Family Chaos Undermines Children’s Well-Being

All of us can recall days during our childhoods when family routines—regular mealtime, bedtime, homework time, and parent-child reading and playtimes—were disrupted, perhaps because of a change in a parent’s job, a family illness, or a busy season of after-school sports. In some families, however, absence of daily structure is nearly constant, yielding a chaotic home life that interferes with healthy development (Fiese & Winter, 2010). An organized family life provides a supportive context for warm, involved parent-child interaction, which is essential to children’s well-being.

Family chaos is linked to economic disadvantage—especially, single mothers with limited incomes struggling to juggle the challenges of transportation, shift jobs, unstable child-care arrangements, and other daily hassles. But chaos is not limited to such families.

Surveys reveal that among U.S. families as a whole, mothers’ time with children has remained fairly stable over the past three decades, and fathers’ time has increased (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009). But the way many parents spend that time has changed. Across income levels and ethnic groups, both mothers and fathers report more multitasking while caring for children—for example, using mealtimes not just to eat but also to check homework, read to children, and plan family outings and celebrations (Bianchi & Raley, 2005). Consequently, disruption in one family routine can disrupt others.

Possibly because of this compression of family routines, today’s parents and children consistently say they have too little time together. For example, only slightly more than half of U.S. families report eating together three to five times per week (CASA, 2006; Opinion Research Corporation, 2009). Frequency of family meals is associated with wide-ranging positive outcomes—in childhood, enhanced language development and academic achievement, fewer behavior problems, and time spent sleeping; and in adolescence, reduced sexual risk taking, alcohol and drug use, and mental health problems. Shared mealtimes also increase the likelihood of a healthy diet and protect against obesity and adolescent eating disorders (Adam, Snell, & Pendry, 2007; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). As these findings suggest, regular mealtimes are a general indicator of an organized family life and positive parent involvement.

But family chaos can prevail even when families do engage in joint activities. Unpredictable, disorganized family meals involving harsh or lax parental discipline and hostile, disrespectful communication are associated with children’s adjustment difficulties (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). As family time becomes pressured and overwhelming, its orderly structure diminishes, and warm parent-child engagement disintegrates.

Diverse circumstances can trigger a pileup of limited parental emotional resources, breeding family chaos. In addition to microsystem and mesosystem influences (parents with mental health problems, parental separation and divorce, single parents with few or no supportive relationships), the exosystem is powerful: When family time is at the mercy of external forces—parents commuting several hours a day to and from work, child-care arrangements often failing, parents experiencing excessive workplace pressures or job loss—family routines are threatened.

Family chaos contributes to children’s behavior problems, above and beyond its negative impact on parenting effectiveness (Coldwell, Pike, & Dunn, 2008; Fiese & Winter, 2010). Chaotic surroundings induce in children a sense of being hassled and feelings of powerlessness, which engender anxiety and low self-esteem.

Exosystem and macrosystem supports—including work settings with favorable family policies and high-quality child care that is affordable and reliable—can help prevent escalating demands on families that give way to chaos (Repetti & Wang, 2010). In one community, a child-care center initiated a take-home dinner program. Busy parents could special-order a healthy, reasonably priced family meal, ready to go at day’s end to aid in making the family dinner a routine that enhances children’s development.