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

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Household chaos, characterized by high levels of environmental noise, crowding, disorganization and instability, has been increasing among U.S. families. 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. 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) 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.

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 warmth and hostility 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).
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.

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.

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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
8. Adolescents were on average 15.71 years old.

About the Author
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