Early Childbearing and Children’s Achievement and Behavior over Time

The importance of including period variables is shown in the PSID analyses. First, test scores for all children and behavior-problem scores for children of teenage mothers have changed over time. Second, when we control for period, the effects of maternal age at first birth on achievement test scores may be stronger or weaker than (or the same as) findings from a model without such a control.

We found less support for our hypothesis that the effect of early childbearing on children’s development varies over time. Our analysis did show period variations in the effect of early childbearing on behavior-problem scores, but yielded no significant variations for cognitive achievement.

We conclude that when behavior or achievement scores or the effects of age at first birth change over time, the effect of birth timing is confounded with period changes and is impossible to separate without independent variation in first-birth age within period. Clearly, such period effects are fairly common and substantial. Although few researchers have pooled NLSY data for children born from the 1970s through the 1990s, more will do so. Those who do should consider an alternative explanation for their findings or take time trends into account, particularly if the outcome could be affected by the age of the mother at first birth.

REFERENCES

FIGURE 4. Predicted scores on applied-problems test among children of women who first gave birth during their teens and children of women who first gave birth as adults, by period of first birth, PSID

FIGURE 5. Predicted total number of behavior problems among children of women who first gave birth during their teens and children of women who first gave birth as adults, by period of first birth, PSID