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Childcare subsidy receipt and reduced emotional neglect: Examining parents' enhanced self-efficacy as a mediator

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Abstract

Background: Each year 1.5 million children receive childcare subsidized under the Child Care and Development Fund, which supports working parents with low income in affording childcare; such policies hold promise for reducing child neglect.

Objective: The current study sought to examine how receiving childcare subsidies might reduce emotional neglect by supporting working parents' self-efficacy.

Participants and Setting: Data came from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) which oversampled births to unmarried mothers in large U.S. cities. The current study focused on the third wave of the study, when focal children were age three, and when many parents were using childcare.

Methods: The associations between childcare subsidy receipt, parent self-efficacy, and emotional neglect were analyzed with path modeling using a structural equation modeling framework.

Furthermore, we estimated the indirect effect of subsidy receipt on emotional neglect via self-efficacy.

Results: Receipt of the childcare subsidy was significantly associated with decreased emotional neglect ($b = -1.24, p = .045$) and increased parent self-efficacy ($b = .16, p = .004$). Self-efficacy was significantly associated with decreased emotional neglect ($b = -1.27, p < .001$). The path model results showed a significant mediating effect of self-efficacy on the link between receipt of the childcare subsidy and emotional neglect ($b = -.20, p = .01$).

Conclusions: The present study highlights the potential for increasing access to affordable, high-quality childcare to improve parent and child well-being. Subsidies that increase access to high-quality childcare can benefit both mothers and children.

Keywords

emotional neglect; childcare subsidies; self-efficacy; maltreatment

Child maltreatment is a significant public health concern. In the U.S., there were 4.3 million referrals of suspected abuse and neglect involving 7.5 million children in fiscal year 2022 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024). Of the 558,899 substantiated victims of abuse and neglect in 2022, over 74% of victims experienced neglect, compared to only 17% of victims who were physically abused. Despite neglect being the most common form of maltreatment found within the child welfare system in the U.S., the majority of child maltreatment prevention strategies have focused on addressing abuse. Such prevention strategies often operate at the micro-level, focusing on individual parents or family systems, without considering the broader contexts that impede responsive, attentive caregiving (Bullinger et al., 2020). Macro-level policies hold much promise for reducing child neglect, and recent calls for making substantial changes to reduce child maltreatment have explicitly advanced a need for examining the impacts of policies on families (Bullinger et al., 2020).

One such policy includes the provision of subsidized childcare for low-income families (Healy & Dunifon, 2014). Childcare is an essential context in which children spend much of their time. It provides substantial benefits for parents, including providing a safe and enriching environment for children, allowing parents to work or attend school, and offering respite from the physical and emotional demands of caring for young children. Although childcare is an essential context for both children and their working parents, the cost of high-quality care limits parental access. In 2022, the average annual cost of center-based childcare was over \$13,000 per child for infants and over \$10,000 per child for four-year-olds (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2024). The high cost of childcare throughout the U.S. (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2024) forces many low-income families to rely on informal childcare arrangements, which can be less reliable and lack quality control (Weber et al., 2018), or forgo childcare arrangements altogether.

The U.S. government recognized this barrier to work and in 1998 established the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) to provide subsidized childcare for low-income families (Healy & Dunifon, 2014). Funds for childcare subsidies are provided to states in the form of

a block grant, meaning that states have discretion to create their own qualification criteria for subsidy receipt. Parents who meet income and work requirements for subsidies can receive assistance in paying for childcare, with the specific mechanism by which the assistance is provided being determined by states (e.g., in some states, parents receive a direct voucher to use at a childcare center, while other states reimburse the centers directly).

Working parents with low income face a variety of stressors, having to meet the demands of both their home life and professional life. Reliable and high-quality childcare may serve as a protective factor for families in a multitude of ways (Maguire-Jack et al., 2022). First, when parents know they have a reliable setting to take their children to and can complete their work tasks while their children are cared for and supported, it may reduce the stress they experience when working. Prior work has found that when childcare is not reliable and consistent, there is a higher risk of both abuse and neglect (Ha et al., 2015). Second, receipt of subsidies has been associated with an increased likelihood of enrollment in high-quality, center-based childcare programs (Ertas & Shields, 2012). When the childcare setting is high quality, parents' stress may be further reduced, and they may have increased confidence that they are meeting their child's needs (Press et al., 2006). Third, parents may be exposed to prosocial parenting norms from childcare teachers with expertise in this area and other parents who have children at similar developmental stages to their children. Fourth, childcare may serve as a respite time for parents. Given the potentially protective impact of childcare, subsidies to increase access to childcare may reduce child maltreatment (Maguire-Jack et al., 2022).

Childcare Subsidies and Risk for Child Maltreatment

A limited body of work has revealed somewhat mixed findings on the link between childcare subsidy receipt and child maltreatment (e.g., Herbst & Tekin, 2014; Maguire-Jack et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019). Two studies have found a uniformly protective effect of childcare subsidies against child maltreatment, with one using administrative measures of both childcare subsidy receipt and child maltreatment and another relying on self-report for both measures (Maguire-Jack et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019). These studies focused on low-income samples and used careful criteria to select families considered income-eligible for childcare subsidies. Related work using national child maltreatment data has found that states with more generous childcare subsidy policies that reduce barriers to receipt – higher income eligibility and lower work requirements – had lower rates of child maltreatment (Klika et al., 2023; Maguire-Jack et al., 2023).

On the other hand, Herbst and Tekin (2014) found that childcare subsidy receipt was associated with higher levels of self-reported physical and psychological aggression. The contradictory findings from this study may be driven by sample selection. Specifically, this study did not account for income level. Because childcare subsidy is a means-tested program, only those with lower income are eligible to receive it. The current study specifically selected the sample based on those who were income-eligible for childcare subsidies, following the procedures by Maguire-Jack and colleagues (2019).

While most studies have examined the relationships between childcare subsidies and physical abuse, physical neglect, or emotional abuse, far fewer have sought to clarify the potential impact of childcare subsidy receipt on emotional neglect. In broad terms, neglect is a complex construct that is often challenging in practice to pinpoint. Child welfare workers often look for a pattern of behaviors and circumstances to guide decision-making. Neglect refers to the failure of a caregiver to meet a child's basic needs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022). Young children are at the most significant risk for neglect (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024), as they depend on their primary caregiver to meet most of their daily needs.

State definitions surrounding neglect vary, with 49 states having a definition involving a failure to provide necessities such as food and clothing, 48 including abandonment, 48 including medical neglect, 45 including a failure to supervise the child, 39 including a failure to protect a child, 36 including exposure to drugs or chemicals, 35 including educational neglect, 21 including parental incapacities such as mental illness, disability, incarceration, and hospitalization, 17 including a harmful environment, and 15 including parental substance abuse (Casey Family Programs, 2023). Many of these subcategories are vague, such as "a failure to provide a 'stable home environment'" constituting neglect in Idaho. While perhaps even less easily distinguished than other forms of neglect, emotional neglect constitutes a significant and unique risk to the fundamental developmental needs of children.

Emotional neglect involves the "failure to meet children's emotional needs, and includes, for example, the failure to provide adequate nurturance and affection" (Stoltenborgh et al., 2012, p. 346). Although many state definitions of neglect include a reference to children's emotional needs generally, they typically do not provide specific guidance around how to objectively assess this form of neglect (Casey Family Programs, 2023). Despite the difficulty in defining and identifying emotional neglect by child welfare agencies, the phenomenon has significant impacts on child victims (Strathearn et al., 2020). Emotional neglect has been linked to attachment problems (Cyr et al., 2010; Strathearn, 2011), impaired emotion recognition and regulation (Jaffee, 2017), and even accelerated biological aging (Chang et al., 2024). Children who are emotionally neglected are at a greater risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation (Loos & Alexander, 1997), as well as depression (Hanson et al., 2015) and other psychiatric disorders (Young et al., 2011), including self-harm and suicidal ideation (Lipschitz et al., 1999).

Parent Self-Efficacy as a Buffer to Emotional Neglect

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' "perceptions of their capability to execute the actions necessary to achieve a desired goal" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 314). Self-efficacy theory suggests that an individual's perception of their self-efficacy impacts their choice of activities, the effort they expend, and how long they will persist in the face of adversity (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Self-efficacy related specifically to parenting, in terms of a parent's feelings about their ability to meet their child's needs, has been found to have positive impacts on parenting behaviors, such as greater use of monitoring (Dumka et al., 2010), lower reported laxness and over-reactivity (Sanders & Woolley, 2005), lower levels of parenting stress

(Bloomfield & Kendall, 2012), and less coercive parenting (Bor & Sanders, 2004). Parenting self-efficacy is also related to lower rates of depression (Barnett et al., 2015; Gross & Marcussen, 2017; Gross et al., 1994), anxiety (Don et al., 2014), and psychological distress (Giallo et al., 2013).

Although most studies on parenting and self-efficacy use a specific measure of self-efficacy within the context of parenting, more general measures of self-efficacy (e.g., Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) are also related to child neglect across administrative data and self-report measures (Slack et al., 2011). Parents who have high levels of self-efficacy may especially be less likely to report that they are too caught up in their problems to show love and affection to their children because, by having higher levels of perceived self-efficacy, they may feel more empowered and in control of their parenting, and thus may be more likely to make efforts to engage in emotionally nurturing behaviors with their children.

The Link Between Childcare Subsidies and Emotional Neglect: Self-Efficacy as a Potential Mechanism

Prior theoretical work has hypothesized the pathway through which childcare subsidies relate to child maltreatment, suggesting that improved parenting skills and knowledge, reductions in parenting stress, and increased income and access to basic needs may be important mediators (Maguire-Jack et al., 2022). Only one prior study has examined mediators of these relationships and found that increased working hours, household income, decreased childcare concerns, and decreased parental stress were not mediators of the relationship between childcare subsidy receipt and the likelihood of being reported for concerns of physical abuse or neglect (Yang et al., 2019). However, this study did not consider emotional neglect, and therefore, our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the potential link between childcare subsidies and reduced emotional neglect among families with low income remains limited.

Caring for young children without help may leave parents burnt out (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2020) and unable to engage in warm, responsive parenting (Griffith, 2022; Mikolajczak et al., 2019). Without access to reliable childcare, parents may experience frequent and unplanned absences from work, necessitating extra shifts or bringing work home that further impedes their ability to tend to children's emotional needs. Drawing from Belsky's (1984) determinants of parenting model, the two most important factors believed to shape parenting are the personal psychological resources of the parent, and contextual stressors and supports available to the parent. In line with this view, childcare subsidies may serve to provide both greater psychological and contextual support to parents by reducing stress associated with not having help with childcare, as well as the financial burden of using childcare. In this manner, parents may have the flexibility to organize their lives in a way that aligns with their values and goals – including the ability to contribute financially, advance their careers, and gain more financial freedom in their parenting and other lifestyle decisions – thereby garnering a bolstered sense of self-efficacy.

In turn, parents with higher self-efficacy are expected to feel more in command of their capacity to demonstrate warmth and affection in interactions with their children. This may

amplify and sustain parents' ability to not only meet their children's basic emotional needs, but to do so in a manner that promotes positive child development. Thus, the current study sought to understand whether childcare subsidies were related to reduced emotional neglect and whether parents' self-efficacy mediated this relationship. We hypothesize that childcare subsidies might increase the amount of control a parent feels over their own life; receiving a childcare subsidy, in theory, increases access to high-quality childcare, reduces stress associated with finding a safe place for children to be while parents are working, and increases income potential. This increase in self-efficacy, in turn, is hypothesized to reduce emotional neglect by opening time and mental space for the parent to engage with their child in an emotionally nurturing manner.

Purpose of the Current Study

Although prior research has found a protective impact of childcare subsidies on child maltreatment (Maguire-Jack et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019), few have examined the pathways through which receipt of childcare subsidy is related to maltreatment risk, and no prior study has examined the mechanisms underlying its potential link with emotional neglect. Further, although self-efficacy is related to neglect risk (Slack et al., 2011) and acts as a mediator between macro-level neighborhood factors and child maltreatment (Guterman et al., 2009), it has not been considered a mediator between childcare subsidies and emotional neglect among families with low income. The current study sought to contribute to the growing body of literature examining childcare subsidies as an important component of the child maltreatment prevention continuum by exploring the following research questions: (1) Does receipt of a childcare subsidy decrease the risk of emotional neglect? and (2) Does parents' self-efficacy mediate the link between childcare subsidy receipt and emotional neglect?

Methods

Participants and Procedure

All data and measures came from the core Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), an ongoing longitudinal birth cohort study of 4,898 families across 20 large U.S. cities. Parents were surveyed at the time of the birth of the focal child (between 1998 and 2000) and again at child ages one, three, five, nine, 15, and 22. The current study focused on the third wave of the study, when focal children were age three, and when many parents were using childcare. State childcare subsidy income eligibility requirements were drawn from CCDF Reports to Congress (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2003) and matched to the mother's state of residence at the time the focal child was three years old. Childcare subsidies were established under the federal CCDF as a block grant to states. As a block grant, states have the flexibility to determine eligibility standards, including household income. In 2003, for a family of three, the median amount of annual income a family could have and remain eligible was \$28,632 across the U.S., ranging from \$17,784 in Missouri to \$53,772 in Alaska (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2003).

Because the present study concerns childcare subsidy receipt, we dropped all participants who did not meet the income eligibility requirements for childcare subsidy in wave three (n

= 1,346 families), were not in the wave ($n = 667$), or were missing the location identifier ($n = 34$). We then dropped cases that did not participate in the third parent/caregiver interview wave ($n = 598$), or the biological mother was not the known respondent to the parent/caregiver interview ($n = 97$). Given that children in Head Start are likely to be receiving free services that may have similar outcomes to childcare subsidies, we next dropped cases in which mothers reported that their child was currently being cared for by someone other than herself or the father, that someone gives them money to help pay for childcare, and that the source of that funding was Head Start or Early Head Start ($n = 4$). This yielded a subsample of 2,152 families.

Measures

Emotional Neglect: Emotional neglect was assessed via parent self-report on one item from the Conflict Tactics Scale–Parent–Child Version (CTS-PC; Straus & Hamby, 1997). This question was: “Tell me how many times in the past year you were so caught up with your problems that you could not show or tell your child that you loved him/her.” The response options for this variable and the associated coding were *never* or *not in the past year* (0), *once* (1), *twice* (2), *3–5 times* (4), *6–10 times* (8), *11–20 times* (15), and *more than 20 times* (25). The associated codes applied were as recommended by the scale developer (Straus & Hamby, 1997) to give an overall frequency of emotional neglect occurring.

Childcare Subsidy Receipt: Childcare subsidy receipt was coded dichotomously. It was determined through mothers’ responses to three self-report questions. Mothers were asked if their child was currently being cared for by someone other than herself or the father, if someone gives them money to help pay for childcare, and whether the source of that funding was a government agency. Mothers who reported “yes” to all three of those questions were given an initial code of “1” for subsidy receipt, and those who reported “no” to any of those questions were coded as “0.” Mothers initially coded as “1” who also reported paying \$0 out-of-pocket for childcare (not taking into account any cost reductions due to receiving money from another person or agency) were subsequently dropped from the sample ($n = 163$).

Self-Efficacy: Self-efficacy was determined through five questions asking about parents’ perceptions of personal control. These items came from a mastery scale as part of a more extensive study on coping (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). They include: (1) “I have little control over the things that happen to me”; (2) “There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have”; (3) “There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life”; (4) “I often feel helpless in dealing with problems”; and (5) “Sometimes I feel that I am being pushed around.” Responses are ranked on a four-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” such that a higher score indicated greater self-efficacy, and scores from all five items were averaged to create a mean score. The interitem reliability for this scale was $\alpha = .81$.

Control Variables: We controlled for a variety of demographic and psychosocial characteristics that have been found in prior research to be associated with emotional maltreatment (Dube et al., 2001; Marçal et al., 2023; Windham et al., 2004). This included

the number of hours per week the child was in childcare across all types of nonparental care arrangements. Hours in childcare were reported from mothers or were assigned a value of zero if mothers reported no use of nonparental childcare. Maternal depression at child age three was assessed using the Composite International Diagnostic Index–Short Version (CIDI-SF; Kessler et al., 1998). We used a dichotomous indicator relying on conservative criteria for diagnosis, which states that respondents had some symptoms at least half the day and almost every day for two weeks (Walters et al., 2002). Maternal alcohol dependence was measured dichotomously at child age three from the CIDI-SF (Kessler et al., 1998). Income-to-poverty ratio was drawn from a constructed variable from mothers' reports at wave three. Maternal education (*less than high school* as reference category, *high school or equivalent*, and *some college or more*), employment status in the past year (measured dichotomously; 1 = employed, 0 = unemployed), mothers' marital status with child's father (measured dichotomously; 1 = married, 0 = single), and number of children in the household were also measured at wave three. The CTS-PC (Straus & Hamby, 1997) at age three was used to assess other types of maltreatment: physical assault (four items), emotional abuse (five items), and physical neglect (four items). Summed scores were constructed using midpoints of the response options: *never or not in the past year* (0), *once* (1), *twice* (2), *3–5 times* (4), *6–10 times* (8), *11–20 times* (15), and *more than 20 times* (25). Responses with two or more unanswered items were coded as missing. Three demographic variables were derived from the wave one survey at the time of the birth of the child, including child sex (measured dichotomously; 1 = male; 0 = female), mothers' race (*non-Hispanic White* as reference category, *non-Hispanic Black*, *Hispanic*, and *other race*), and state of birth (*Wisconsin* as reference category).

Analytic Approach

Data were cleaned and analyzed in Stata version 17.0 (StataCorp, 2023). Because the dependent variable (i.e., emotional neglect) was measured in reference to the past year, whereas the independent variable (i.e., childcare subsidy receipt) was measured in reference to the past month, it was possible that for some families in the childcare subsidy group, the onset of childcare subsidy receipt occurred after their reports of emotional neglect. To minimize this possibility, we dropped families in the childcare subsidy group who could be reasonably assumed to have not been receiving childcare subsidies during the past year ($n = 39$). These families were identified as those who reported that their child's age when they started childcare was less than or equal to 12 months from the child's age when the mother survey was administered (and subsidy receipt was measured). Missing data were handled using listwise deletion, resulting in an analytic sample of 1,871 families.

The associations between childcare subsidy receipt, self-efficacy, and emotional neglect were analyzed with path modeling using a generalized structural equation modeling framework (see Figure 1). The direct link from subsidy receipt to the mediator, self-efficacy, was estimated using ordinary least squares linear regression; due to the count nature and overdispersion of the outcome, direct links from both subsidy receipt and self-efficacy to emotional neglect were modeled using negative binomial regression. The outcome variable, emotional neglect, was regressed on all control variables. Furthermore, we estimated the indirect effect of subsidy receipt on emotional neglect via self-efficacy to test the hypothesis

that subsidies give parents more control over their lives (e.g., finances and schedules), thus making them better able to show love toward their children.

Results

Descriptive statistics of all study variables are presented in Table 1. The sample was majority non-Hispanic Black (51%, followed by Hispanic [33%] and non-Hispanic White [13%]) and unmarried to the child's father (78%). The largest share of the sample had less than a high school degree (37%), followed by some college or higher (33%), and a high school degree or equivalent (30%). Fisher's exact chi-square tests were conducted to determine if there were any significant group differences between childcare subsidy recipients and non-subsidy recipients on demographic characteristics. Results showed that there were significant group differences in marital status, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,871) = 11.49, p < .001$, education level, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,871) = 23.81, p < .001$, employment status, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,871) = 53.04, p < .001$, and race/ethnicity, $\chi^2(3, N = 1,871) = 40.88, p < .001$. Additionally, while 43% of non-subsidy recipients utilized nonparental forms of childcare and 57% of non-subsidy recipient parents cared for children themselves, all subsidy recipients used nonparental forms of childcare.

Results from the path model can be found in Table 2. Because the model did not include any latent variables, it was fully identified, and thus model fit indices were irrelevant. The following direct and indirect path analysis results supported our hypotheses. Receipt of the childcare subsidy was directly and significantly associated with increased self-efficacy ($b = .16, p = .004$) and decreased emotional neglect ($b = -1.24, p = .045$). Self-efficacy was significantly associated with decreased emotional neglect ($b = -1.27, p < .001$). Regarding covariates with statistically significant associations with emotional neglect, having a male child was significantly associated with greater emotional neglect ($b = .75, p = .007$). In addition, both physical neglect ($b = .36, p = .001$) and emotional abuse ($b = .03, p < .001$) were significantly associated with greater emotional neglect.

The path model results showed a significant mediating effect of self-efficacy on the link between receipt of the childcare subsidy and emotional neglect ($b = -.20, p = .01$). Still, the total effect remained significant ($b = -1.44, p = .021$), indicating that self-efficacy was a partial mediator of the inverse association observed between childcare subsidy receipt and emotional neglect.

Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between childcare subsidy receipt and emotional neglect, and whether this link functioned in part through self-efficacy. It was hypothesized that receiving childcare subsidies would improve mothers' perceptions of control over their finances and schedules, translating to mothers being more present and able to show love towards their children. Findings supported this hypothesis; childcare subsidy receipt was indeed associated with less emotional neglect of children. This link suggests that access to affordable childcare can give parents of young children respite from the heavy physical and emotional demands of caring for young children, potentially promoting maternal mental health and healthy parent-child interactions (Swit & Breen, 2023). Our

findings converge with earlier research suggesting that access to affordable childcare may reduce the risk of maltreatment (Ha et al., 2015; Maguire-Jack et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019).

Moreover, our findings extend knowledge of the mechanisms for the inverse relationship between childcare subsidy receipt and emotional neglect of children. Notably, mothers' self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between childcare subsidy receipt and emotional neglect. Subsidies likely allowed low-income mothers more control over their time and schedules, including opportunities to work uninterrupted in addition to getting breaks from the challenges of caring for young children (Mistry et al., 2007). In line with previous research that has examined the role of self-efficacy in supporting positive parenting practices (e.g., Dumka et al., 2010; Sanders & Woolley, 2005), our findings also suggest that an increased sense of self-efficacy appeared to alleviate parents' sense of difficulty demonstrating warmth and affection towards their children.

Several other factors exacerbated the risk of emotional neglect. Mothers who engaged in other types of maltreatment, including physical neglect and emotional abuse, were more likely to also engage in emotional neglect. The co-occurrence of these maltreatment types may point to mothers who lack both the material and emotional bandwidth to meet young children's needs. Indeed, prior work has suggested that children at risk for one type of maltreatment (e.g., emotional neglect) often face increased risk for another form of maltreatment (e.g., physical neglect; Jonson-Reid et al., 2003), especially in the context of the myriad challenges experienced by parents with low income. Emotional abuse may co-occur with emotional neglect (i.e., psychological maltreatment) among mothers with existing mental health problems or overwhelming work commitments that may increase the likelihood of hostile or inconsistent parent-child interactions (Glaser, 2002). Interestingly, we also found that male children were more likely to experience emotional neglect compared to female children. This may suggest that our measure of emotional neglect (i.e., unable to show love toward child), reflects differences in mothers' expression of warmth toward male children. This possibility is supported by some studies that have found that boys report lower levels of maternal affection than girls (Murphy et al., 2010). Future research should examine if there is a relationship between child gender and alternative measures of emotional neglect (e.g., insensitivity, unresponsiveness).

Implications

Several policy implications arise from the present findings. The CCDF, which is funded by the federal government and administered by states, subsidizes childcare for approximately 1.4 million children (Administration for Children and Families, 2019). Nevertheless, the childcare cost burden for low-income families with young children across the country remains high (Hardy & Park, 2022). The block grant rather than entitlement structure of the CCDF means that once the fund is depleted, remaining eligible families are unable to receive assistance; in 2020, only one in seven eligible children (14.1%) received subsidies (Government Accountability Office, 2021) leaving the vast majority of low-income families without assistance. Significantly broader funding for the CCDF would allow many more families in need to access high-quality childcare and experience the potential benefits to both

mothers and children. The costs of child maltreatment, which can exceed \$100 billion per year (Gelles & Perlman, 2012), far outstrip current funding for the CCDF (Administration for Children and Families, 2023). Increased funding for subsidized childcare to support low-income families may benefit children and families directly and have broad economic benefits by keeping mothers in the workforce, boosting productivity, and reducing the economic burden driven by neglect.

Limitations

Our findings must be considered in light of study limitations. First, our study limited survey respondents to mothers. Men also may take the primary role in providing childcare (Lee et al., 2020) and the effects of subsidy receipt on emotional neglect and explanatory mechanisms may differ for families in which men are the primary caregivers. Second, emotional neglect was measured using a single item. Although this item came from a widely used and validated measurement tool for child maltreatment (Straus & Hamby, 1997), it may not have captured the full range of ways parents may address young children's emotional needs. Our measurement of subsidy receipt also did not allow us to verify if a family received a CCDF-funded subsidy; it is possible that our findings speak more broadly to parents receiving some kind of assistance paying for childcare. Additionally, while efforts were made to address potential issues of temporality in terms of childcare subsidy receipt and the timing of emotional neglect, the cross-sectional nature of our data underscores that future work is needed to test this mediation model in a longitudinal framework to examine the directionality of these findings. Third, due to a high degree of missing data, we did not have reliable information to examine the amount of subsidy received; it is possible that variability in the amount of care subsidized affected its association with mothers' self-efficacy and emotional neglect. Fourth, the FFCWS data used in this study does not capture the dramatic ways in which the early childcare and education landscape has changed in the past two decades, including major expansions in state-funded pre-kindergarten. It would be important for future studies to examine these relationships in the current policy context, ideally with administrative data on the amount and timing of subsidies received.

Conclusions

The present study highlights the potential for increasing access to affordable, high-quality childcare to improve parent and child well-being. Providing mothers with the opportunity to stay involved in the workforce and get respite from the demands of parenting may improve their sense of self-efficacy and their ability to meet the emotional needs of their young children. Subsidies that increase access to high-quality childcare can benefit both parents and children.

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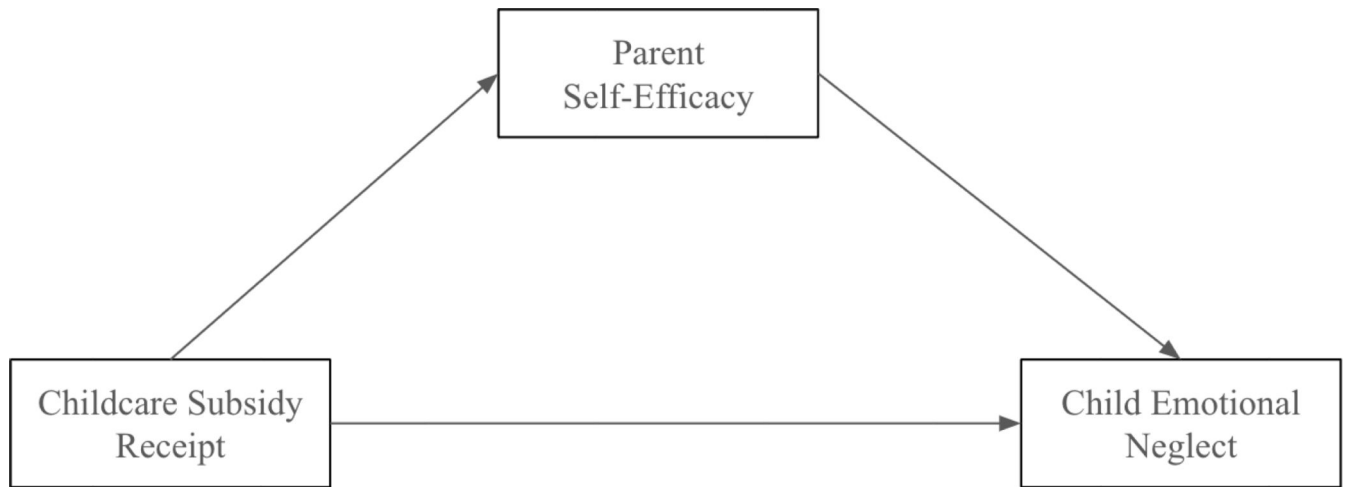


Figure 1.
Analytic Model of Childcare Subsidy Receipt Predicting Emotional Neglect via Parent Self-Efficacy

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables in Analytic Sample

Variable	<i>M (SD) or n (%)</i>		
	Subsidy Recipients (<i>n</i> = 155)	Non-Subsidy Recipients (<i>n</i> = 1,716)	Total Subsidy Eligible (<i>n</i> = 1,871)
Use Nonparental Care	155 (100%)	737 (43%)	892 (48%)
Emotional Neglect	0.09 (0.73)	0.50 (2.57)	0.46 (2.48)
Parent Self-Efficacy	2.47 (0.63)	2.31 (0.67)	2.32 (0.66)
Child Sex			
Male	92 (59%)	876 (51%)	968 (52%)
Female	63 (41%)	840 (49%)	903 (48%)
Maternal Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White	12 (8%)	236 (14%)	248 (13%)
Non-Hispanic Black	117 (75%)	844 (49%)	961 (51%)
Hispanic	22 (14%)	592 (35%)	614 (33%)
Other race/ethnicity	4 (3%)	44 (3%)	48 (3%)
Mother's Relationship to Father			
Married	18 (12%)	403 (23%)	421 (23%)
Single	137 (88%)	1,313 (77%)	1,450 (78%)
Maternal Educational Level			
Less than high school	30 (19%)	663 (39%)	693 (37%)
High school or equivalent	55 (35%)	511 (30%)	566 (30%)
Some college or higher	70 (45%)	542 (32%)	612 (33%)
Maternal Employment Status			
Employed	151 (97%)	1,203 (70%)	1,354 (72%)
Unemployed	4 (3%)	513 (30%)	517 (28%)
Maternal Depression	24 (15%)	272 (16%)	296 (16%)
Maternal Alcohol Dependence	0 (0%)	4 (< 1%)	4 (< 1%)
Number of Children in Household	2.50 (1.28)	2.58 (1.45)	2.57 (1.43)
Income-to-Poverty Ratio	0.94 (0.55)	0.87 (0.61)	0.88 (0.61)
Hours in Childcare	36.01 (11.41)	12.23 (17.23)	14.20 (18.06)
Other Maltreatment			
Physical Abuse	20.21 (19.85)	14.94 (18.10)	15.38 (18.31)

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Variable	M (SD) or n (%)			Total Subsidy Eligible (n = 1,871)
	Subsidy Recipients (n = 155)	Non-Subsidy Recipients (n = 1,716)		
Physical Neglect	0.20 (2.02)	0.36 (2.93)	0.35 (2.86)	
Emotional Abuse	28.01 (20.22)	23.90 (20.30)	24.24 (20.32)	

Table 2
Results of Path Model Testing Direct and Indirect Pathways from Childcare Subsidy Receipt to Emotional Neglect via Parent Self-Efficacy

	Direct Effect		Indirect Effect		Total Effect	
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI
Parent Self-Efficacy						
Childcare Subsidy Receipt	0.16**	(0.05, 0.27)				
Emotional Neglect						
Childcare Subsidy Receipt	-1.24*	(-2.46, -0.03)	-0.20*	(-0.36, -0.05)		
Parent Self-Efficacy	-1.27***	(-1.69, -0.85)			-1.44*	(-2.67, -0.22)

Note.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$. CI = Confidence Interval.