Q&A: How Early Childhood Shapes Social Maladjustments Over Time

With Elizabeth Karberg

**Q: What are some tips you can provide for safety around virtual home visiting for the safety for the children?**

**A:** This is beyond my area of expertise, but here are some resources! https://www.nationalalliancehvmodels.org/rapid-response  
https://institutefsp.org/covid-19-rapid-response  
https://www.childtrends.org/during-the-covid-19-pandemic-telehealth-can-help-connect-home-visiting-services-to-families  
  
Coffee Chats with Brookes - 30 minute Q&A Use of screenings and tools: https://brookespublishing.com/coffee-chats-brookes/ - note a webinar next Monday on doing assessments virtually (perhaps screening relevance too)

**Q: Has the divorce rate not been stabilizing?**

**A:** When you look at crude divorce rates they are stabilizing, but when researchers adjust for the age distribution of the population we get a different story. What this means is that the decline that some articles and news outlets report are an artifact of a change in the age of the population since 1980. Said another way, the likelihood of divorce is not equal across ages, with older couples driving the increasing rates.

**Q: What is the heterogeneity effect?**

**A:** The heterogeneity effect is a theory that when something is relatively uncommon and therefore unexpected, it has a bigger effect than when the same phenomenon is common and therefore expected. It is a theory to explain variability in outcomes among different groups experiencing the same thing. So in the context of family instability, the least expected way for children to experience instability is via divorce, and we see that these kids show a stronger reaction, in terms of their social developmental outcomes, to the divorce than kids' who experience family instability in another way.

**Q: Can you explain the impacts cohabitating has on what we talked about today?**

**A:** From our research, kids whose parents are cohabiting fare no worse than other kids when their parents separate.

**Q: Seems to me today's nuclear family idea is failing. This is harmful because we do not live in community where other adults participate in early childhood experiences. Shouldn't we be promoting community?**

**A:** Yes this is a great point. The idea of a nuclear family as the norm and the ideal is an artifact of a relatively short historical period and it's not realistic for us to expect to go back to it. I'm not sure of a way back to the "it takes a village" model, though. We did rely more on community and extended family in raising children before the 1950s. Some communities still do this and it is beneficial for everyone. I think one thing that would help is policies that are more family friendly, because they send the message that we're all in this together and everyone has a responsibility to help families in their communities.

**Q: Do you have any information about children living with relatives, vs. bio parents?**

**A:** This is a relatively small group, so there's not a ton of research on it. The research I'm aware of is confounded with child welfare research because children end up with relatives when their parents aren't able or willing to look after them and CPS often is involved in placing the child with a relative.

**Q: Does heterogeneity concept result in a sociological polarization?**

**A:** The heterogeneity effect is a theory that when something is relatively uncommon and therefore unexpected, it has a bigger effect than when the same "thing" is relatively common and therefore expected. This is wrapped up with social polarization to some extent, but it's a theory to explain what we're observing in social polarization, not something that is causing social polarization. Heterogeneity effect theories can become dangerous if, for example, policy makers read research supporting a heterogeneity effect hypothesis and decided marginalized groups didn't need supports because their hardships were normalized/expected and therefore not a big deal. There is a lot going on with groups we typically serve (low-income, ethnic/racial minority), and as a result they are not doing as well, on average, as their more advantaged counterparts. Heterogeneity effects can help explain some of the variability in outcomes and can help explain when we don't see worse outcomes when they'd be expected. But we should not mistake this for a blanket statement that expected adversity is ok.

**Q: What kind of demographics for race is the study based on?**

**A:** The sample is 28% white, 42% black, 26% Latino, and 4% "other"

**Q: Any data on protective factors? Why some children may do better?**

**A:** Answered during webinar.

**Q: Do the statistics regarding kids suffering from family instability reflect their later involvement in juvenile courts, adult courts, or both?**

**A:** From what I've read the research is pretty limited to juvenile justice settings. However, we know that involvement in juvenile justice is linked with later justice involvement.

**Q: Why the spike in divorce in 1947?**

**A:** Ruggles didn't go into this, but from other research I believe this reflects the post-depression and post-WWII spike in divorce. During the Great Depression, people did not have the means to separate (or marry) and both marriage and divorce rates were relatively low. There was a spike in marriage when WWII began as people wanted to marry before men were shipped off to war. Divorce remained low during the war. Once people regained the means to separate after the Great Depression and men returned from war, there was a spike in the divorce rate.

**Q: What is the name of the social skills inventory referenced?**

**A:** The Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS)

**Q: Does Dr. Karberg have any webinars on her fatherhood research?**

**A:** Yes, there is one archived on the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse website (https://www.fatherhood.gov/webinars) navigate to 2018 webinars and you'll find it), and one that will be archived on FYSB's Exchange website for PREP programs (https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov/) in early May.

**Q: Would this also apply to children who have a parent in the military?**

**A:** A note about this to add to what I said during the webinar. I looked into Kay's point about heterogeneity effects at play here, and they very well could be but I haven't found research that's tested this. I wouldn't be surprised, though, if researchers began to test this because there is quite a bit of variability in children's outcomes during deployment that isn't well explained or understood in the current literature.

**Q: How about families getting helped by grandparents?**

**A:** A lot of the research on this is focused on the role of grandparents when parents divorce, or the role of grandparents when a teen has a baby (e.g., a teen mom lives with her mom). It looks like grandparents can buffer the stress of separation, but it's very hard to understand children's outcomes in these circumstances because the presence of a grandparent is wrapped up in other stressors (e.g., a grandparent lives with children typically when there's a strong need for help, not as a normative family arrangement). There are some racial and ethnic groups for which living with a grandparent is more normative, but I'm not sure if there's extensive research on grandparents in the home and kids' outcomes for these groups.

**Q: Rural Nevada, School District SEL/counseling..suggestions on addressing culture of poverty?**

**A:** This is beyond my area of expertise, and it would help to understand a little more about what this person is interested in, but I would recommend looking at Child Trends' and Urban Institute's websites for research on ways to help families in poverty. Here are links: https://www.urban.org/research-area/poverty-vulnerability-and-safety-net and https://www.childtrends.org/research-topic/poverty-and-inequality Some other suggestions that might be helpful are to build into your work ways to acknowledge and address larger community norms that might work against what you're trying to do. For example, research on teen pregnancy finds that controlling for a host of sociodemographic factors associated with risk of teen pregnancy, the social mobility in the county where a teen lives predicts her likelihood of getting pregnant. The researchers suggest that if a girl grows up believing she has no options for a better life because no one around her rises beyond what they were born into, she's not likely to try hard to avoid getting pregnant. She's not postponing childbearing until she has x,y,z because she doesn't think she ever will. To me, this is a major problem with breaking the cycle of poverty beyond the structural barriers in place to rise out of poverty - you have to be shown that "better" is possible and that's very hard to do.

**Q: In your studies, have you experienced any innovative or creative ways to assist while working with children and/or families?**

**A:** This is a great question. I would say the most successful programs I've observed have an incredibly dedicated leader or facilitators/staff who can adapt to each family and develop person-specific strategies as needed. Clients/participants respond to staff and programs who go to immense efforts to show that the individual is worth their time. This is a huge commitment on the part of staff, but the individuals and families typically in human service agencies have been told their whole lives (in most cases) that they aren't worth much, and they come to believe it. It takes a lot to unlearn that. I'm sorry I don't have a more generalizable solution!

**Q: Are the outcomes regarding a parent partner moving in only relate to a male moving into the household?**

**A:** Answered during webinar

**Q: Does it track mothers who are living with other family i.e. grandparents? Does that have any effect on the outcomes?**

**A:** A lot of the research on this is focused on the role of grandparents when parents divorce, or the role of grandparents when a teen has a baby (e.g., a teen mom lives with her mom). It looks like grandparents can buffer the stress of separation, but it's very hard to understand children's outcomes in these circumstances because the presence of a grandparent is wrapped up in other stressors (e.g., a grandparent lives with children typically when there's a strong need for help, not as a normative family arrangement). There are some racial and ethnic groups for which living with a grandparent is more normative, but I'm not sure if there's extensive research on grandparents in the home and kids' outcomes for these groups.

**Q: Would seeing two parents in the home and observing how they go through conflict have an effect? Would a second adult open up the child to a greater network of adults (via extended family, friends) and be linked to positive outcomes?**

**A:** Conflict is not "bad" for children when it's accompanied by the ability to observe resolution of the conflict. It's obviously not ideal for there to be frequent conflict, but I think in cases where there's actually a resolution it's not common to have persistent conflict. Seeing conflict and the resolution allows children to develop conflict resolution skills. Just being exposed to the conflict and not the resolution is stressful for kids. The more positive relationships children have with trusted adults, the better. This isn't necessarily just adults living with the child, but if the child lives with extended family with whom they have a good relationship, this could be a buffer for other stressors in their lives.

**Q: What is happening in society to cause lower marriage rates?**

**A:** The meaning of marriage has changed. Andrew Cherlin calls this the "deinstitutionalization of marriage," and describes a weakening of the social norms that define behavior in the social institution of marriage. Marriage used to have very distinct prescribed roles of "breadwinner" and "homemaker." People were not necessarily happy in these roles, but people knew what to expect of their roles and how to fulfill them. Beginning in the 1950s, although these roles persisted, marriage also began to be seen as an institution of companionship, where the emotional satisfaction of the couple was becoming as important than their ability to fulfill their gendered roles. However, couples tended to derive satisfaction from fulfilling these roles well, at least in the beginning. During this shift toward an emphasis on the companionship, marriage remained the only socially acceptable way to have a sexual relationship and raise children. Beginning in the 1960s, however, marriage dominance began to diminish as other ways of having companionship gained social acceptance (e.g., non-marital sexual relationships became more accepted, reflected in the sexual revolution of this time). Roles in marriages also became more flexible and not so gendered or prescribed. This gave rise to the "individualized marriage" where individual satisfaction became paramount and replaced satisfaction derived from being a spouse or parent. There are a lot of co-occurring legal changes in the definition of marriage/divorce that went along with this, but this historical shift in the meaning of marriage made it "easier" to divorce when people were unhappy and made people more willing to divorce because they were more concerned with their own sense of self than their identity as a spouse. This is not to say all marriages were miserable before the 1960s, but when the meaning and expectations changed, so did the expectations around the permanence of and sacrifice expected with marriage, as well as expectations that marriage was the only way to have a family life.

**Q: I'm wondering if rate of marriage is different based on socioeconomic status?**

**A:** Yes. Higher SES groups are more likely to marry than lower SES groups. Across nearly every SES/race/ethnic group in the US, adults say they want to marry. But particularly for lower income individuals, the idea of marriage is wrapped around high economic standards for themselves, a "marriage bar," that even they recognize is very hard to attain. Probably related to this, there is also a difference by SES in views of whether marriage is necessary to form a family, with lower income individuals being more likely to want to marry but simultaneously not thinking it's the only way to form a family.

**Q: In my experience the child who has two adults to interact with are more flexible in their interactions because they had had more than one way to be played with, held, taken care of with ordinary everyday needs. To me that gives them more social competence.**

**A:** There is something to this, but I think it reflects young kids' (I see the comment below about age range) socialization. When they're exposed to other people, children and adults, they're more flexible and have more opportunities to practice social competence. Children definitely have different expectations for and attachments to different adults in their life. There is strong evidence though that having one good parent (at this age it needs to be a parent or parent figure) is enough to be protective. For example, supportive, nurturing, involved fathers can protect children from the negative effects of having a harsh, negative mother.

**Q: What about the difference between long term partnership and marriage, such as families where biological parents are not married but are in a long term lasting partnership?**

**A:** This is relatively uncommon in the US and therefore not well studied, but research suggests when these relationships are stable they confer the same benefits as marriage to children.