

Abstract: Profiles of Family Strengths Among Early Head Start Caregivers and Associations with Young Children's Socio-Emotional Well-Being (Society for Social Work and Research 30th Annual Conference Anniversary)



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Profiles of Family Strengths Among Early Head Start Caregivers and Associations with Young Children's Socio-Emotional Well-Being

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* noted as presenting author

* **Yujeong Chang, MSW**, PhD Student, Ohio State University, OH
 Erin Tebben, PhD, Associate Director of Research, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
 Taylor Napier, PhD, Postdoctoral Scholar, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
 Minjung Kim, PhD, Assistant Professor, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
 Sarah Lang, PhD, Assistant Professor, Ohio State University
 Susan Yoon, PhD, Associate Professor, The Ohio State University, OH

Background and Purpose: Young children from families experiencing poverty are disproportionately vulnerable to social-emotional difficulties. Early Head Start (EHS) programs serve children from families with low income, aiming to support children's holistic development and family well-being. Traditional deficit-based approaches often overlook the strengths and resilience demonstrated by families from marginalized communities. Despite growing recognition of the value of bolstering existing familial strengths, such as parent-child closeness and strong social support, few studies have identified underlying patterns of family strengths within an EHS context or examined their association with child well-being. Guided by resilience theory and ecological systems theory, this study employed a strengths-based lens to (1) identify distinct strengths-based profiles among EHS families, and (2) examine associations between profiles and children's social-emotional functioning.

Methods: We used data from the 2022 *Early Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey*, a nationally representative dataset of families participating in home-based and center-based EHS programming. The analytic sample included 886 home-based and 575 center-based families. Eight constructs were included as primary indicators of family strengths (parent-child closeness [CPRS-SF], parent-child interactions [HFPI], social support [HFPI], parental calm [PSI-4-SF], mental well-being [CESD-R], orderly home environment [CHAOS], and parent- and staff-reported involvement in EHS). Children's social-emotional competence and behavioral functioning (BITSEA) served as distal outcomes. Using Factor Mixture Modeling, we first separately identified best-fitting latent profile models for families participating in home- and center-based programming. Next, we compared children's outcomes (e.g., social-emotional competence, behavioral functioning) and tested the equality of means across profiles using the Bolck-Croon-Hagenaars method.

Results: We found three distinct family strength profiles for each service model (home-based, center-based). Among home-based families, profiles consisted of 1) *Strained Parent-Child Relationships* (17.2%); 2) *Emotionally Distressed* (8.4%); and 3) *High Strengths and Engagement* (74.5%). Among center-based families, profiles included: 1) *Emotionally Distressed with Low Engagement* (7.5%); 2) *High Engagement* (25.4%), and 3) *High Strengths, Low Engagement* (67.1%). For both home-based and center-based families, the *High Strengths and Engagement* profiles (Home-based: *High Strengths and Engagement*; Center-based: *High Strengths, Low Engagement*) had significantly better parent-reported child outcomes, including higher social-emotional competence ($m_{Home/Center}=18.15/18.93$ [$R = 0-22$]) and lower problem behavior ratings ($m_{Home/Center} = 9.15/8.54$ [$R = 0-50$]), compared to the other profiles ($p < .001$). Additionally, for home-based families, staff-reported child social-emotional competence was significantly higher in the *High Strengths and Engagement* profile ($m = 16.48$ [$R = 0-22$]) than in the *Strained Parent-Child Relationships* profile ($p < .001$). No significant differences were found in other profile comparisons.

Conclusions and Implications: Our findings revealed distinct profiles of family strengths in both home- and center-based EHS models, with most families falling into *High Strengths* profiles. These findings challenge deficit-based assumptions about low-income families and demonstrate that most EHS caregivers exhibit substantial relational, emotional, and program-engagement strengths. Importantly, children in the *High Strengths* groups also consistently demonstrated positive socio-emotional outcomes, suggesting that these multidimensional strengths are developmentally meaningful. Findings reinforce the importance of redefining low-income families through a strengths-based lens, creating opportunities for transformative practice that reflects families' lived realities and builds on existing capacities.

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