

Effect of an unwanted pregnancy carried to term on existing children's health, development and care

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Background

- The majority of women in the United States who have abortions are already mothers.
- 45% of mothers give their desire to care for existing children as a reason for seeking abortion.^{2,3}
- 42% of mothers seeking abortion say they cannot afford another child.²
- The birth of an unwanted child may have significant effects on existing children, including reductions in availability of caregiving and increases in poverty.

Study aim

To assess whether health and development outcomes for existing young children differ for women who seek and obtain an abortion and women who are denied an abortion and carry to term.

Methods

Study design

The Turnaway Study is a prospective, five-year, longitudinal, telephone interview study of the impact of receiving versus being denied an abortion on women's physical and mental health and socioeconomic well-being. Women in each study group were interviewed by telephone eight days after seeking the abortion and then every six months for the subsequent two years.

Study groups

- 1. Near Limit group—women who presented for abortion up to two weeks under a facility's gestational limit and received an abortion (n=452);
- 2. Turnaway Parenting group—women who presented for abortion up to three weeks over a facility's gestational limit and were denied an abortion, who parent the child (n=160);
- 3. Turnaway Non-Parenting group—women who presented for abortion up to three weeks over a facility's gestational limit and were denied an abortion, who subsequently either received an abortion elsewhere, miscarried or placed the child for adoption (n=50); and
- 4. First-Trimester group—women who received a first-trimester abortion (n=273).

Outcome measures

- Number of hours child spends with mother and/or caregiver;
- Preschool attendance (three- and four-year-olds);
- Child health: asthma, injuries severe enough to consider medical attention;
- PEDS: Developmental Milestones for maternal-reported, agespecific measures of six aspects of child development.⁴

Statistical analysis

Using mixed effects regression and logistic analyses, we tested for differences at time of abortion seeking. Starting at the six-month interview (after participants in the Turnaway parenting group had given birth), we compared outcomes for the youngest previous child born to each participant.

596 (62%) of the Turnaway Study participants reported at least one previous child. Nearly three quarters (430) of these children were under age 4.5 when their mother sought an abortion. The mothers of 369 children completed the six-month interview, including 186 children born to women in the Near Limit group, 55 to women in the Turnaway Parenting group, 101 in the First-Trimester group and 27 in the Turnaway Non-Parenting group.

Results

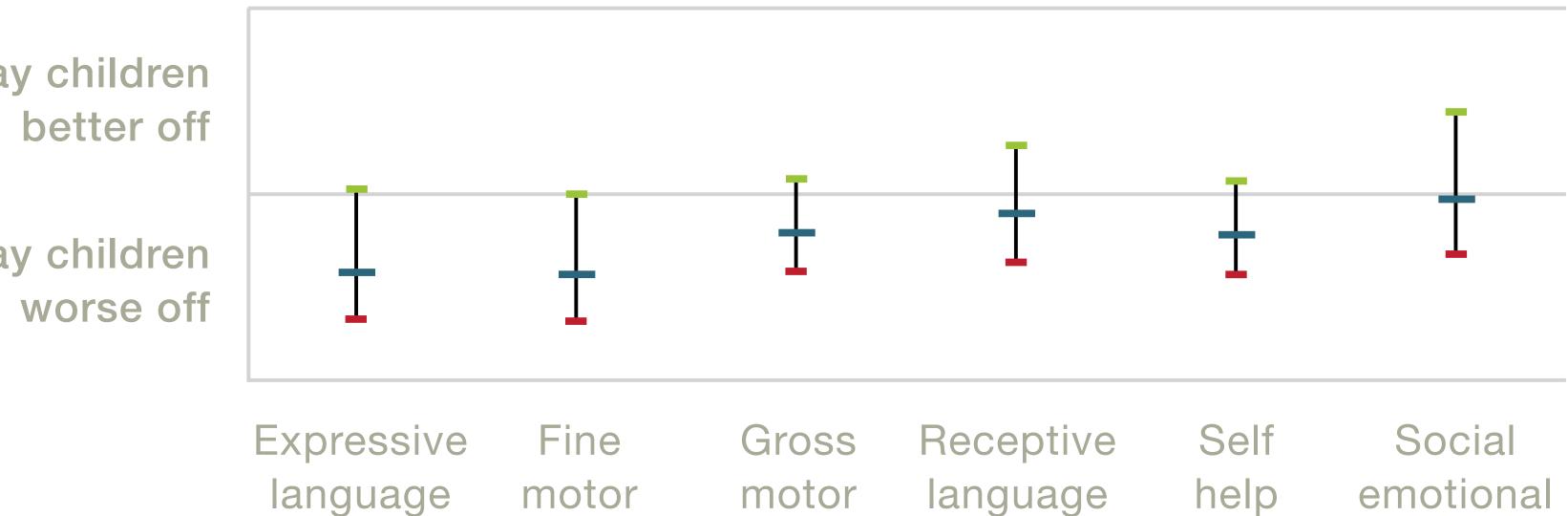
One week after abortion seeking, there were no differences found between participants in the Near Limit and Turnaway Parenting groups in race, education, marital status or smoking. The children of the two groups did not differ in age, sex, birth order, twin status, any of the measures of child development, child health, residency with the mother, or caregiving.

After the birth of the Turnaway Parenting group's children, differences were found in the development of previous children. Expressive language and fine motor development were lower among the Turnaway group's previous children compared to those of the Near Limit group (p<0.10). Turnaway children had 4 percentage point lower scores across all six domains of child development (p<0.05). There were no significant differences in injuries in the past six months, residency with the mother, caregiving or asthma. The three- and four-year-old previous children of women in the Turnaway group were more likely to attend preschool (OR=2.1, p<0.05) than similar-aged children of women who received an abortion.

Existing children of women denied an abortion have 4 percentage point lower scores across all six domains of child development (p<0.05) compared to children whose mother received a wanted abortion.

Six domains of child development: Existing children of women denied abortions compared to children of women who receive an abortion

Turnaway children better off Turnaway children



Results are consistent in models that exclude twins, models that exclude children who do not live with their mothers, and models that include covariates in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of existing children by mother's study group at baseline

	Near Limit Abortion	Turnaway Parenting	Turnaway Non- Parenting	First Trimester Abortion
Mother's characteristics	N=186	N=55	N=27	N=101
Mother's age—yr	24.4±4.3	24.3±4.7	24.0±4.1	26.0±4.6*
Mother's race/ethnicity, % White Black Hispanic/Latina Other	25 38 19 18	15 40 27 18	19 48 19 15	31 39 22 9*
 Mother's highest level of education, % Less than high school High school or GED More than high school/GED 	19 39 42	22 35 51	19 30 44	19 31 52
 Union status Married Not married, cohabiting Never married, not cohabiting Previously married, not cohabiting 	10 19 59 12	20 15 56 9	7 15 52 26	16 23 49 13
 Tobacco smoking severity None 10 or fewer cigarettes More than 10 cigarettes a day 	56 29 15	56 31 13	62 27 11	52 41 7
Characteristics of previous child Age of previous child—yr	1.48±1.16	1.45±1.05	1.59±1.08	1.38±1.11
		49	42	33*
Female sex Birth order First child Second child Third child Fourth child or higher	43261516	49 40 33 15 13	48 22 22 7	39 31 25 6
Singleton * p < 0.05	96	98	100	93

Conclusions

Consistent with women's concerns about the well-being of their existing children if they carry an unwanted pregnancy to term, we

> found lower scores on child development for the children of women denied abortions compared to children whose mothers received an abortion. We found no differences in health or caregiving, but existing children of women who were denied an abortion were more likely to attend preschool. The sample size of children was small, and more research in this area is needed.

¹ Jones RK, Kavanaugh ML. Changes in abortion rates between 2000 and 2008 and lifetime incidence of abortion, Obstetrics & Gynecology, 2011, 117(6):1358–1366.

² Biggs MA, Gould H, Foster DG. Understanding why women seek abortions in the US. BMC Womens Health. 2013, 13:29.

³ Finer LB et al., Reasons U.S. women have abortions: quantitative and qualitative perspectives, Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2005, 37(3):110-118.

⁴ Brothers KB, Glascoe FP, Robertshaw NS. PEDS: Developmental milestones an accurate brief tool for surveillance and screening. Clinical Pediatrics, 2008, 47(3):271-9.