Welcome to the eighth issue of New Developments, an e-newsletter from SRI International’s Center for Education and Human Services. Earlier issues are available on our website. In this issue, we highlight findings from a recently published research article exploring families of children with disabilities.

Effects of Child Disability on Families

For more than 25 years, SRI has designed and conducted several large-scale national studies for the U.S. Department of Education on the characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of children and youth with disabilities. SRI has used the data generated by these studies to answer some of the most pressing questions about how to best support positive development of children and youth with disabilities.

For example, little is known about the effect of having a child with a disability on the child’s family over time. In particular, it remains unclear what happens to families of young children with disabilities as those children become adolescents. Does the child’s disability increase burden and strain on the family over time? Or does the family better adapt with time, resulting in a strengthened and stable family situation as the child gets older?

In November 2010, SRI researchers published an online article in Maternal and Child Health Journal, which considered the impact of a child’s disability and health status on family experiences, specifically, parents’ marital status, mother’s employment, and receipt of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Researchers analyzed data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), a nationally representative study of over 11,000 children ages 6-12 in 12 disabilities categories. The study was initiated in 2000 and followed the children over three time periods. This article considered both children’s and families’ experiences in 2000 and how their experiences changed by 2004.

Selected Findings

Findings show that certain disability characteristics in children impact the entire family over time.

- Parents of children with emotional disturbances were 81% more likely to get divorced, compared to the reference group* between 2000 and 2004.
- Families of children with emotional disturbances also had 2.5 times greater odds of being enrolled in TANF compared with families of children in the reference group 4 years later.
- Mothers of children identified with more than one disability were 81% more likely to become [or continue to be] unemployed than mothers of children identified with one disability 4 years later.
- These differences were found after controlling for child’s age, gender, ethnicity, parents’ education level, family income, number of children in family and whether those other children also have disabilities, as well as parents’ marital status, employment, and household TANF in 2000 (baseline).

* The reference group was comprised of children with learning disabilities who were much more similar to typically developing children than children in the more serious disability groups to which they were compared.

Implications of Findings

- Clinicians, educators, and policymakers need to be aware of the complex needs of families of children with disabilities and the emotional and economic stresses they face.
- Providing family-centered resources to children with disability types that experience the greatest hardships would substantially improve the lives of these children and their families.


For more information about SEELS, visit our website at www.seels.net.

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