



Levels of Household Chaos Tied to Quality of Parent-Adolescent Relationships in Coös County, New Hampshire

Corinna Jenkins Tucker

Household chaos, characterized by high levels of environmental noise, crowding, disorganization and instability,¹ has been increasing among U.S. families.² Scholars have expressed concern about the rise in household chaos because it may interfere with the extent to which positive, consistent, and supportive processes will occur between parents and children. Research focused on children shows that household chaos reduces parental responsiveness, involvement, and supervision and increases parental harshness.³ Yet little attention has been paid to adolescents' experiences of household chaos and its importance to their relationships with parents. In this brief, we examine Coös County adolescents' reports of household chaos and whether socio-economic and parenting differences are related to adolescents who experience household chaos.

We employed an adapted version of the Confusion, Hubbub, & Order Scale (CHAOS)⁴ to measure chaos in Coös County adolescents' households. The items and average scores for each item of the scale, and for the total scale, are presented in Table 1. Generally, Coös County adolescents reported low levels of household chaos.

TABLE 1. HOUSEHOLD CHAOS

IN THE PAST MONTH:	AVERAGE SCORE
1. YOU CAN'T HEAR YOURSELF THINK IN OUR HOME.	0.97
2. IT'S A REAL ZOO IN OUR HOME.	0.87
3. WE ARE USUALLY ABLE TO STAY ON TOP OF THINGS IN OUR HOME.*	1.17
4. THE ATMOSPHERE IN OUR HOUSE IS CALM.*	1.70
AVERAGE OF ITEMS	1.18

Note: Asterisks indicate items are reversed coded so that higher scores mean greater household chaos. The range for each of the items was 0–4. 0 = not true and 4 = very true.

KEY FINDINGS

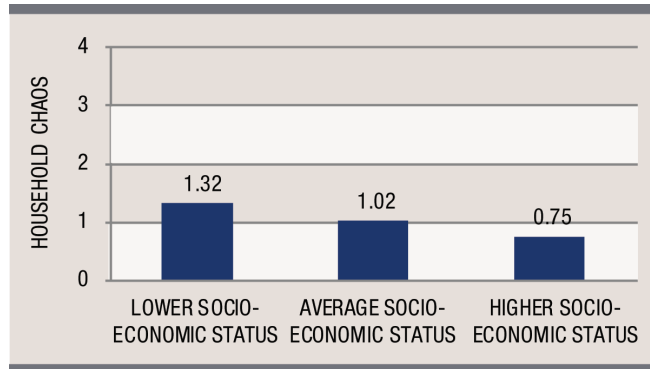
Household chaos—characterized by high levels of environmental noise, crowding, disorganization and instability—is generally low in Coös County, but there is variability in the extent of adolescents' experiences with chaos.

Household chaos was greater in households with lower socio-economic status than those with average and higher socio-economic status.

Adolescents from chaotic households reported less warm and more hostile relationships with their mothers and fathers.

For the analysis of socio-economic differences in experiences of household chaos, three socio-economic groups were created—low, average, and high—based on parents' education, occupation, and family financial strain as reported by adolescents. Adolescents in lower socio-economic status families reported greater household chaos than adolescents in average and higher socio-economic status families. Adolescents' reports of household chaos did not differ significantly between average and higher socio-economic status families (see Figure 1).

Adolescents reported separately on the nature of their relationships with their mothers and fathers. Established measures of warmth⁵ and hostility⁶ in the parent-child relationship were employed. Relationships between household chaos and each of the parenting measures for mothers and fathers were significant and in the expected direction. Adolescents' reports of household chaos were associated with less parental warmth and more parental hostility (see Figure 2).

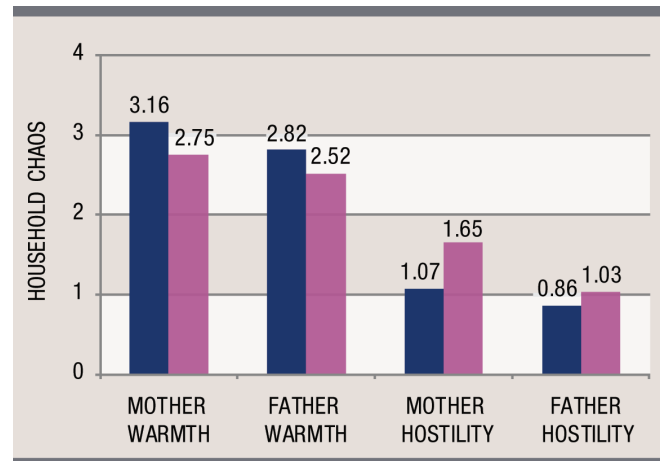
FIGURE 1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES IN REPORTS OF HOUSEHOLD CHAOS

Discussion

Coös County adolescents generally report low levels of household chaos. There is no nationally-representative study on household chaos in order to make comparisons to the findings reported in this fact sheet. However, it is notable that the average household chaos score for this sample represented approximately '1' on a five-point scale with '0' representing 'not true.'

The socio-economic differences in Coös County adolescents' experiences of household chaos fit with the larger research literature. Although all income levels are experiencing greater household chaos, low-income families are more likely to encounter household chaos than families at the middle- or upper-income levels.⁷ Findings from this study reflect this pattern, and suggest that adolescents' risk of experiencing household chaos is not evenly distributed across socio-economic status.

Our finding that household chaos was related to adolescents' reports of lower quality relationships with mothers and fathers is consistent with previous work focused on children. Chaos is thought to be harmful to families and children because it interferes with and limits predictable and sustained positive interactions among family members. Children and parents cannot develop healthy relationships unless they can count on and interact with family members regularly.

FIGURE 2. RELATIONSHIP QUALITY DIFFERENCES WITH MOTHERS AND FATHERS BY HOUSEHOLD CHAOS

Growing attention to this issue shows there is opportunity for teachers, social service workers, school nurses, and others who work with adolescents and families in Coös County in their prevention and intervention efforts. Clinical and programmatic work aimed at reducing household chaos and improving parent-adolescent relationships could be done by helping families and adolescents establish routines, organization, and predictability. Work also could be directed at garnering reliable individuals from a supportive network to provide consistency and assistance to adolescents and their parents in order to increase household stability.

Data in This Brief

Our data came from Coös Youth Study. A population of tenth grade students⁸ attending all public schools in Coös County completed a confidential self-reported paper-and-pencil questionnaire administered during school hours. All procedures were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board and by the partnering school districts.

End Notes

1. T. D. Wachs and G. W. Evans, "Chaos in context," in *Chaos and its influence on children's development: An ecological perspective*, edited by G. W. Evans and T. D. Wachs (Washington, DC: APA, 2010), 3–13.
2. U. Bronfenbrenner et al., *The state of Americans: This generation and the next* (New York: Free Press, 1996); D. T. Lichter and E. Wethington, "Chaos and the diverging fortunes of American children: A historical perspective," in *Chaos and its influence on children's development: An ecological perspective*, edited by G. W. Evans and T. D. Wachs (Washington, DC: APA, 2010), 15–32.
3. F. Corapci and T. D. Wachs, "Does parental mood or efficacy mediate the influence of environmental chaos upon parenting behavior?" *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 48 (2002): 182–201; J. Coldwell, A. Pike, and J. Dunn, "Household chaos: Links with parenting and child behaviour," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47 (2006): 1116–1122; Wachs and Evans, "Chaos in context."
4. A. P. Matheny, et al., "Bringing order out of chaos: Psychometric characteristics of the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 16 (1995): 429–444.
5. M. K. Johnson, G. H. Elder, and M. Stern, "Attachments to family and community and the young adult transition of rural youth," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15 (2005): 99–125.
6. R. D. Conger et al., "Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents," *Child Development*, 65, (1994): 541–561.
7. Bronfenbrenner et al., *The state of Americans*; Lichter and Wethington, "Chaos and the diverging fortunes of American children."
8. Adolescents were on average 15.71 years old.

About the Author

Corinna Jenkins Tucker, PhD, CFLE, is a Carsey School of Public Policy faculty fellow and a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire (cjtucker@unh.edu).

Acknowledgments

The Coös Youth Study Team is supported by the National Science Foundation (#155797), the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (#79127), and the Carsey School of Public Policy. The Coös Youth Study Team thanks the students who are participating in this research project and the superintendents, principals, guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators who helped the team collect these data. Special thanks to fellow members of the Coös Youth Research Team, including project manager Eleanor Jaffee, research assistants Meghan Mills and Michael Stanton, and Co-PIs Cesar Rebellon, Erin Hiley Sharp, and Karen Van Gundy.



University of New Hampshire
Carsey School of Public Policy

The Carsey School of Public Policy conducts policy research on vulnerable children, youth, and families and on sustainable community development. We give policy makers and practitioners timely, independent resources to effect change in their communities.

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 1155797) and the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (Grant No. 79127).

Huddleston Hall • 73 Main Street • Durham, NH 03824
(603) 862-2821

TTY USERS: DIAL 7-1-1 OR 1-800-735-2964 (RELAY N.H.)

carsey.unh.edu