

Beyond Quality:

Parental and Residential Stability and Children's Adjustment

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ABSTRACT—*In identifying environmental factors affecting children's development, researchers have typically focused on the quality of children's home or family environments. Less attention has been paid to environmental stability as a factor influencing children's well-being. This is partially due to outdated notions of children's living arrangements and to the fact that children in the least stable environments are often the hardest to involve and retain in research. Recent research suggests that there are associations between the degree of environmental instability and difficulties in adjustment, such that children exposed to higher levels of family instability (e.g., more frequent separations from parent figures and more frequent residential moves) show worse adjustment across a variety of developmental domains. Although there is still uncertainty regarding the causal direction of these associations (does instability cause children's problems or do the problems cause instability?), the sources and consequences of family instability clearly deserve greater attention in future research on child and adolescent adjustment.*

KEYWORDS—*parental separation; residential mobility; adjustment*

Children's home or family lives have long been considered a primary environmental context influencing their cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical development. Although modern-day developmental theories also recognize the important influences of genetic factors and extrafamilial factors on children's outcomes, these variables have been found to have much of their effect through their influence on children's home environments (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000).

Many aspects of children's family environments have been studied. These variables include family structure or composition, family economic and learning resources, and the quality of parent-child relationships (Collins et al., 2000; Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002). Even when measured at multiple time points, however, these variables are typically treated as providing a "snapshot" of the quality of a

child's home environment at each time. Rarely has the degree of change in children's home environments over time been treated as the primary variable of interest in research on child adjustment.

FAMILY INSTABILITY AS THE VARIABLE OF INTEREST

As many of us are aware from our own lives, family circumstances are not static. We move, change jobs, get sick, separate from romantic partners, and lose loved ones. For most people, these are relatively infrequent events. For others, change is a frequent and even defining feature of their home lives. Recent research has demonstrated that the degree of family instability children are exposed to is a strong predictor of their developmental adjustment (Ackerman, Kogos, Youngstrom, Schoff, & Izard, 1999; E.K. Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002).

Many family-instability variables can be studied, including changes in marital status and household composition, separations from parent figures, changes in physical residence, and episodes of antisocial behavior or mental or physical illness in the family. Because many of these events occur more often for low-income families than for families with more economic resources, family instability has been proposed as one mechanism explaining the associations between poverty and negative child outcomes (Ackerman et al., 1999; Linver et al., 2002).

In this review, I focus on two indicators of family instability that Chase-Lansdale and I investigated in a recent study of a sample of low-income adolescent girls: residential moves and separations from parent figures (E.K. Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). *By residential moves*, I mean physical changes of residence, including moves that adolescents make either with their families or on their own. *By separations from parent figures*, I mean major separations¹ from any adults the child considers "parental."

Residential moves and separations from parent figures are both highly disruptive events in children's lives, and both are relatively easily quantified. These events are not uncommon, particularly in low-income populations. Among the girls in our study, 15% had experienced at least one separation from a mother figure, and 42% had experienced at least one separation from a father figure. They had lived with a range of 1 to 5 parent figures in their lifetime and had

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¹Major separations are long-term separations that violate children's expectations for regular contact with their caregiver; they do not include short-term or predictable separations such as regular day-care experiences.

experienced from 0 to 6 major parental separations. The numbers of residential moves experienced in the past 5 years ranged from 0 to 10. Such events are not restricted to low-income families, however—16% of the U.S. population moved the year these data were collected (Faber, 1998).

SEPARATIONS FROM PARENT FIGURES AND CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Interest in separations from parent figures emerged from research on how loss of a parent affects children's mental health, as well as from research on the effects of divorce on children. In an early instability study, K.S. Adam, Bouckoms, and Streiner (1982) found that suicidal adolescents and adults were more likely to have experienced the loss of a parent through death, divorce, or separation, and to have experienced a generally disorganized, unpredictable home life, than were nonsuicidal individuals who were the same age and gender and similar in demographic background. Although early research treated divorce as a one-time event, later researchers noted that divorce is often associated with multiple changes in family structure, including the loss of the father from the home and subsequent remarriages and divorces of the mother. Studies found that multiple changes in a mother's partners have a cumulative negative effect on her children's social, emotional, educational, and behavioral outcomes (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1994).

Prior research has focused primarily on changes in children's contact with their fathers, rarely acknowledging that children experience major separations from their mothers as well. In our sample of adolescent girls, Chase-Lansdale and I found that as the number of separations from parent figures increased, adolescents showed higher levels of adjustment problems on an index measuring cognitive, emotional, academic, and behavioral functioning (E.K. Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). (See Fig. 1.) Separations from mother figures and father figures were both significantly and independently related to the girls' adjustment. Separations from temporary (less than 2 years) and long-standing (more than 2 years) caregivers, and those occurring early in childhood, in middle childhood, and during adolescence, all

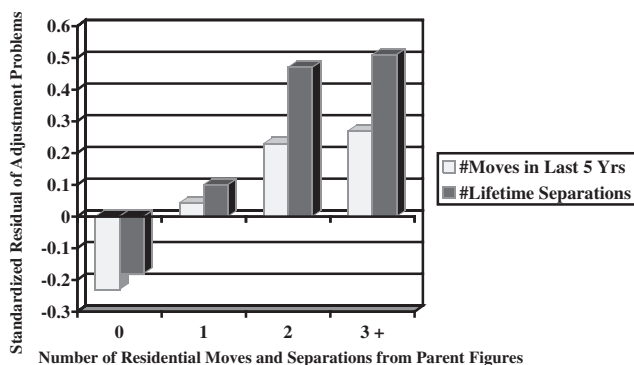


Fig. 1. Adolescents' adjustment problems as a function of two indicators of environmental instability: number of residential moves in the previous 5 years and number of separations from parent figures. The standardized residual measure of adjustment controls for household demographics and quality of the current environment, so that any effects of those variables are removed. Reprinted with permission from E.K. Adam and Chase-Lansdale (2002). Copyright 2002 by the American Psychological Association.

had significant effects on adjustment. The effects of separations were independent of family demographics and the quality of current relationships with parents and peers, as well as neighborhood environments.

How and why might separations from parent figures have these effects? Attachment theorists have long argued that children's feelings of security are strongly determined by their internalized perceptions of the availability of their primary caregivers. Although threats to the availability of caregivers have their most visible effect in infants, such threats provoke profound feelings of anxiety, anger, and despair throughout childhood and adolescence, and therefore have implications for emotional health (Kobak, 1999). Kochanska (2003) also provided evidence that the internalized history of mutual positive emotion and trust between a parent and child ("mutually responsive orientation") is an important basis for conscience.

What happens when this internalized sense of emotional security and mutual trust is disrupted by a major separation from a parent? Negative implications for emotional health and behavior could be expected. What happens if a child experiences this kind of disruption repeatedly? An anecdote illustrates one possible answer. A child living in foster care, who had lived with five different caregivers before the age of 6, was told: "You are a wonderful and special girl." She responded: "Then why does everybody leave me?" The violation of trust involved in the repeated loss of caregivers has implications not only for perceptions of other people, but also for perceptions of the self.

At the same time that the child is experiencing the emotional impact of a separation, he or she may also be losing an important source of social support. He or she may also experience dramatic changes in daily routines and reductions in the quality of care provided by the remaining adult or adults in the household.

RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY AND CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Sociological and epidemiological research on residential mobility has shown that a high rate of residential moves predicts social-emotional, behavioral, and educational problems, even when controlling for family characteristics contributing to a greater likelihood of moving (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). In our study, the number of moves adolescents had experienced in the prior 5 years was positively associated with the number of adjustment problems they had (see Fig. 1), and this association was independent of the effects of separations from parent figures, family demographic characteristics, and the quality of the adolescents' current environments (E.K. Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002).

Researchers interested in explaining the effects of residential moves on children have proposed that these effects are due to the loss of familiar physical environments, activities, and routines; the loss of social-support networks; or decreases in parents' well-being and parenting quality. One study (Pribesh & Downey, 1999) found evidence that children's loss of prior social connections is indeed an important mechanism. Characteristics such as the age or sex of the child, family structure, and parental support have been found to moderate the effects of moves on children (Simmons, Burgess, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987).

THE CAUSALITY PROBLEM

Clearly, the associations between family instability and children's and adolescents' adjustment problems can be explained in various ways.

There is still considerable debate regarding the causal direction of these associations. Rather than family instability causing children's problems, children's adjustment problems may be the cause of family instability, or preexisting characteristics of families and communities may cause both family instability and adjustment problems. Evidence exists, for example, that children of couples who later divorce exhibit problematic behavior prior to the divorce (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998), that mothers who change partners tend to have preexisting personality attributes that contribute to unstable relationships (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991), and that families who move more frequently have more disadvantages than other families prior to their moves (Pribesh & Downey, 1999). Researchers strive to measure and statistically control for such possibilities, but adequate data have not always been available to rule out these alternative explanations. Experimental research on nonhuman primates, however, has shown that random assignment to high levels of social disruption results in an array of serious social, emotional, and physical health problems (Kaplan, 1983). At a minimum, the current findings indicate that high levels of separations from parent figures and residential moves are important markers that may be used to identify children at high risk for adjustment problems so that intervention efforts may be targeted toward them.

WHY HAS FAMILY INSTABILITY NOT RECEIVED MORE ATTENTION?

There are several reasons why family instability has not received much research attention thus far. First, there has been a reliance on cross-sectional studies, which are poor tools for studying change. Second, much psychological research has been conducted with middle-class families, who tend to have relatively low levels of instability. Third, studies often select traditional family types as a means of "control," thus automatically excluding children with unusual or changing family experiences. Fourth, narrowly worded questions about family, such as questions that ask about only biological parents rather than all potentially important adult figures, may fail to illuminate the complexity and changeability of children's family lives. Finally, families with the highest amount of instability are often the hardest to recruit, track, and retain in research.

CUMULATIVE INSTABILITY INDICES

In my research, the independent effects of residential moves and separations from parents on adolescent adjustment were assessed. Other researchers have added together multiple instability factors to form a single index (Ackerman et al., 1999) and tested the effect of this cumulative measure of instability. Whether it is more informative to cumulate or to separate different aspects of family instability remains to be determined. Arguments can be made for both approaches. Cumulative indices describe the total degree of instability children are exposed to, and may therefore produce stronger effects, but separate instability indicators could illuminate the processes by which particular instability factors relate to specific outcomes.

The cumulative perspective suggests that normative changes that take place during individual development, such as those associated with puberty, also are important aspects of instability and may increase the impact of external events. Simmons et al. (1987) found that early adolescents coping with several life changes concurrently

(including normative changes and other less typical events) were at high risk for problematic outcomes. They suggested that adolescents need an "arena of comfort" involving continuity in at least some spheres of their lives. This notion of arena of comfort could be easily extended to explain the effects of instability on younger children and adults during periods of developmental transition.

FOCI FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Numerous issues remain to be examined in future research on the effects of instability on children; the following recommendations should be considered. First, future studies should use prospective longitudinal data, preferably from representative samples including the full range of socioeconomic and family circumstances. Whether the effects of instability vary across different socioeconomic, racial-ethnic, and other subgroups needs to be explored. Second, a wider range of instability variables should be examined. Any variable contributing to disruption, unpredictability, or chaos in a child's life is a reasonable candidate. Such variables should be examined both independently and as part of a cumulative instability index, and the impact of the developmental timing of each instability event should be considered. Third, the interaction between the quality and stability of children's environments needs to be examined. Is a stable but low-quality environment better than a typically high-quality one punctuated by occasional disruption? Does previously having experienced a high-quality home environment buffer the individual from the effects of later disruption?

Fourth, physiological and physical health outcomes should be examined. Animal research and research on human stress physiology show that predictability and control are important variables determining the organism's ability to contain physiological stress responses, and that low predictability and control contribute to increases in physiological stress and worse health outcomes. Given the low control and predictability associated with family instability, its impact on physiological variables and health outcomes is of interest. Fifth, an experimental intervention approach, in which some children from unstable environments are randomly chosen to receive interventions that increase social stability, would help resolve the causality issue. For example, children in long-term foster care could be purposefully maintained in the same home, school, and neighborhood, so that they do not experience additional disruptions, or they could be provided a single case worker who would support them through any and all transitions. Studies of this nature could provide persuasive evidence that would bolster the argument for undertaking more widespread policy initiatives aimed at increasing the degree of stability in children's home lives.

In this review, I have suggested that in order to understand children's adjustment, researchers need to move beyond a focus on quality and also consider the degree of disruption or change children experience in their home environments. Although issues of causality remain to be clarified, family instability is a clear marker of risk for adjustment problems. In the past, developmental psychologists have encouraged practitioners and policymakers to ensure high quality in children's relationships and physical environments. If research continues to show that family instability is an important predictor of children's adjustment problems, ensuring high levels of stability in children's interpersonal relationships and physical environments will be an important additional policy recommendation, with implications

for foster care, child custody, housing, and other child and family policies.

Recommended Reading

- Ackerman, B.P., Kogos, J., Youngstrom, E., Schoff, K., & Izard, C. (1999). (See References)
- Adam, E.K., & Chase-Lansdale, P.L. (2002). (See References)
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