

Children are hurt by chaos at home

July 29 2008, By Sheri Hall

(PhysOrg.com) -- Historically, U.S. children have experienced chaos for decades due to the nation's high rates of migration, poverty, and maternal and child mortality. But today, chaos in children's lives is largely on the family level, said a Cornell sociologist in a statewide videoconference, June 17.

"Children are affected by the divorce and remarriage of their parents, higher rates of maternal employment and the fast pace of modern life," said Dan Lichter, professor of policy analysis and management and director of the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center. Many of the modern factors that contribute to chaos -- such as divorce or children born out of wedlock -- disproportionately impact lower-income and minority children, he said.

Almost 600 community professionals at 13 sites across New York took part in the live videoconference that focused on how chaotic environments impact the health of children.

The conference, co-sponsored by the College of Human Ecology, melded research from psychology, demography and sociology for a diverse audience that included representatives from schools, health-care organizations, the court system and the foster care system.

These disproportionate effects on low-income and minority children contribute to the cycle of poverty in our nation, said Gary Evans, professor of design and environmental analysis and human development, also a speaker at the conference. His research shows that chaos --

specifically crowding, excessive noise, less structured and predictable household routines, as well as geographic instability -- is linked closely to economic status, with poorer families experiencing more chaos.

For example, he said, lower-income families are five times more likely to experience divorce and six times more likely to have unpredictable work schedules.

In addition, lower-income communities are on average 10-15 decibels louder -- or twice as loud -- as middle-class communities. Evans' research has shown that children living in noisy communities are more likely to suffer from deficits in reading.

"There's a convergence of these different issues that creates problems for children living in poverty," Evans said. "Children need to learn they can have an impact on their environment. In chaos, that's difficult to learn because they lose the sense of control over their environment."

Elaine Wethington, associate professor of human development, identified several red flags that indicate children are experiencing too much chaos in their lives:

- a lack of routine in parents' schedules;
- a lack of routine in the child's eating and sleeping schedule;
- time spent unsupervised; and
- a lack of cheerfulness or energy.

"We need local solutions that involve schools and parents," Wethington told the audience.

The videoconference was designed to help communicate to policy-makers and practitioners some of the scholarly research on chaos and children's development from the First Biennial Bronfenbrenner

Conference on the Ecology of Human Development, held in Ithaca in October 2007. Its proceedings are in press at the American Psychological Association.

The video broadcast and downloadable research briefs are available at www.parenting.cit.cornell.edu/events.html. Follow the link to archived webcasts.

Other co-sponsors of the videoconference include the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center, the Parenting in Context project and Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Provided by Cornell University

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