Niamh at 9 months

Niamh at 3 years

Niamh at 5 years

Family Structure and Risk Factors: An Investigation into Emotional and Behavioural Outcomes for Nine-Year-Olds.

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Main Aim

This study aimed to examine the relationship between family structure and risk factors for children's emotional and behavioural outcomes at 9 years of age.

Research Questions

1. **Is there a relationship between family structure and child developmental outcomes?**

2. **Do risk factors moderate the relationship between family structure and child developmental outcomes?**

3. **Do risk factors act in a cumulative manner on child developmental outcomes?**

Context: Changing Family Structure

215,315 lone parent families in Ireland (CSO, 2011).

- **Never married cohabitating mothers, and never married mothers not living with a partner.**
- **Married Mothers, not living with husband.**
- **Divorced Mothers, not living with ex husband.**
- **Mothers who lost their husband through bereavement.**

Family Structure and Child Developmental Outcomes

Empirical evidence:

International studies suggest that children from alternative family structures tend to have less optimal developmental outcomes than children from married families (Ram & Hou, 2003).

BUT: No consensus on the importance of family structure per se for child development.

Many studies have found that differences in outcomes are best explained by factors *other* than family structure.

Risk Factors for Poor Developmental Outcomes

- **Based on previous research a number of risk factors for child developmental outcomes were identified:**

  - **Poverty**
  - **Stressful Life Events**
  - **Maternal Depression**

1. Poverty and Child Developmental Outcomes

- **In Ireland 35.5% of lone parent families are at risk of poverty, while over 44% of lone parent families have reported experiencing two or more items of deprivation (CSO, 2011).**

- **Empirical evidence: Research in USA found that the relationship between family structure and child behavioural problems was only evident when low income and poverty were also present (Dearing, McCartney, & Beck, 2006).**

2. Stressful Life Events and Child Developmental Outcomes

- **It is important for a child to have consistency in their relationships and routines (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).**

- **Empirical evidence: Children who experience more stressful life events are more likely to be at risk of poorer developmental outcomes (Amato & Maynard, 2007).**

3. Maternal Depression and Child Developmental Outcomes

Empirical Evidence:

Link between depression and developmental outcome (Munson et al. 2001).

Mechanism:

Maternal depression is seen to exert an *indirect* influence on children's development via its negative impact on parental competence e.g.

- **less child-centred behaviours (Bluestone et al. 1999)**
- **less likely to express warmth and to exert an appropriate level of control (Westbrook and Harden, 2010)**

Cumulative Risk Hypothesis and Child Developmental Outcomes

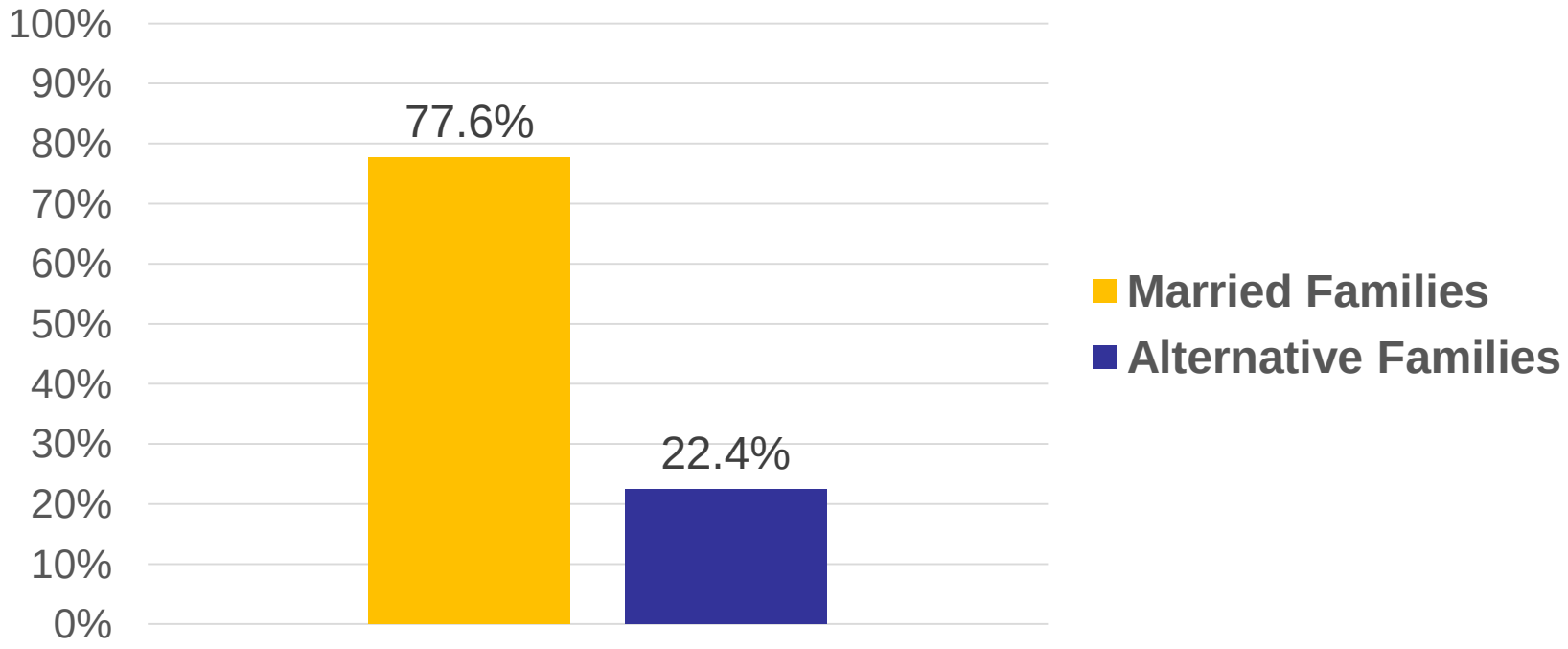
Cumulative Risk Hypothesis:

1. **The presence of ONE risk factor will not significantly influence child outcomes.**
2. **However as the number of risk factors increase the probability of adverse developmental outcomes multiplies (Flouri, & Tzavidis, 2008).**

Sample

Research participants: **8,209 mothers of nine-year-olds**

Family structure: **77.6% in married families**
22.4% in alternative families



Research Measures

CONSTRUCTS	MEASURES	DICHOTOMIZED MEASURES WITH THEIR CUT-OFF POINTS
Children's Emotional and Behavioural Outcomes	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997)	Normal (0-13), Borderline/Abnormal (14-40)
Child Poverty	Median Annual Household Income	≥ €16, 616.88 High income ≤ €16, 616.88 Low income
	Basic Deprivation Scale (ESRI)	≤1 No deprivation; ≥2 Deprivation
Stressful Life Events	Life Events Questionnaire (Adapted from the NLSCY)	≤1 Life events; ≥2 Life events
Maternal Depression	CESD-8 (Melchoir et al. 1993)	≤6 No depressive symptoms; ≥7 Depressive symptoms

Data Analysis

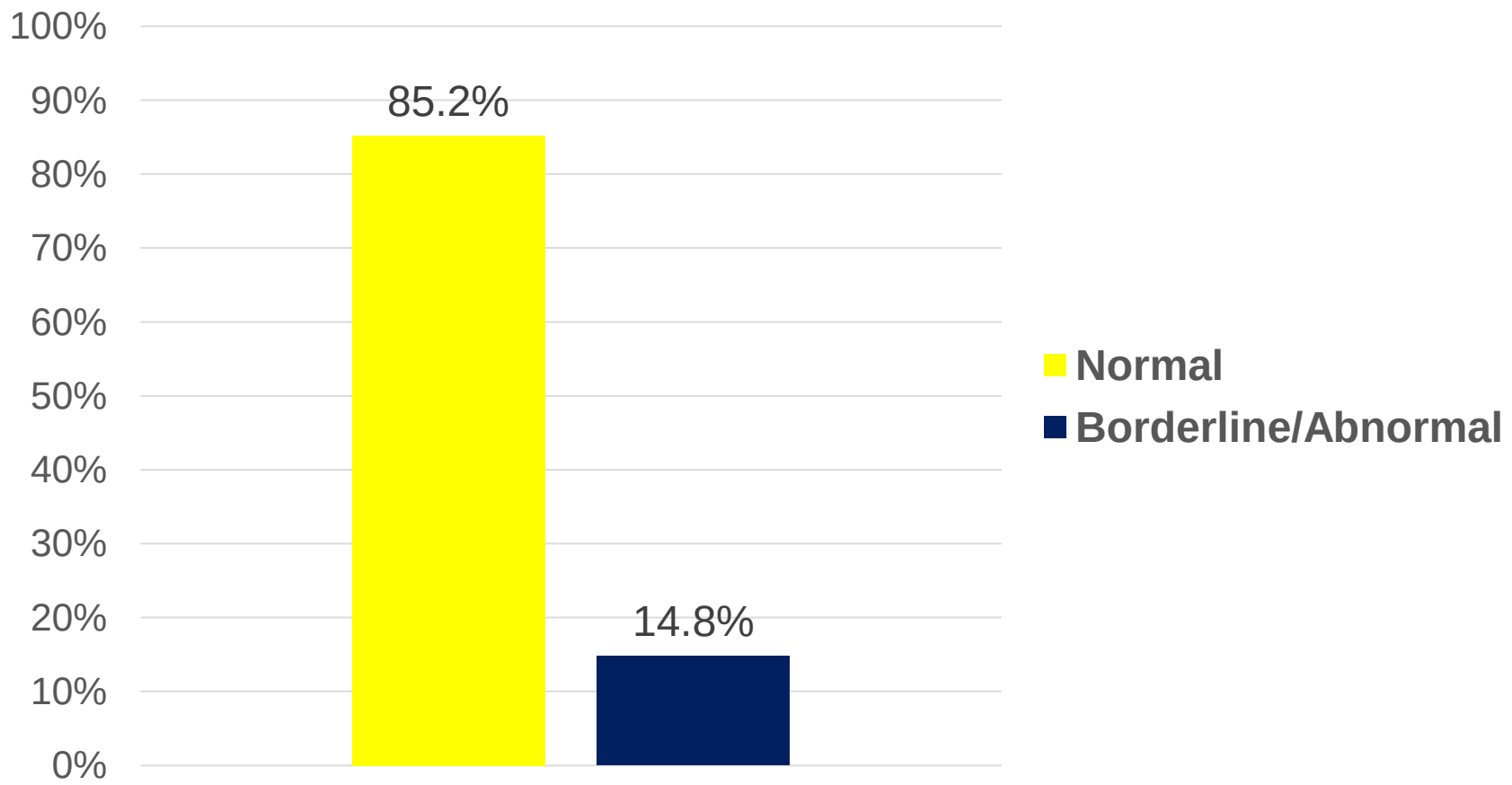
1. **Descriptive statistics of key variables**

2. **Examination of factors associated with child developmental outcome at 9 years of age:**

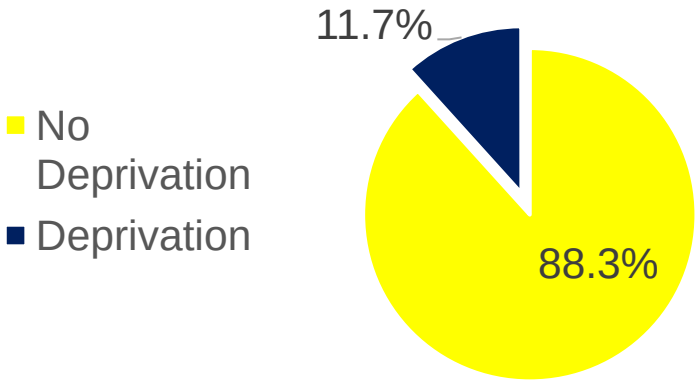
   a) Univariate analyses; chi-square analyses

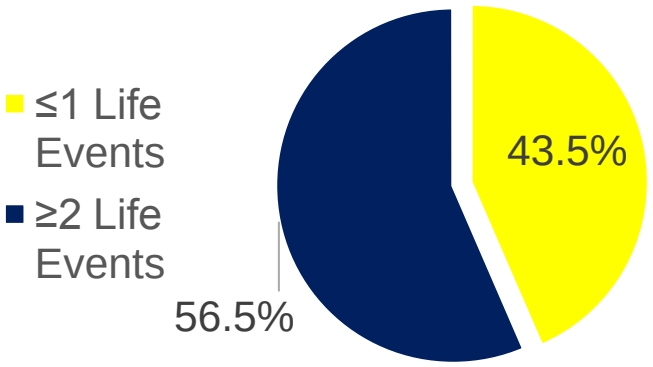
   b) Configurational analysis of multiple risk factors (Belsky et al, 1988)

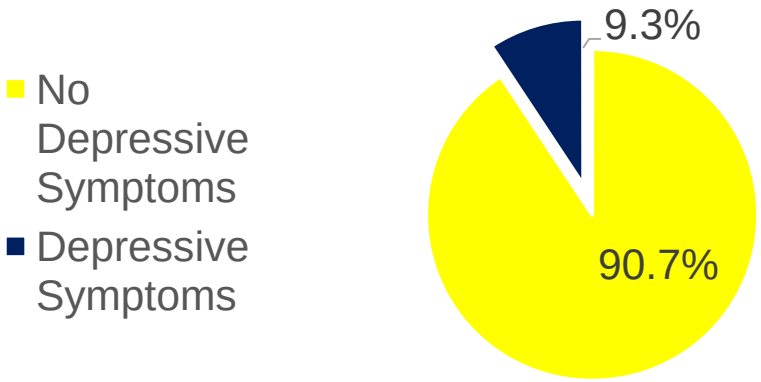
Normal and Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome (N=8169)



Presence and Absence of Risk Factors



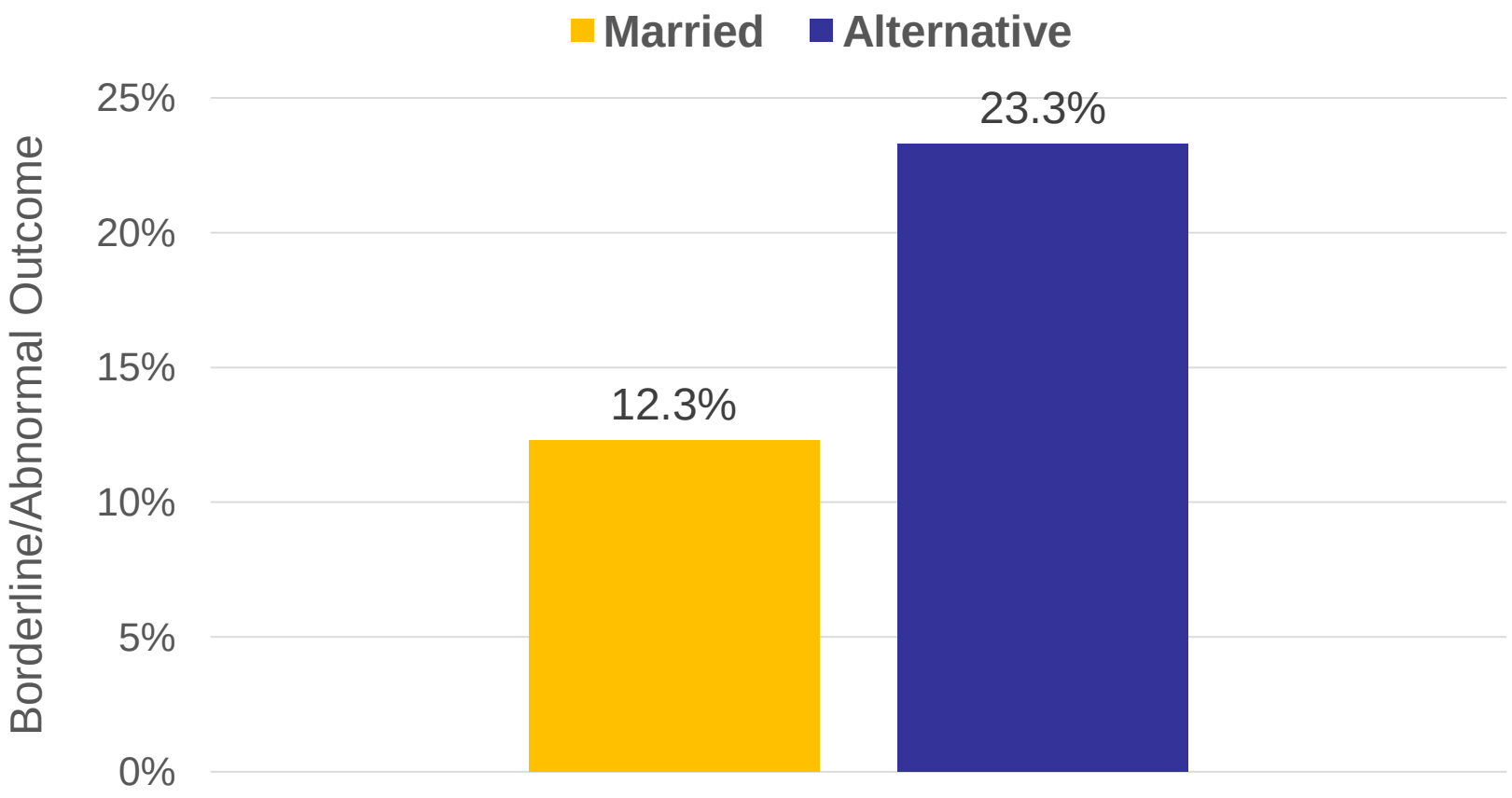




1. Research Question

IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY STRUCTURE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES?

Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome by Family Structure

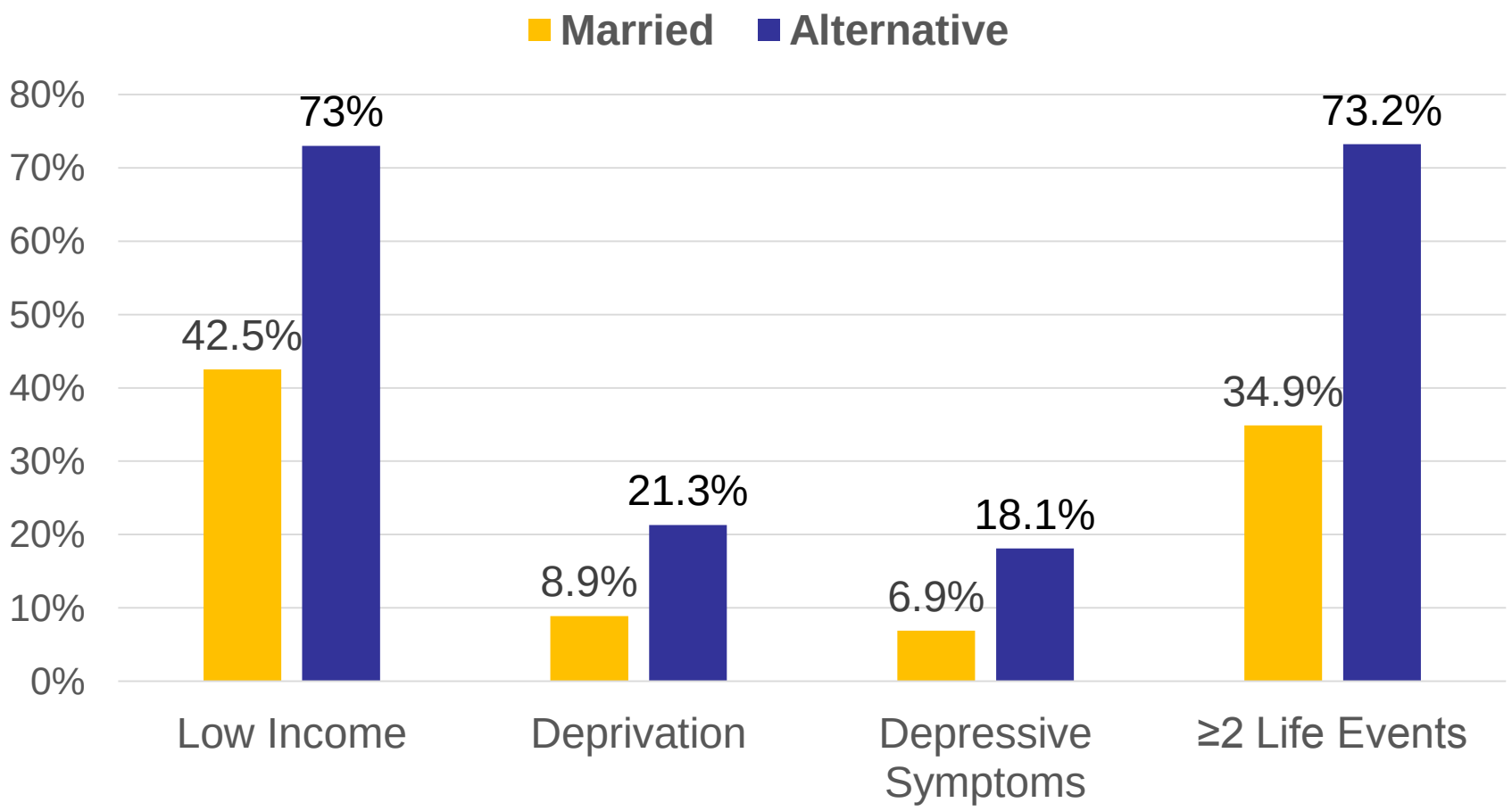


X^2 (1) = 136.85, p<.01

2. Research Question

DO RISK FACTORS MODERATE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY STRUCTURE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES?

Family Structure by Risk Factors



Income: X^2 (1) = 501.7, p<.01.

Deprivation: X^2 (1) = 211.04, p<.01.

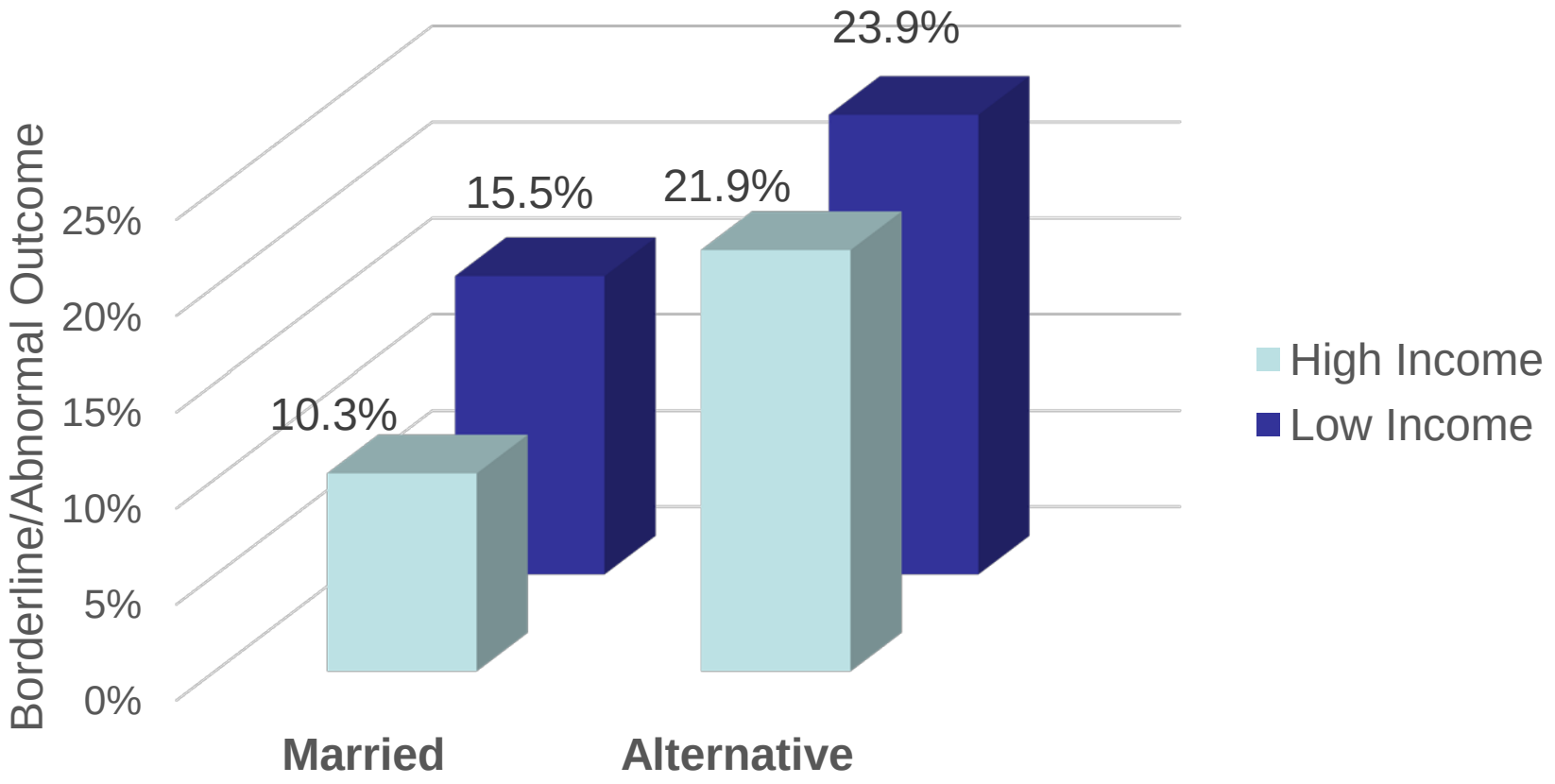
Depressive symptoms: X^2 (1) = 187.9, p<.01.

Life events: X^2 (1) = 853.58, p<.01.

Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome as a Function of Risk Factors

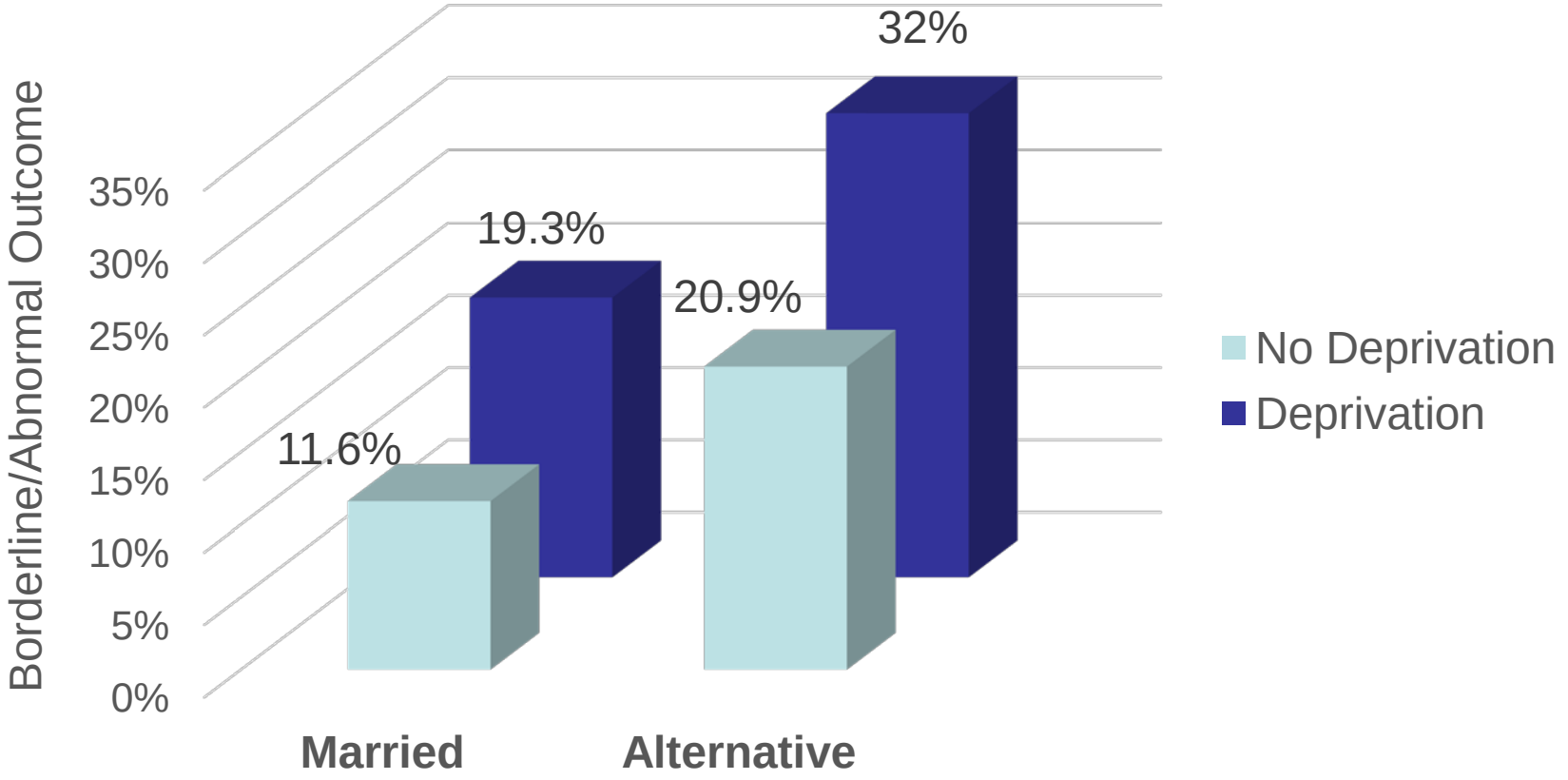
Risk Factor	Absent	Present	
Low Income	11.7%	18.6%	X^2 (1) = 71.08, p<.01
Deprivation	13.5%	25.2%	X^2 (1) = 92.53, p<.01
Depressive Symptoms	12.5%	31.1%	X^2 (1) = 201.25, p<.01
≥2 Life events	11.1%	19.9%	X^2 (1) = 125.19, p<.01

Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome as a Function of Family Structure and Low Income



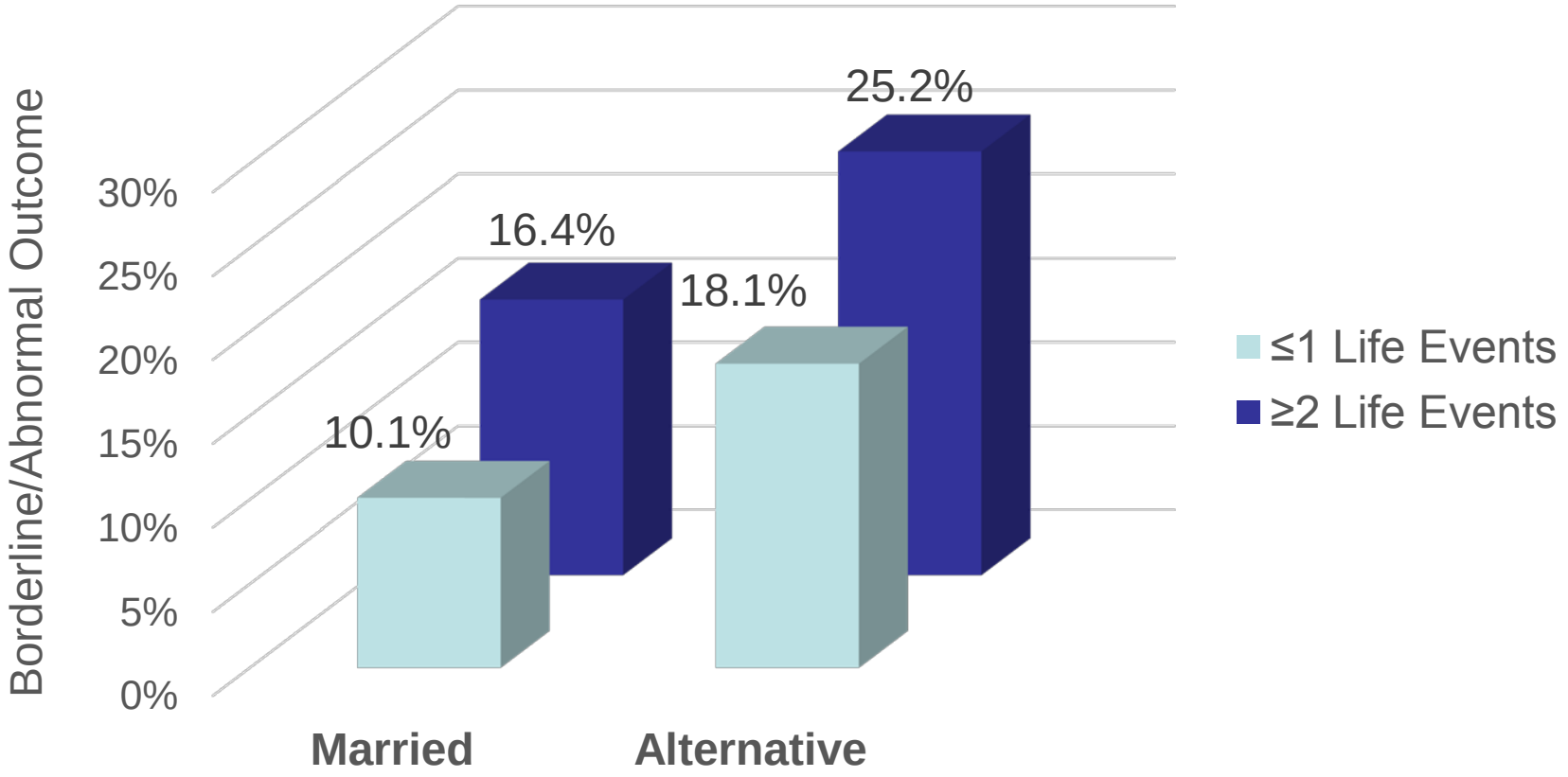
Married: X^2 (1) = 36.202, p<.01
Alternative: X^2 (1) = .76, p>.05

Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome as a Function of Family Structure and Deprivation



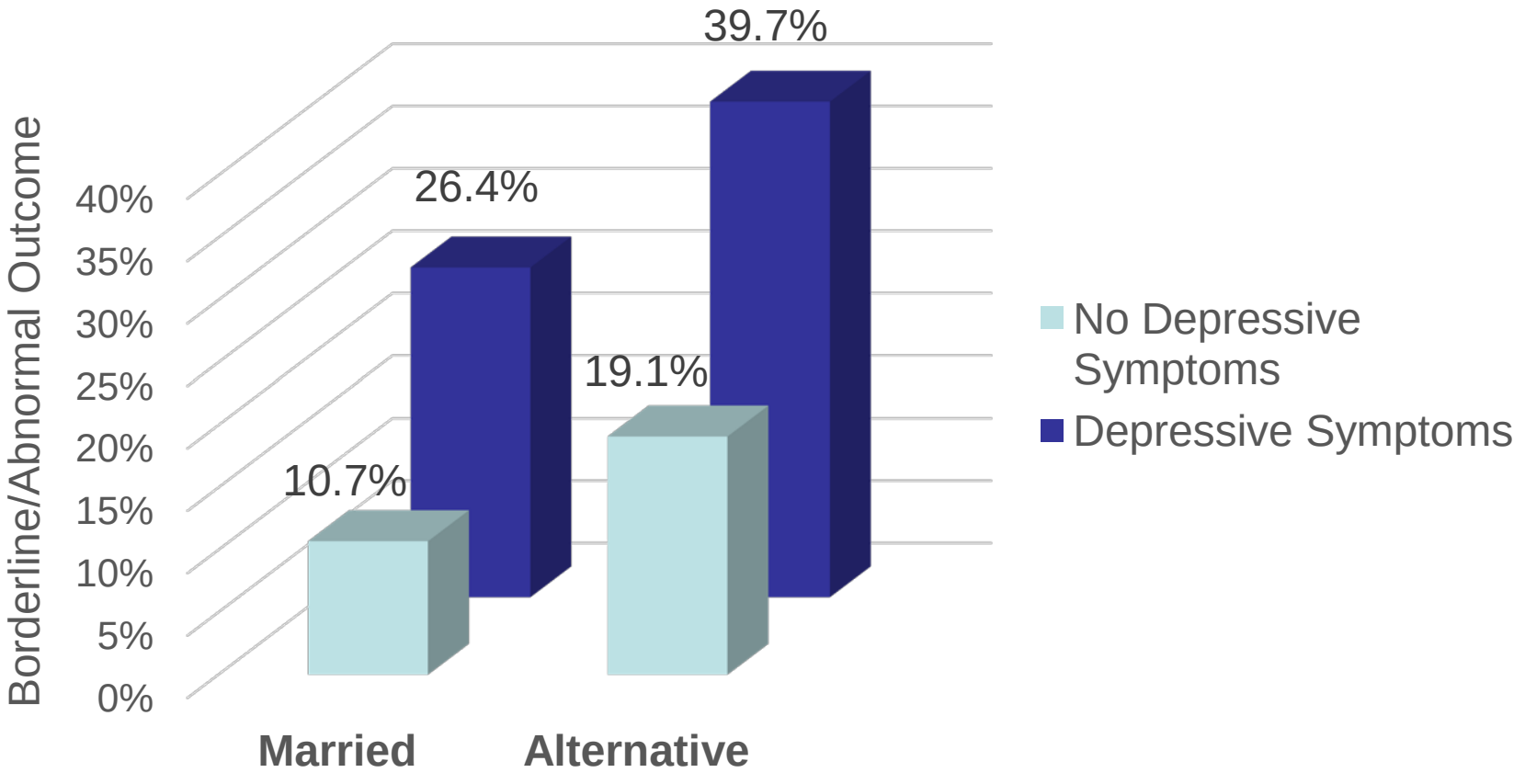
Married X^2 (1) = 27.97, p<.01
Alternative: X^2 (1) = 21.02, p<.01

Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome as a Function of Family Structure and Life Events



Married: X^2 (1) = 51.7, p<.01
Alternative X^2 (1) = 10.08, p<.01

Borderline/Abnormal Developmental Outcome as a Function of Family Structure and Depression



Married: X^2 (1) = 88.3, p<.01
Alternative: X^2 (1) = 58.02, p<.01

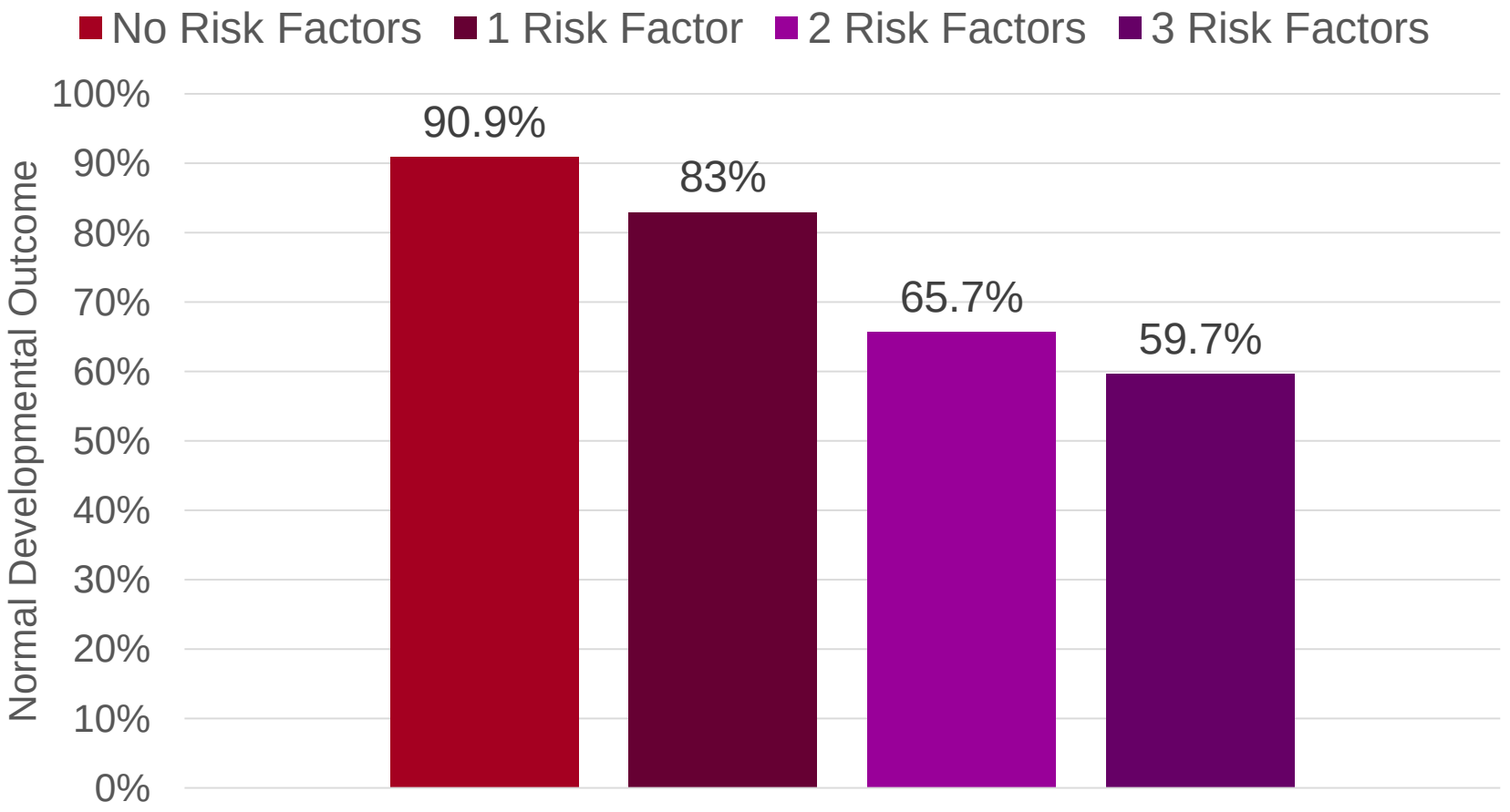
3. Research Question

DO RISK FACTORS ACT IN A CUMULATIVE MANNER ON CHILD DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES?

Cumulative Analysis of Risk Factors and Children's Normal Developmental Outcome

Family Types	No. of Subset	Maternal Depression	Deprivation	Life Events	% of Normal Outcome	Average % of Normal Outcome
1	3295	+	+	+	90.9	**90.9%**
2	2094	+	+	-	85.2	
3	314	+	-	+	85.8	
4	175	-	+	+	78.1	**83%**
5	254	+	-	-	72.8	
6	207	-	+	-	64.9	
7	19	-	-	+	59.4	**65.7%**
8	74	-	-	-	59.7	**59.7%**

Cumulative Analysis of Risk Factors and Children's Normal Developmental Outcome



Conclusion

1. **Children from married families had significantly better emotional and behavioural outcomes than children from alternative families.**

2. **However, children from married families also experienced significantly less risk factors than children from alternate family types.**

Conclusion cont.

3. **Within analyses revealed that deprivation, stressful life events and maternal depression were significantly associated for BOTH family types.**

4. **As the number of risk factors increased, the percentage of optimal developmental outcomes at 9 years of age tended to decrease.**

Limitations

- **No analyses of the particular alternative family structures.**
- **Role of social support and child characteristics (e.g. Child temperament) not considered.**
- **Analyses based on dichotomised variables.**
- **Cross-sectional research can not confirm causal mechanisms.**

Thank you

Questions?