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UNH Researchers Find Chaos at Home Can Adversely Affect Adolescents

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DURHAM, N.H. – Dealing with all the physical and mental changes that teens experience can be tough but add to the mix a disorganized and unstable family environment and it can create a whole new layer of challenges. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire have found that youth living in chaotic households, characterized by confusion, disorganization and lack of routines, were more likely to be depressed, have poorer physical health and engage in problematic substance use.

“It’s not uncommon for families to struggle from time to time with creating stability and predictability at home, many of us have those unexpected crazy periods,” said Corinna Tucker, professor of human development and family studies. “What we’re looking at in this study is when it becomes overwhelming and a way of life.”

The study (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-018-1198-x>), which appears in the Journal of Family and Child Studies, looked at youth in the 10th grade living in an economically-vulnerable rural community over a two-year period. The rural northeastern county of New Hampshire where these teens lived had a higher rate of poverty, loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs, and parents who often needed to drive long distances for jobs with decent wages and benefits. The researchers looked at how these teens’ perceptions of chaos in the home were linked to three key areas of teen health: mental, physical and behavioral.

“We know that chaos at home creates stress which impacts an individual’s ability to self-regulate, or the ability to calm oneself, manage emotions, and to think before acting,” said Tucker. “Adolescence is a critical time to develop self-regulation as teens prepare for transition into adulthood. The stress caused by a chaotic household may cause teens to withdraw and miss out on learning opportunities and feel helpless.”

Results showed that those teens who perceived higher levels of household chaos in 10th grade reported worse physical health and more problematic substance use two years later when they were in 12th grade, even after accounting for these characteristics in 10th grade. Teens in chaotic home situations who also experienced hostile parenting in 10th grade reported even greater depression two years later.

Previous studies of household chaos have looked mostly at its effects on younger children and rarely in rural settings. The reduction in household chaos through routines, predictability and organization along with a focus on warm and supportive parenting are important not only for younger children, but also for healthy adolescent development.



Co-authors on this study, all from UNH, include Erin Sharp, associate professor of human development and family studies; Karen Van Gundy, professor of sociology; and Cesar Rebellon, professor of sociology.

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation, the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, and the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

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