathers' to receptive vocabulary. Finally, household income is found to be irrelevant.

### 3. Early Childhood Socio-emotional Development

The proper development of social and emotional abilities in early childhood includes decreasing negative peer interaction and internalized and externalized problematic behaviors. Indeed, negative peer interaction can be assessed by children's aggressive or excluding behaviors, or by whether they are withdrawn or ignored by their peers during play.<sup>4)</sup> Internalized problematic behaviors are connected to over-control i.e. anxiety, irritability, worry, sensitivity, withdrawnness, etc. and externalized problematic behaviors to the lack of control i.e. attention deficit, hyper activity, hostile aggression, disruptive behavior, etc. (Oh and Kim, 2015).

<Table 2> summarizes the relationship between children's socio-emotional development

Early childhood socio-emotional ability is related to maternal depression, parenting stress and style and their interaction capability.

4) Panel Study on Korean Children (tool profile), [http://panel.kicce.re.kr/kor/publication/01\\_02.jsp](http://panel.kicce.re.kr/kor/publication/01_02.jsp), last access: Nov. 22, 2016 (in Korean).

However, no relevance was observed between early childhood socio-emotional ability and parents' education level and household income.

and parents' role and education level and household income.

Of the parental role variables, maternal depression and parenting stress are found to be positively related to all three indicators for children's socio-emotional development while parenting stress is positively related to children's negative peer interaction.

Children's negative peer interaction has a strong negative relationship with mothers' high responsiveness and demandingness until 35 to 43 months and with mothers' high responsiveness and low demandingness. Externalized problematic behavior has the strongest negative relation to mothers' high responsiveness and low demandingness after 35 to 43 months, followed by mothers' high responsiveness and demandingness.

Frequency of paternal involvement in child care is irrelevant to early childhood linguistic and socio-emotional development.

In addition, children's internalized and externalized problematic behaviors are negatively related to fathers' high responsiveness and low demandingness after 35 to 43 months. On the other hand, paternal involvement in child care, sufficient home learning materials and safe play space are found to be irrelevant to children's socio-emotional development. Parent-child interaction is negatively related to children's negative peer interaction and externalized problematic behaviors. And parents' education level and household income are irrelevant to all socio-emotional development indicators.

### III . Implications for Parental Roles and Ways to Improve Parental Education

Improving parental roles can reduce the gap between children's linguistic abilities that have been affected by the parent's education levels.

The findings in this analysis highlight the importance of parental roles in early childhood linguistic and socio-emotional development and the following are implications for the desirable parental role.

Early childhood linguistic development is related not only to parents' education level but also to parental roles. This implies that if the parent's education level is hindering their children's early linguistic ability, improving parental style and the home environment could help lower the possibility of transferring the parent's abilities (or lack thereof) to their children. On the other hand, socio-emotional development is unrelated to parents' education level and household income, but related to parental roles, such as maternal depression, parenting stress and style and parent-child interaction. Thus, parental education aimed at enhancing early childhood socio-emotional abilities must be implemented in line with the capability of the parents in their parental roles, not with their socioeconomic status. Meanwhile, linguistic and socio-emotional abilities are unrelated to how frequently fathers are involved in child care, but related to fathers' parental stress and style. This implies that parental education should focus on enhancing the quality of paternal parenting, not the quantity.

Parents' responsiveness, attention and respect for their children's opinions and a reduction in demandingness as the children become older are most beneficial to early childhood linguistic and socio-emotional development. Mothers' consistent high

Parental education should be designed to enhance the quality of paternal parenting, instead of increasing the quantity.

responsiveness and demandingness until 35 to 43 months and low demandingness thereafter were found to have the strongest positive relationship with child development. For fathers, it is high responsiveness and low demandingness after 35 to 43 months.

These findings imply that parental education should be designed to improve maternal depression, parenting stress and style, parent-child interaction and home educational environment. For the healthy growth of children, parents should be capable of caring for them not only on a physical level but also emotional. Parents should provide their children with educational stimuli in accordance with the developmental stage and improve their the ability to communicate from their children's perspective. Only when parents have a proper understanding of the physical and emotional characteristics of each stage of development can they engage in their children's education based on better child-rearing efficacy. Furthermore, parents must recognize that there is a correlation between their behavior and their children's developmental problems, and learn about ways to improve before taking action. This will result in the ability to finding a balance between responsiveness and strictness.

As a part of efforts to promote parental education, the government recently granted uniformed access via "Parenting School" to parental education materials such as booklets and videos that were previously scattered across Health Family Support Centers, Support Center for Childcare, Parents Service Center, etc. However, centers continue to provide independent parental education data and diverse materials on similar themes are handled by different centers, making it difficult for parents to find the right one that meets their child care needs. Accordingly, parental education materials need to be arranged specifically according to the children's age and the parental need so that parents can access the necessary information promptly.

The government is also planning to expand the counselor visiting program in which experts visit vulnerable households and teach parenting skills.<sup>5)</sup> The government's parental education package is now at the incipient stage and its main focus is on preventing severe child abuse and neglect. As such, parents who are not covered by the counselor visiting program may be unaware of any problems in their children's linguistic and socio-emotional development. Moreover, if they do not voluntarily participate in parental education to solve the problems in their children's education, it may be difficult to improve their parenting skills.

An empirical analysis found that children's socio-emotional abilities are irrelevant to parents' social and economic status. So, it is desirable that society, as a whole, pay attention to enhancing parental abilities that includes accurate parenting knowledge and better communication skills. Parents should be given guidance via diverse channels, such as daycare centers, kindergarten, hospitals and community health centers, and informed about the importance of their roles in child development.

**It is most beneficial to the linguistic and socio-emotional development of children when parents maintain responsiveness and are less demanding as their children grow older.**

**It is necessary to increase the use and effectiveness of parental education materials by integrating resources such as booklets and videos at different ministries and providing the necessary knowledge and skills that suit the children's age and respective situations.**

5) Ministry of Health and Welfare, "Complementary Measures with Lessons from Child Abuse Case," press release, Sep. 29, 2016 (in Korean).



**More parental education programs are needed that provide expert counselling and guidance to help parents cope with their respective child care needs and improve their parenting skills.**

In addition, parent support programs should be recommended that can help parents promptly recognize signs of depression, parenting stress and style, home environmental conditions and interaction with children. This will enable them to gain the proper assistance. Indeed, most parental education courses are designed to provide parents with general knowledge on the 'desirable' role of parents. However, such education is most effective when experts can offer small-group counselling sessions to help parents struggling with the same problems and improve their parenting skills (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Thus, it is necessary to provide more parental education programs with expert counselling and guidance to help parents cope with their respective child care needs and improve their parenting skills.

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