



Understanding the links between family structure transitions, stress, and children's educational ability

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Defining family structure transitions

- A change in household composition caused by a change in the parent's romantic relationships
 - The entrance or exit of marital or cohabiting partners
- *Example:* moving from a two-biological-parent family to a single-parent family after a divorce



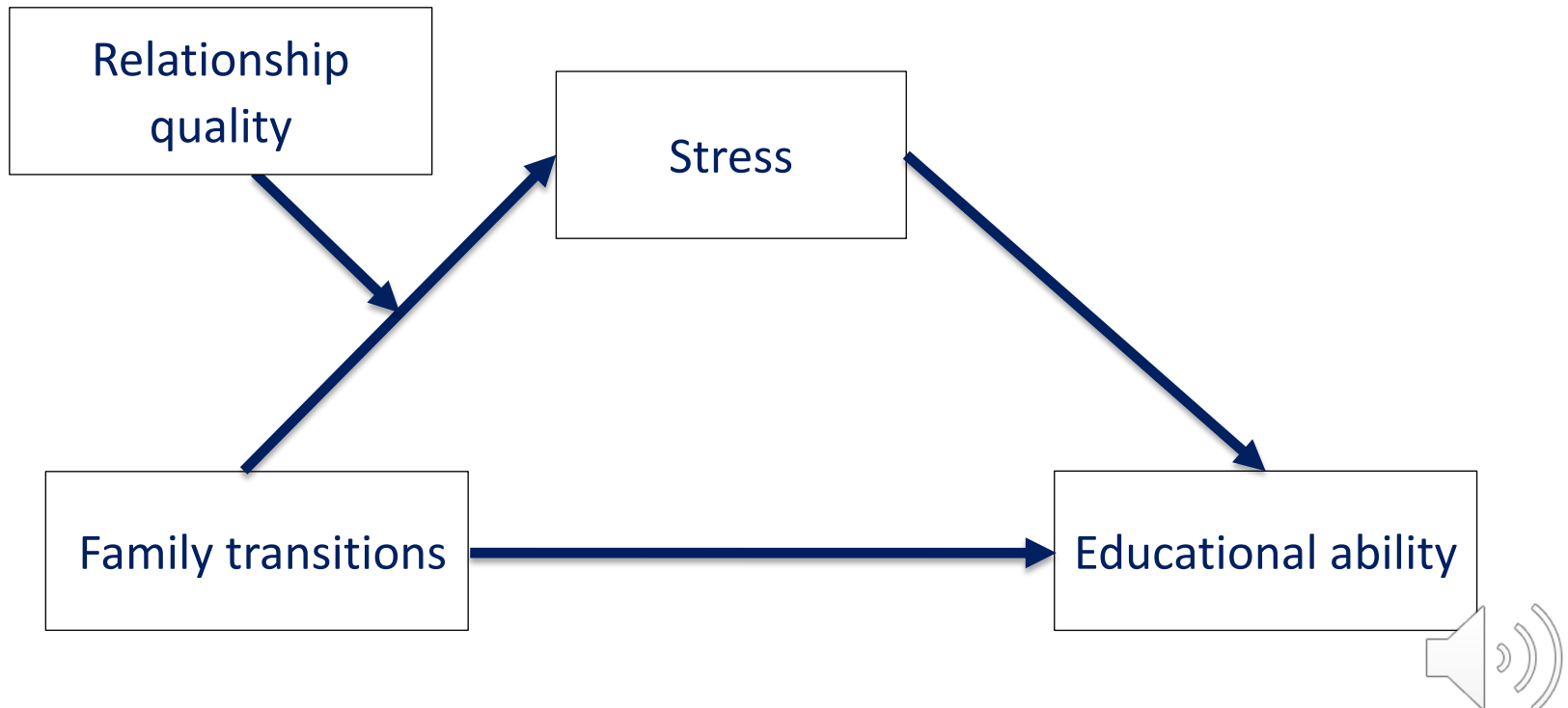
Background

- Family structure transitions can be harmful to child development
- The instability hypothesis (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Wu & Martinson, 1993)
- But ... the literature is mixed (Hadfield et al., 2018)
- Mothers and children employ strategies to mitigate potentially negative effects of family structure transitions on children
 - Maintaining and managing relationship quality



Current study

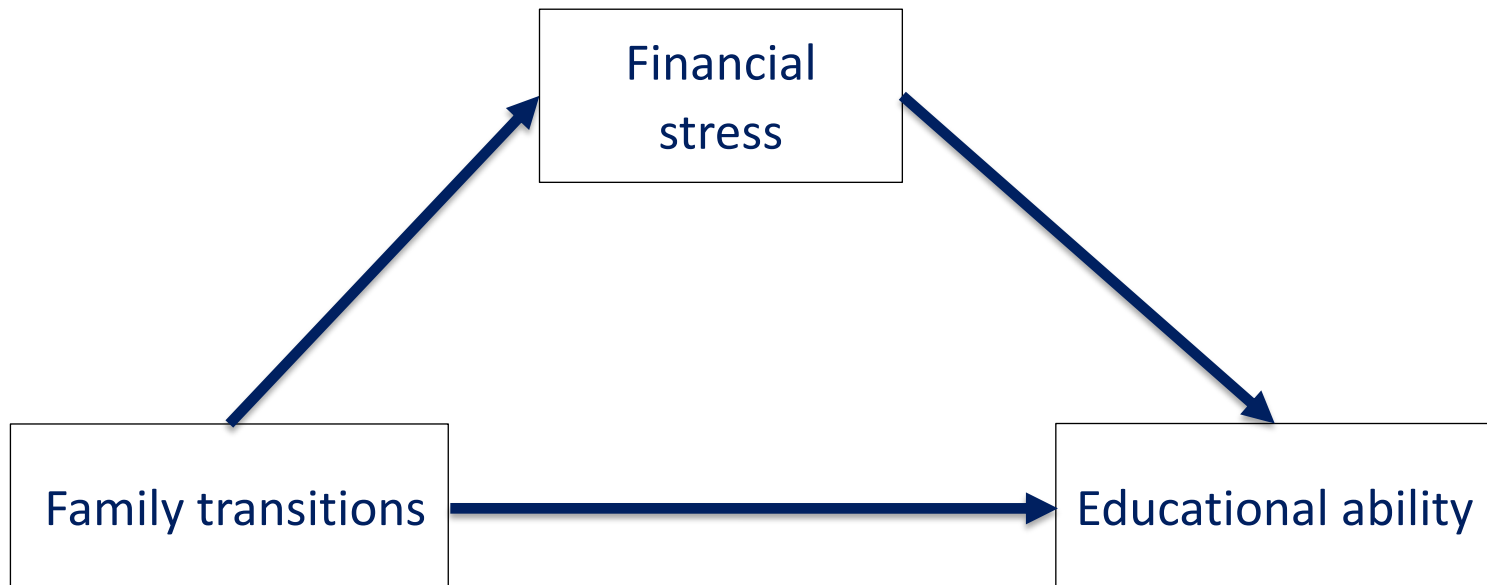
- Research question: Does family relationship quality moderate the mediation relationship between family structure transitions, stress, and children's educational ability?



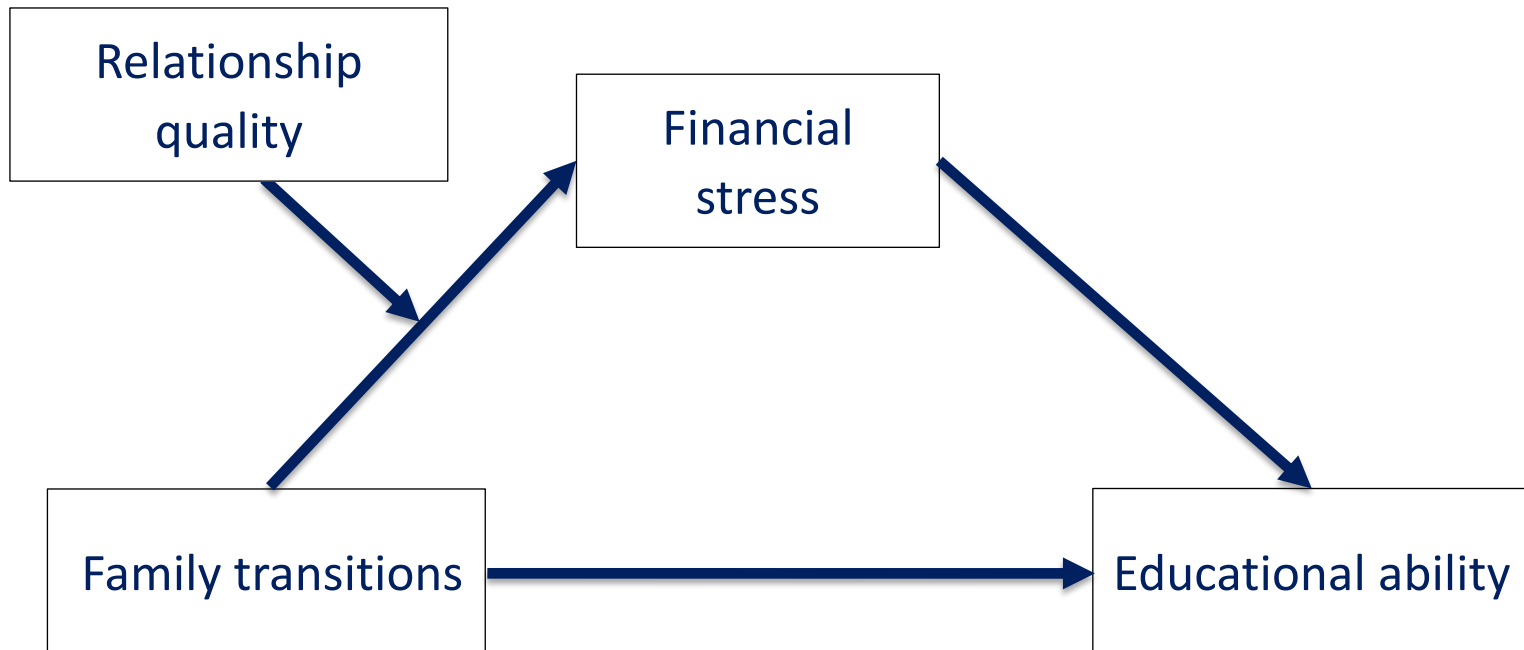
- GUI AMF child cohort (age 9, 13, and 17/18)
- Family structure transitions
 - Household composition questionnaire
- Financial stress
 - Equivalised household income
- Children's educational ability
 - Drumcondra maths and reading tests (age 9 and 13)
 - Cognitive maths and vocabulary tasks (age 17/18)
- Family relationship quality (conflict and closeness)
 - Pianta child-parent relationship scale (age 9 and 13)
 - Networks of Relationships Inventory (age 17/18)
- Control variables
 - Sex, premature birth, native language, learning disability, breakfast club, free school meals



- Multilevel mediation using Linear Mixed Models



- Multilevel moderated mediation using Linear Mixed Models



Results

- Prevalence of family structure transitions by age 17/18: 12.1%

Experienced one transition	Experienced two transitions	Total %
10.6	1.4	12.1

- The most common type of family structure transition was from a two-biological-parent (TBP) family to a single-parent family

TBP to single-parent	TBP to stepfamily	Single-parent to TBP	Single-parent to stepfamily	Stepfamily to TBP	Stepfamily to single-parent
6.3	0.2	0.9	1.5	3.6	1.0

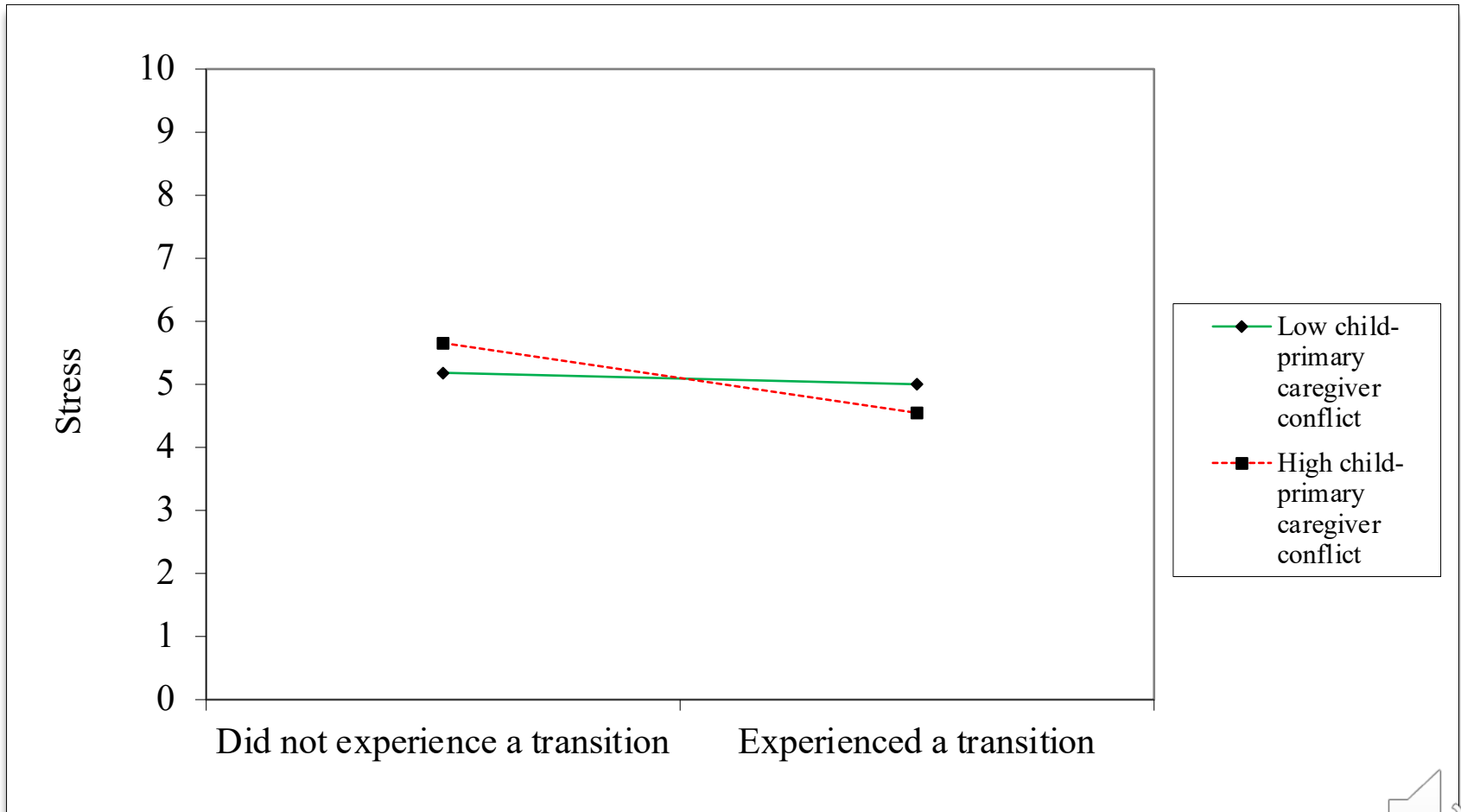


Results

- Transitions were associated with worse educational ability
 - Maths ($p=.000$, $\beta=-.208$)
 - Literacy ($p=.000$, $\beta=-.160$)
- Stress mediated the link between transitions and educational ability
 - Children who experienced a transition had greater financial stress than children who did not ($p=.000$, $\beta=-.505$)
- Child-primary caregiver conflict moderated the relationship between transitions and stress ($p=.027$, $\beta=-.009$)
 - Child-primary caregiver closeness, and child-secondary caregiver conflict or closeness did not moderate the relationship between transitions and stress ($p>.05$)



Results



Discussion

- Take home messages
 - Financial stress mediates the link between family structure transitions and children's educational ability
 - Child-primary caregiver conflict moderates the relationship between family structure transitions and stress (very small effect!)



Discussion

- Limitations
 - Large gaps between waves
 - Inconsistency of variables across waves
- Future directions
 - Explore other moderators in the transition → stress → child outcome relationship to unpack the instability hypothesis further
 - Closeness and conflict between the primary and secondary caregivers
 - Does the importance of moderators differ depending on the age of the child?





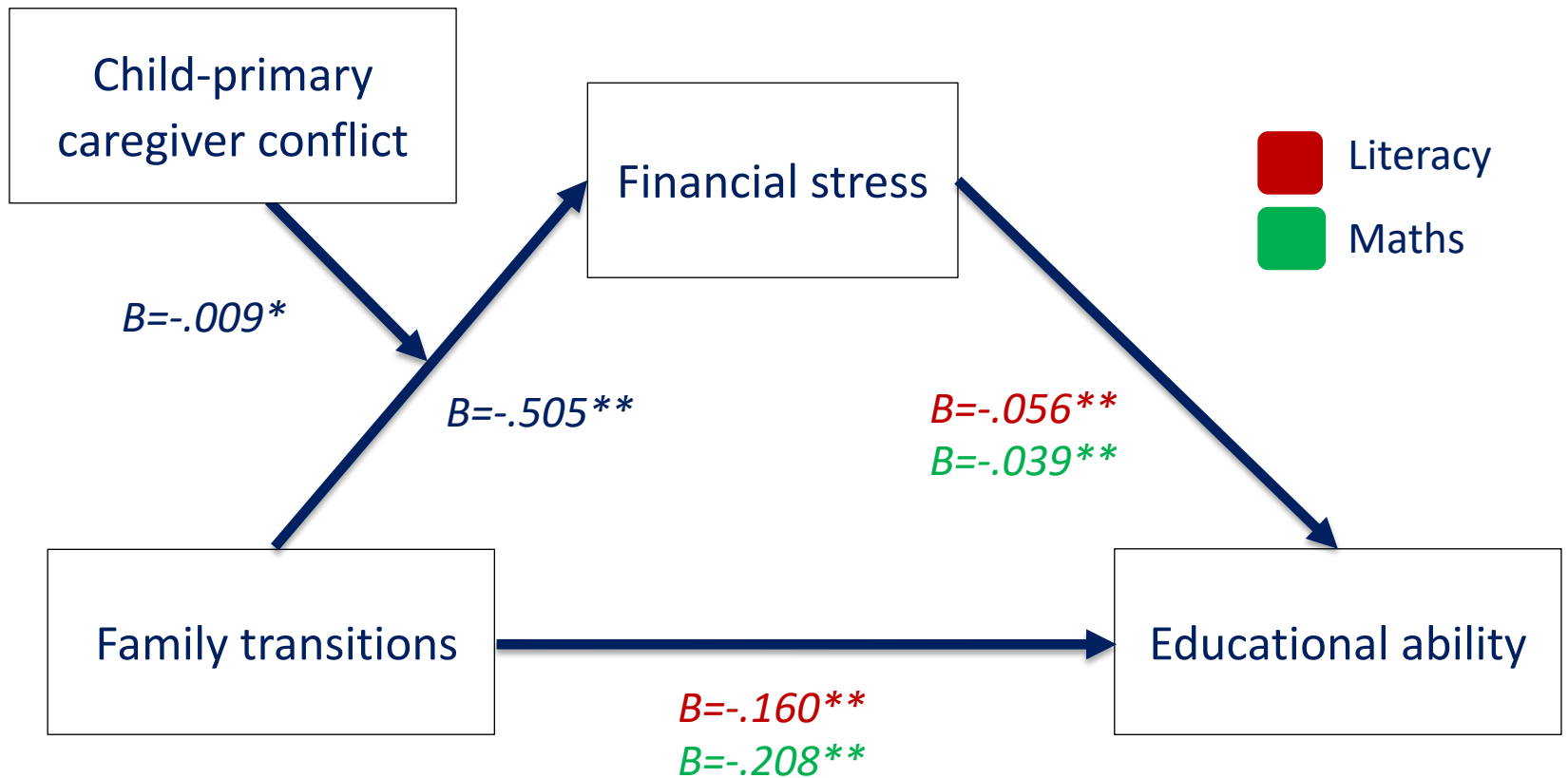
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Thank you!

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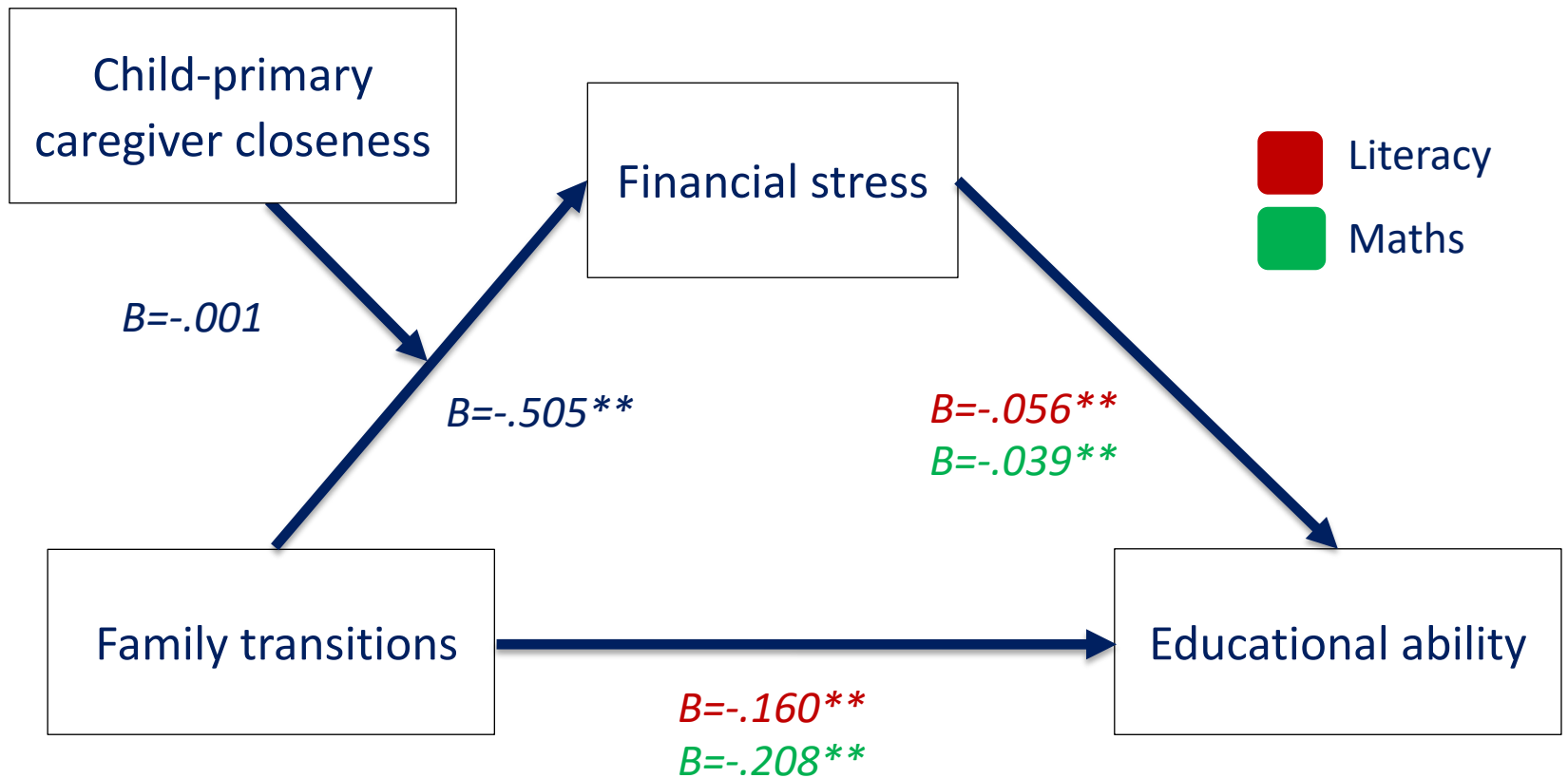
Additional slides: results



Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .001$



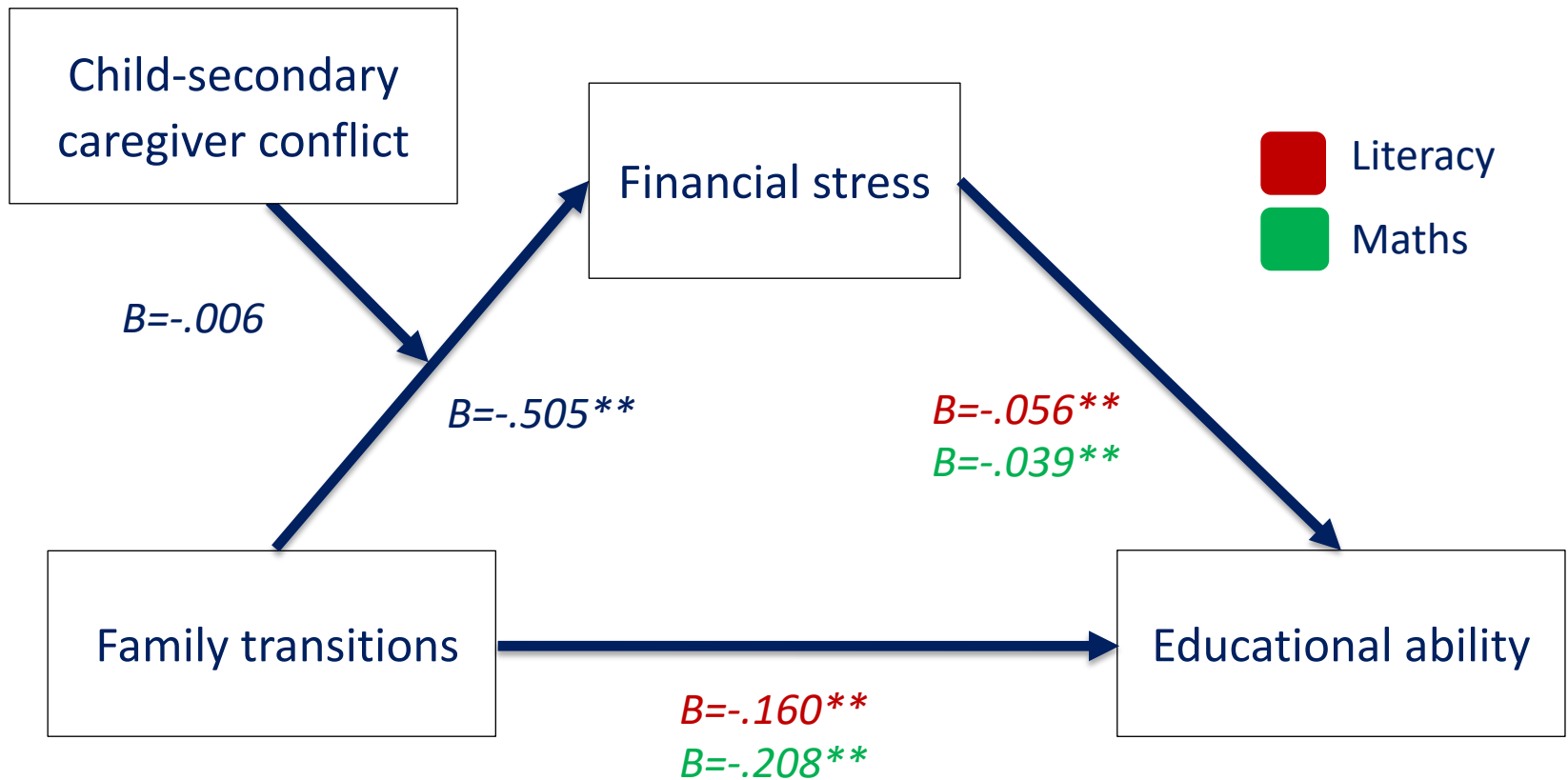
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Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$



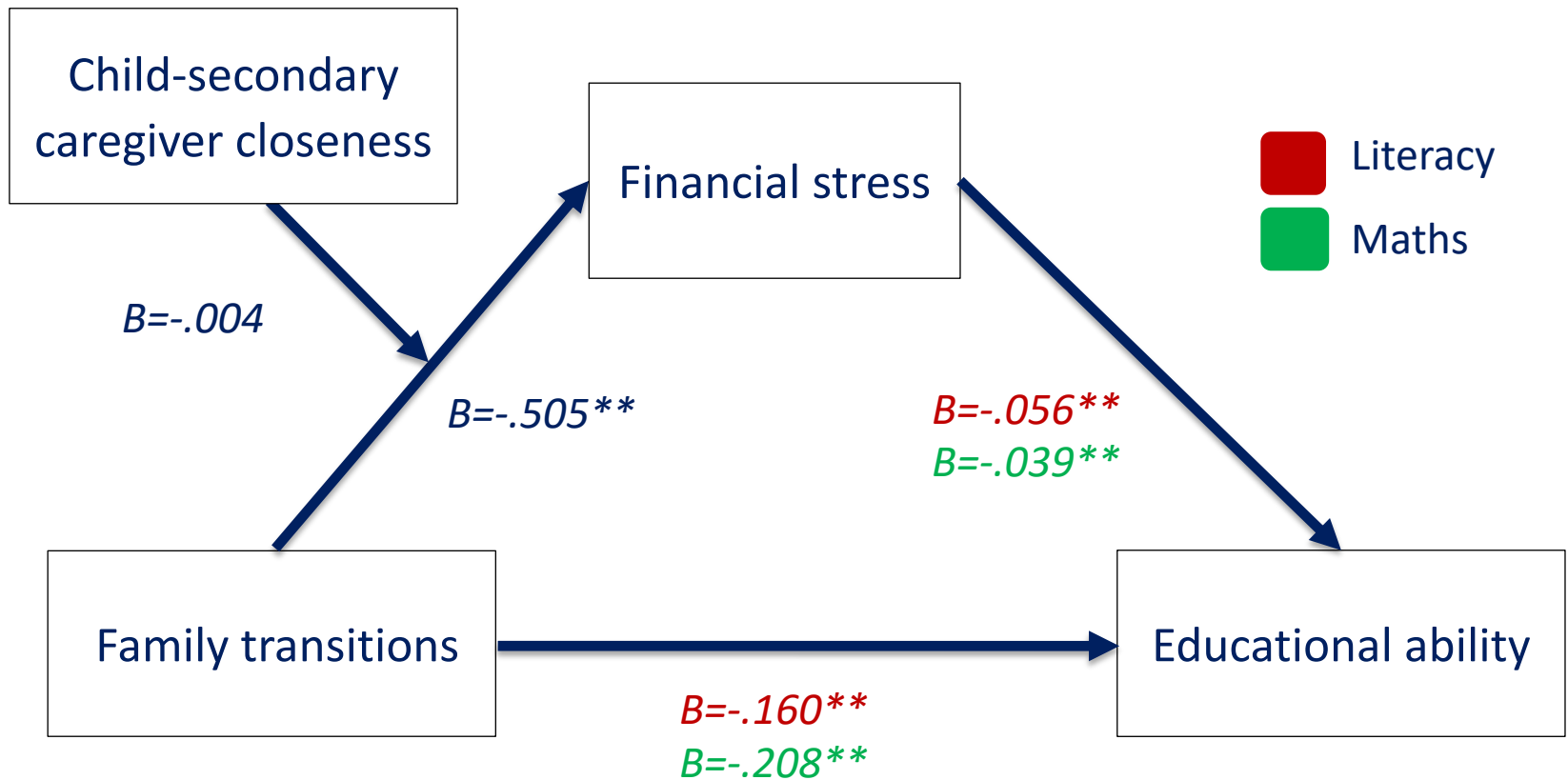
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Additional slides: results



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