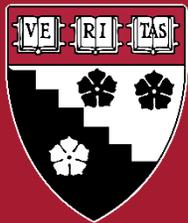




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Caregiver mental health and early child development: *It's complicated!*

Dana Charles McCoy | Harvard Graduate School of Education

**Does better caregiver mental health
always translate into better child
outcomes?**

**Do interventions to support parent
mental health always work?**



Example studies

1

City-wide survey in urban **Ethiopia**

2

Survey of crisis-affected populations in **Uganda**

3

Experimental evidence with low-income families in **Brazil**

Ethiopia

Suntheimer, N. M., Ju, S. G., McCoy, D. C., Wolf, S., Abate, S., Mekonnen, A., ... & Demlew, T. (2025). Parent psychological distress and beliefs about nurturing care: Associations with parent investments and early child development in Ethiopia. *Developmental Psychology*, 61(7), 1342-1357.

Study background

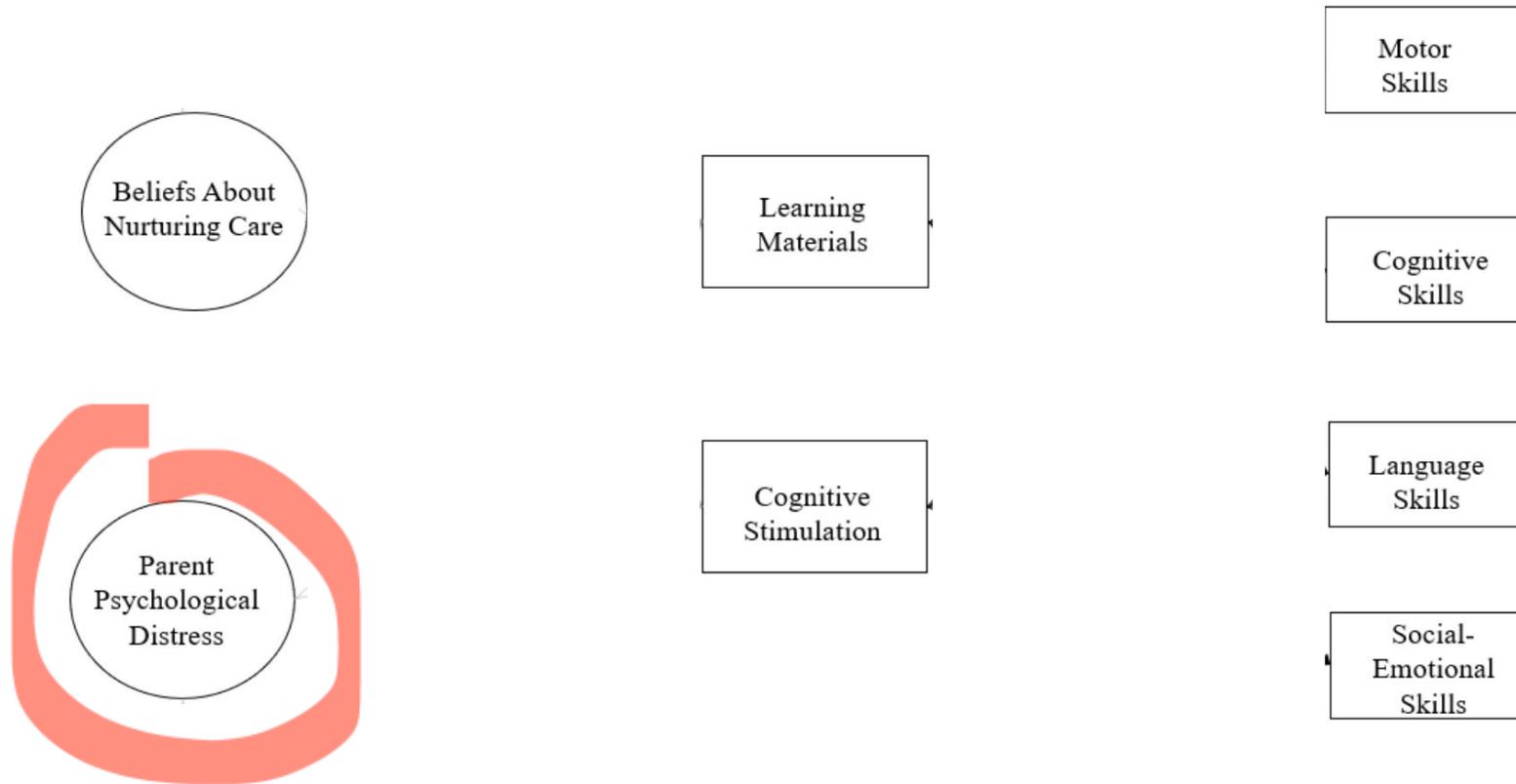
Methods

- **Context:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- **Goal:** To inform government efforts to improve ECD across the city, to serve as a baseline to track progress over time
- **Study design:** Cross-sectional with representative sampling
- **Sample size:** 3000 households



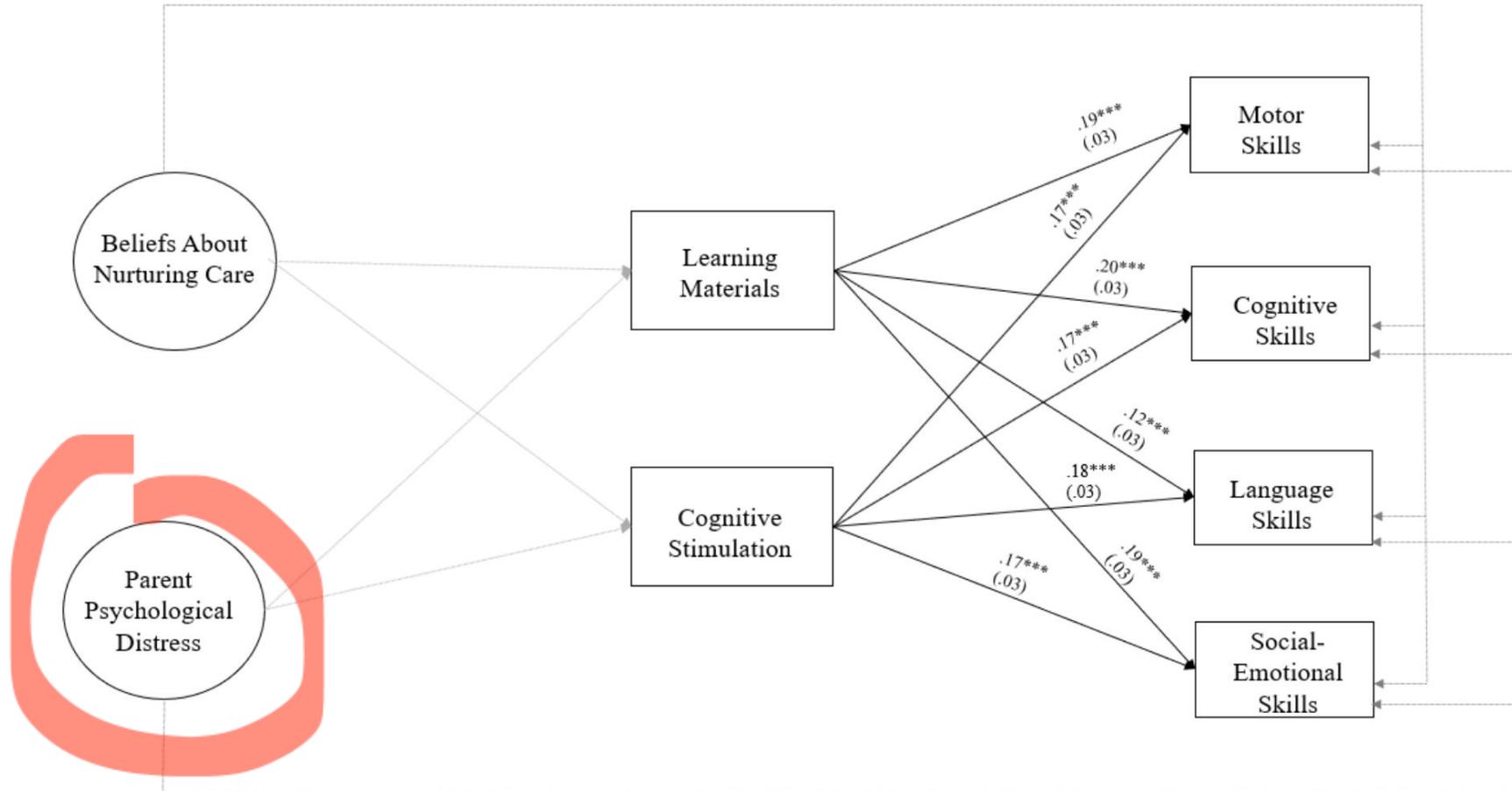


Conceptual model



Results

Infants and toddlers

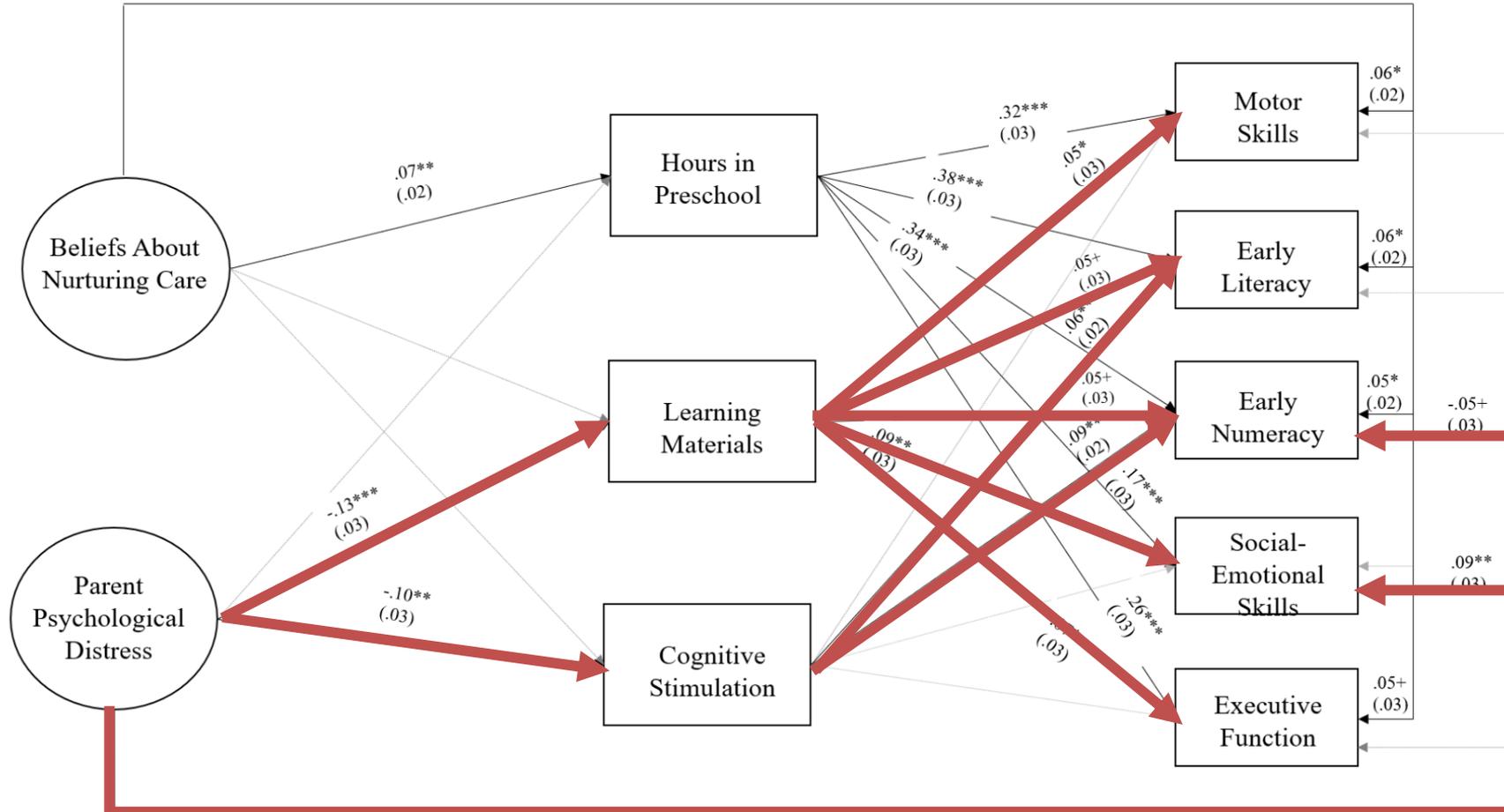


Parent psychological distress is unrelated to investments and infant/toddler outcomes



Results

Preschool-age children



Parent psychological distress *does* predict lower developmental outcomes for preschool-age children, mostly through lower investments in at-home learning

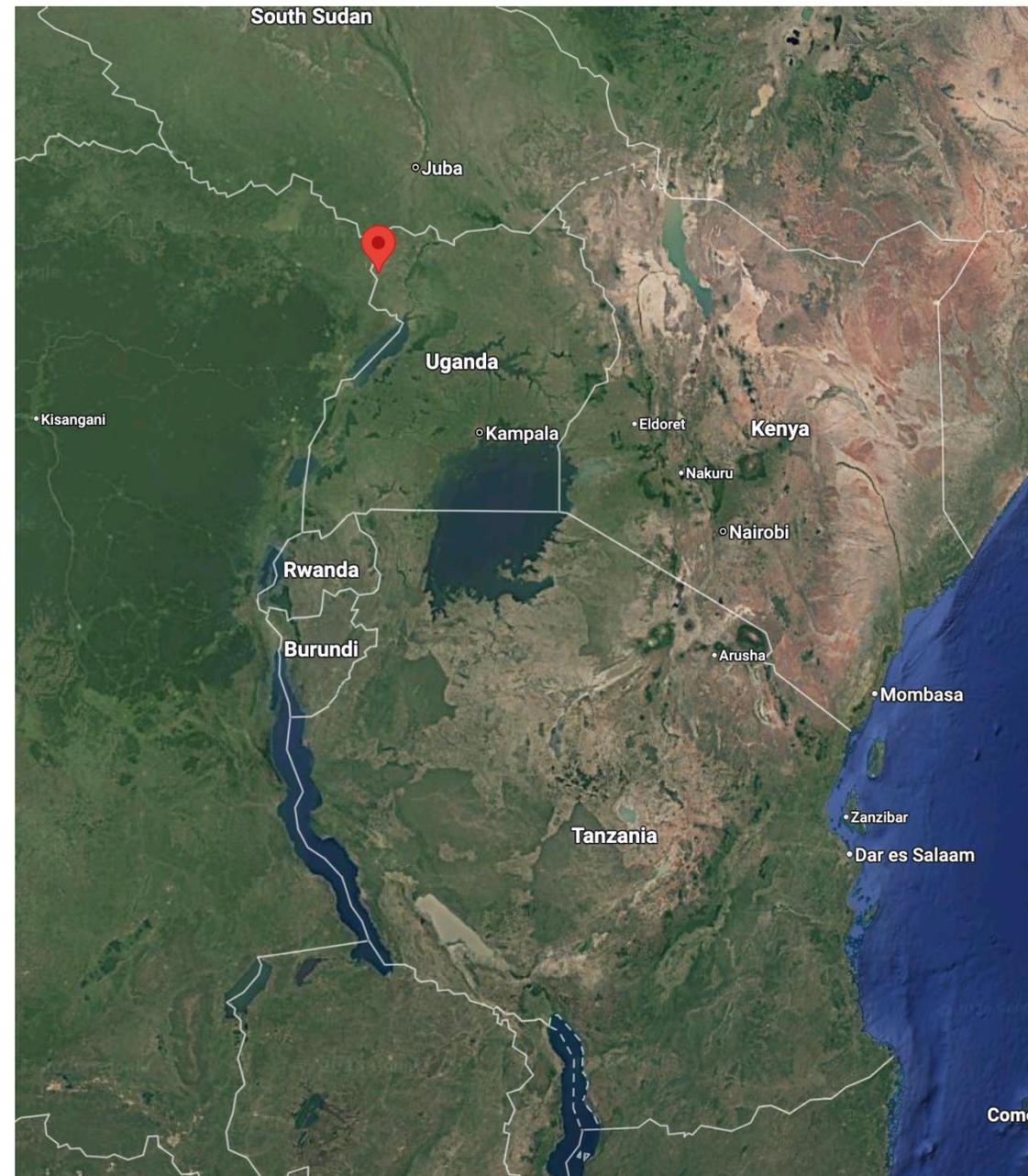
Uganda

Dusard, L., Kabay, L, McCoy, D. C., & Wolf, S. (2026). Associations amongst caregiver investments and early childhood outcomes in refugee and host households in Uganda. *In preparation.*

Study background

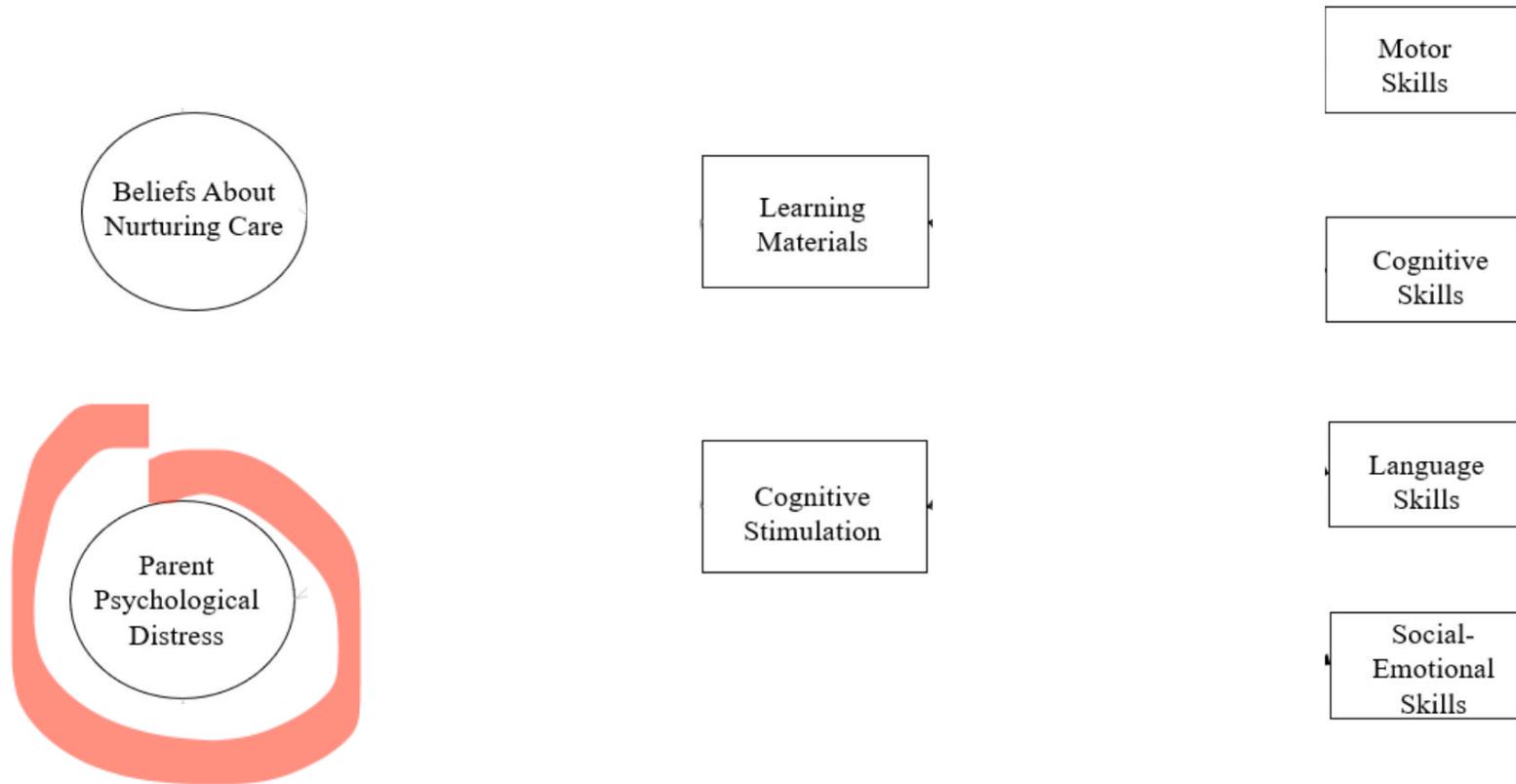
Methods

- **Context:** West Nile Region, Uganda
- **Goal:** To understand needs of refugee and host families facing extreme disadvantage
- **Study design:** Cross-sectional survey
- **Sample size:** 760 households





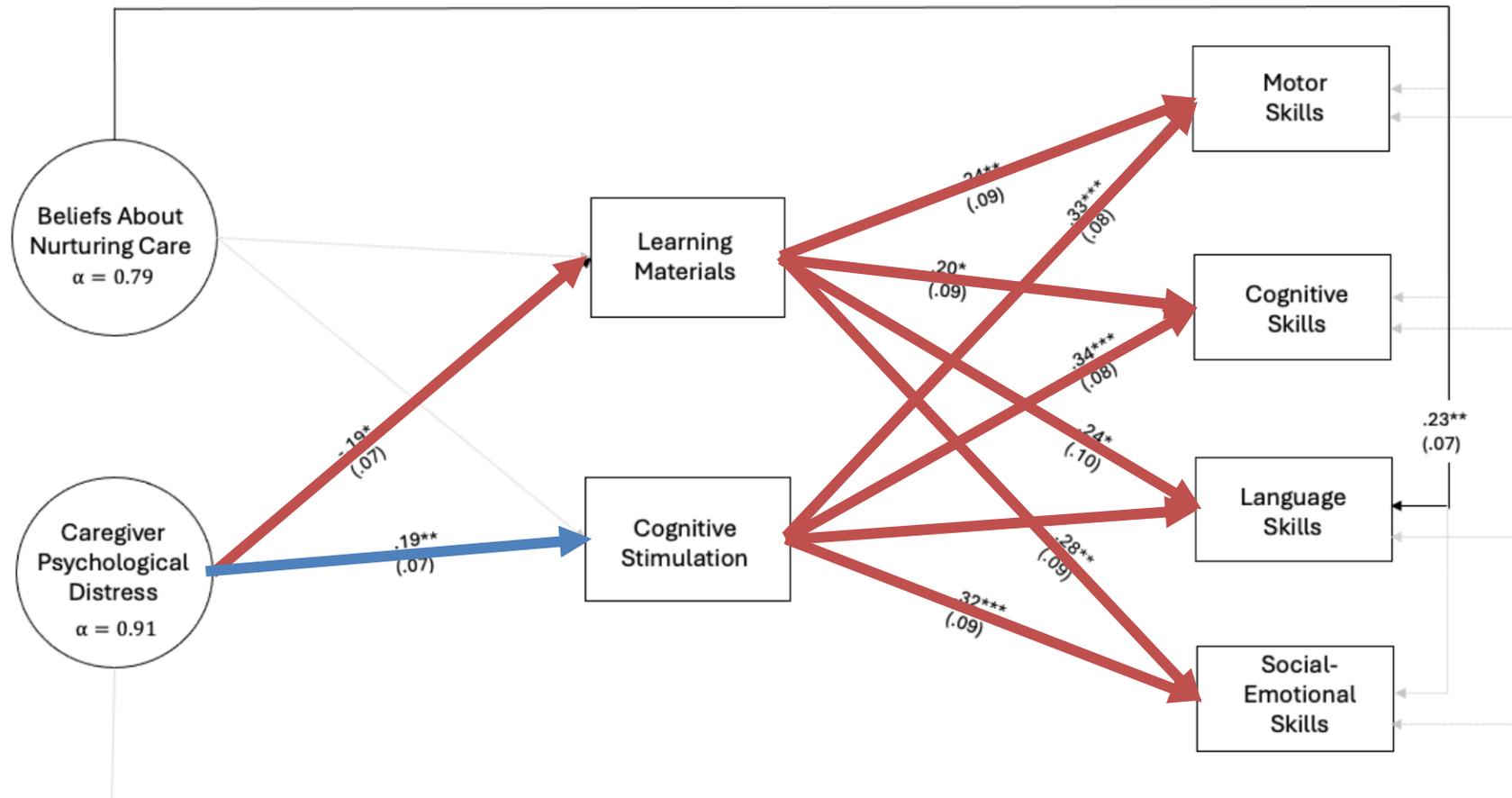
Conceptual model





Results

Toddlers

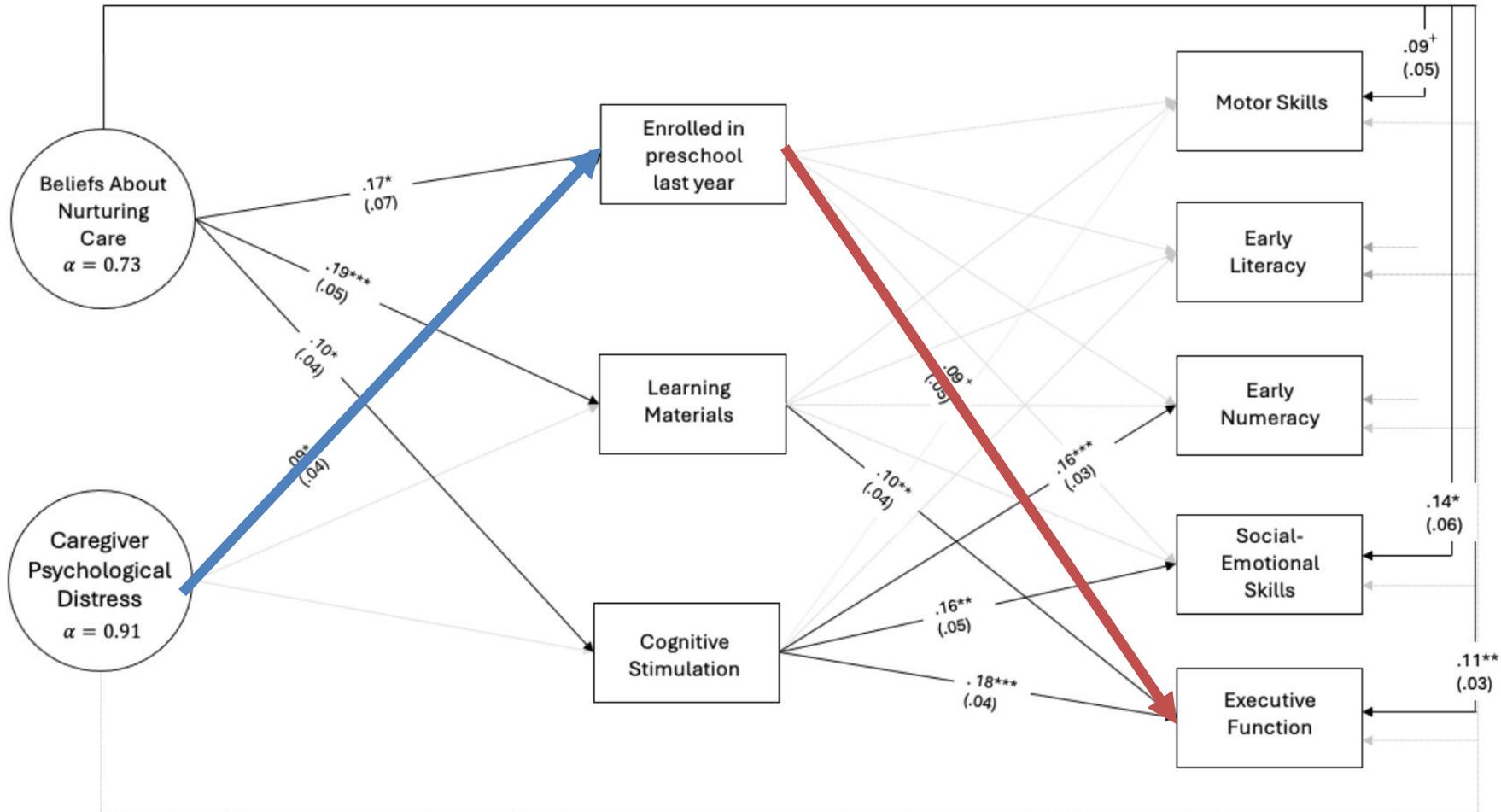


Parents' psychological distress is associated with *more* cognitive stimulation with toddlers in conflict affected setting.



Results

Preschool-age children



Parents' psychological distress is associated with *more* preschool enrollment for older children.

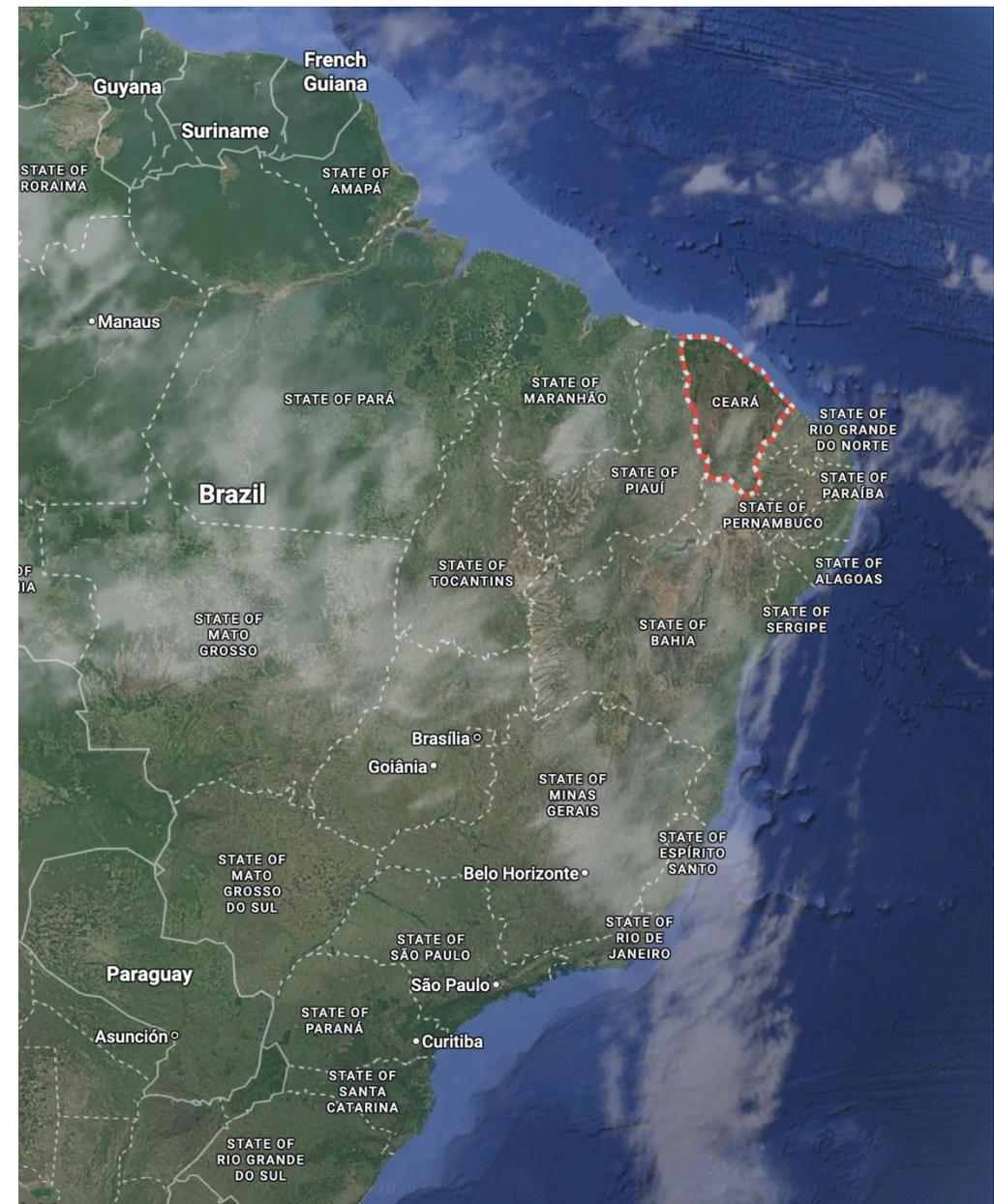
Brazil

McCoy, D. C., Trias, J., Kitamura, K., Ezeugwu, C., & Oliviera, J. (2026). Examining the impact of a digital parenting intervention within Brazil's national home visiting program. *In preparation.*

Study background

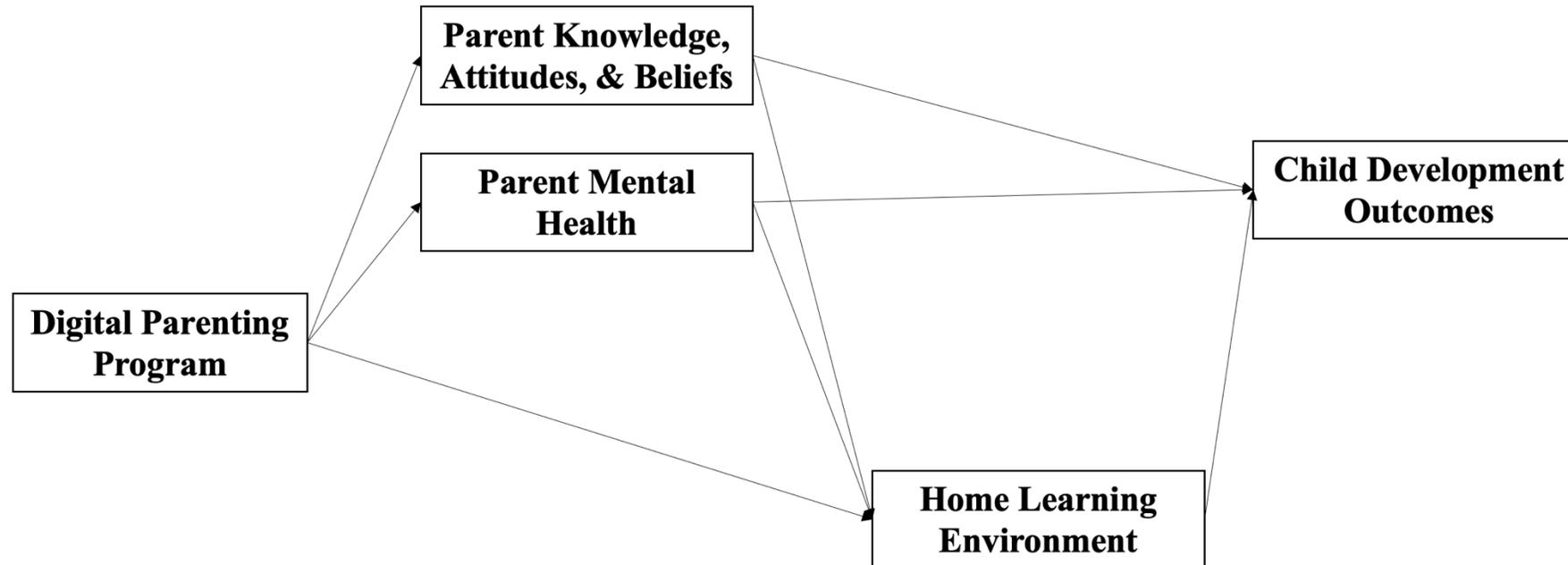
Methods

- **Context:** State of Ceará, Brazil
- **Goal:** To evaluate the impact of adding a digital intervention to the national home visiting program for low-income families
- **Study design:** Cluster randomized control trial
- **Sample size:** 1159 households





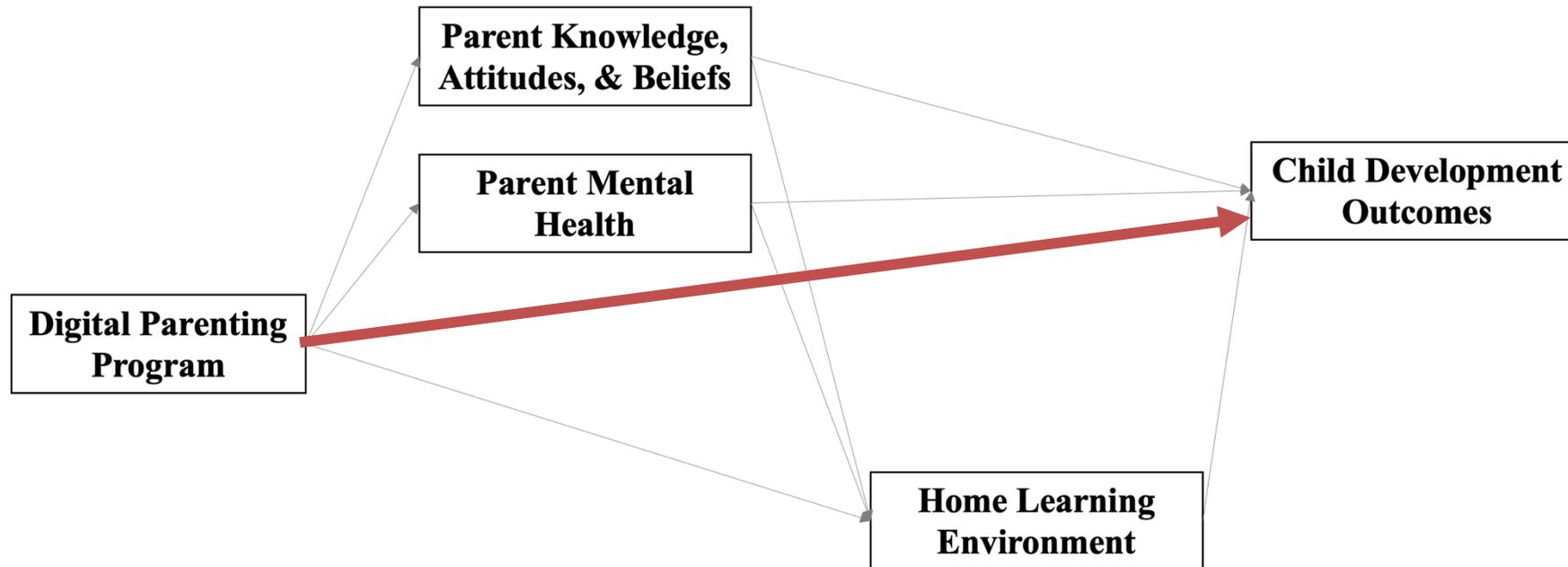
Theory of Change





Results

Quantitative



The intervention *did* improve child outcomes, but not (measured) parent outcomes after 18 months



Results

Qualitative

“ [The program] impacted positively because it taught us a lot, you know? Like I explained, I had very little patience—I was overwhelmed with everything falling on me. I went through some rough times, you know? But thank God, now I sit down and play with them. Now I feel more confident about raising my child, about encouraging him. ”

Parents perceived intervention to help... but also reported feeling overwhelmed.

“ [I didn't use the program much] because I also work, so I don't have much time. The little time I do have is already for doing house chores. I don't have much time for doing things from [the program]. ”

Conclusion



Conclusion

Summary

- **Caregiver mental health** is not *always* associated with better child outcomes
 - Links likely differ by both age and context
 - In contexts of extreme disadvantage, caregivers with high distress may cope by investing in children
- **Parenting interventions** do not *always* improve parent mental health
 - This can be true *even for* interventions that benefit children
 - Interventions may work better when parents are otherwise not receiving services, when they help to ease parents' burdens (rather than adding to them)



Conclusion

Take-aways

- **Caregivers matter:** Caregiver well-being should be prioritized as an important outcome on its own
- **Interventions** should be thoughtfully delivered and designed:
 - Prioritized for populations with few available supports
 - Focused on *reducing* parents' burdens (rather than adding more responsibilities)
 - Built to reflect the needs and priorities of the local context



Thank you!

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