

PARENTAL SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL READINESS, PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT, AND CHILDREN'S ACADEMIC SKILLS DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD

The current investigation tests a conceptual model (see Figure 1) that links parents' support of their children's school readiness and enrollment of their children in preschool. We also pay special attention to children's development of skills that will prepare them for achievement when they enter formal schooling. Drawing on central tenets of the developmental systems perspective (Lerner, 2006), this model captures the interplay of parenting behavior and children's preschool enrollment while highlighting "child effects", or the potential for children to elicit parental investment (e.g. investment, extracurricular activities, home resources) and to select into preschool through their own skills and competencies (or lack thereof). We also tested whether these micro-level processes were embedded within socioeconomic and cultural contexts that affect the opportunities that children have and how parents react to and manage them.

To address these points, we conducted structural equation modeling of data from 6,250 two- to five-year old children (41% White, 20% Latino/a, 16% Black, 11% Asian, and 12% other race/ethnicity) and parents in the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). Although missing data were minimal, we estimated this model based on 50 imputed datasets, with the final estimates derived from the average coefficients across these datasets.

After adjusting for covariates, weights, and clustering, we found that parental support for school readiness fostered children's academic skills ($\beta = .10, p < .01$), which in turn, were associated with their likelihood of preschool attendance ($\beta = .21, p < .001$). Preschool experience then promoted children's early academic competencies during the following year ($\beta = .03, p < .05$), which appeared to further facilitate parental support ($\beta = .24, p < .001$). There was also evidence for indirect effects (mediation) whereby care-related changes in children's early academic skills elicited changes in parenting ($\beta_{indirect} = .007, p < .05$), and parent-related changes in children's academic skills were associated with increased odds of preschool attendance ($\beta_{indirect} = .02, p < .01$).

After taking into account measurement equivalence, we found that these processes were not moderated by parental education but did vary by parents' nativity status (moderation results are *not* shown in Figure 1). Specifically, foreign-born parents' support for early learning was directly linked with preschool enrollment ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), and the academic skills of children elicited greater investment from foreign-born parents ($\beta = .35, p < .001$) than their native-born peers ($\beta = .18, p < .001$).

The findings from this study provide a new conceptualization of the transactional relations among parental support for school readiness, preschool enrollment, and children's academic skill formation during this increasingly critical developmental period and also highlight how children are drivers of such systemic transactions. This conceptualization has practical value in that it suggests that positive program effects for children, if intense enough, can be translated to improvements in parenting and parents' support for school readiness.

Word Count: 484

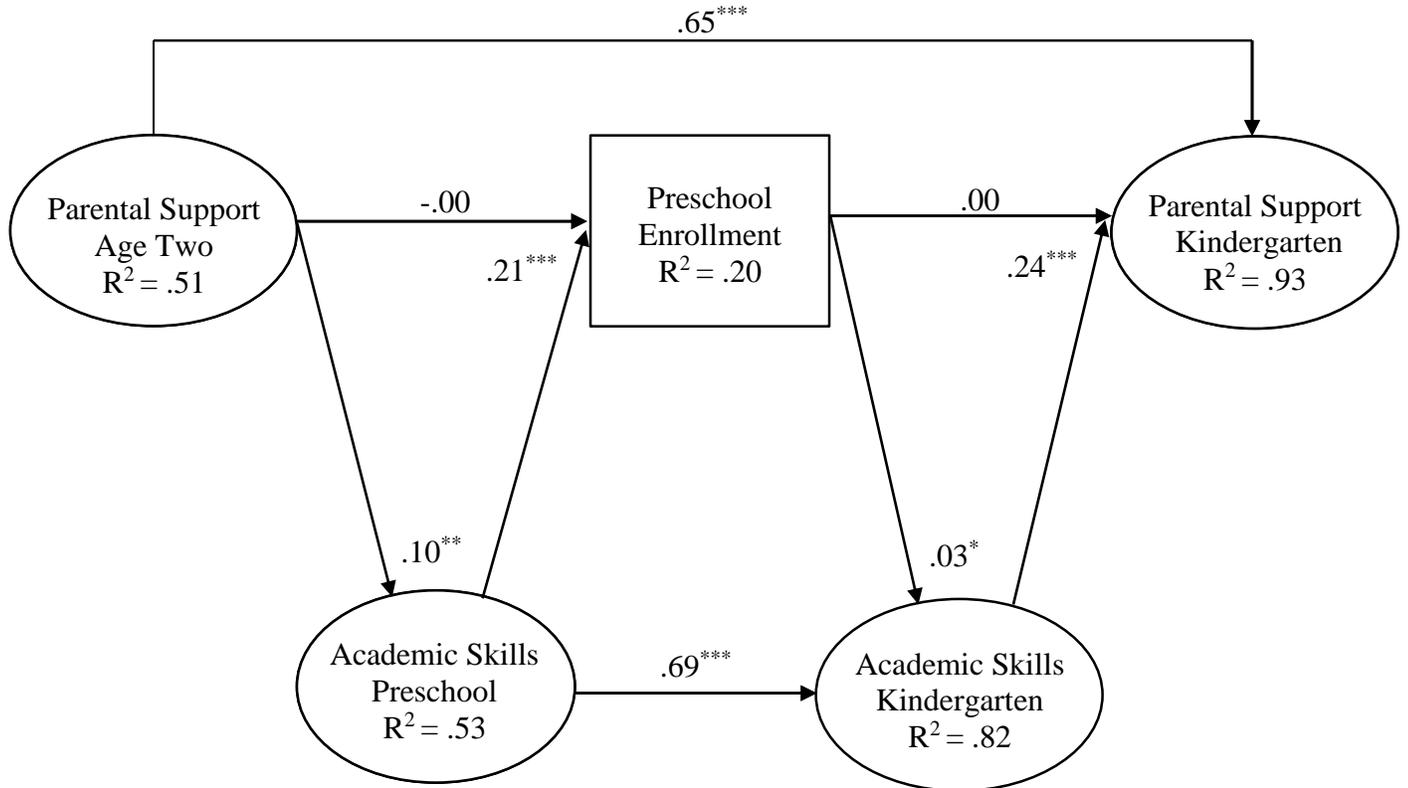


Figure 1. Observed model of parents' support for school readiness, preschool enrollment, and children's academic skills. Standardized direct path coefficients are shown. Note: All variables in the figure above were regressed on the following set of control variables: child race/ethnicity, child gender, child age (A4, A5), assesment month (A4, A5), Bayley Mental scale at nine and twenty-four months, childcare at age two, age of first non-parental care, parent nativity status, parent highest education (A4, A5), parent marital status (A4, A5), parent expectation for children's education (A4, A5), mothers' age, mothers' employment status (A4, A5), household income (A4, A5), household language, number of siblings (A4, A5), region (A4, A5), urabnicity (A4, A5). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$