

Household chaos may be hazardous to a child's health

October 9 2013, by Jeff Grabmeier

Kindergarten-age children have poorer health if their home life is marked by disorder, noise and a lack of routine and they have a mother who has a chaotic work life, new research suggests.

The results show the importance of order and routine in helping preschoolers stay healthy and develop to the best of their potential, said Claire Kamp Dush, lead author of the study and assistant professor of human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"Children need to have order in their lives," Kamp Dush said. "When their life is chaotic and not predictable, it can lead to poorer health."

Kamp Dush said that the study involved mostly low-income families, and the results showed mothers who were more impoverished reported significantly higher levels of chaos.

"I don't think that the findings would be different in a middle-class sample – chaos is bad for children from any background," she said.

"But most middle-class families can avoid the same level of chaos that we saw in the most impoverished families. We're not talking about the chaos of your kids being overinvolved in activities and the parents having to run them from one place to another. This harmful chaos is much more fundamental."

Kamp Dush conducted the study with Kammi Schmeer, an assistant

professor of sociology at Ohio State, and Miles Taylor, assistant professor of sociology at Florida State University. Their results appear online in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*.

Data came from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, and included 3,288 mothers who were interviewed at their homes by a trained interviewer when their child was 3 and again when he or she was 5 years old. Most of the parents were unmarried and low-income.

The researchers used several measures of household chaos: crowding (more than one person per room), TV background noise (TV was on more than 5 hours a day), lack of regular bedtime for the child, and a home rated as noisy, unclean and cluttered by the interviewer.

The study also included a measure of the mother's work chaos, which included stress caused by the work schedule, difficulty dealing with child care problems during working hours, lack of flexibility to handle family needs and a constantly changing work schedule.

The children's health was rated by their mother at ages 3 and 5 as excellent, very good, good, fair or poor.

Results showed that higher levels of household chaos and mothers' work chaos when their children were age 3 were linked to lower ratings of [child health](#) at age 5, even after taking into account initial child health and other factors that may have had an impact.

In addition, the researchers were also able to use a statistical technique to determine if the causality may have been reversed: in other words, if poor child health might lead to more household chaos. "It would be easy to see how having a sick child may make your household more chaotic, but that's not what we found. We did clearly see, however, that a chaotic household at age 3 was linked to poorer health at age 5," Kamp Dush

said.

The most common source of household chaos was television noise, with more than 60 percent of mothers reporting the television was on more than five hours a day. Between 15 and 20 percent of households reported crowding, noise, and unclean and cluttered rooms.

About a third of the mothers had inflexible [work schedules](#) and 11 percent worked multiple jobs.

How does household chaos lead to sicker children? Kamp Dush noted that chaos has been linked to stress, and stress has been shown to lead to poorer health. Women with inflexible work schedules may not be able to take their children to the doctor when needed. And a dirty house may increase exposure to toxins and germs.

Kamp Dush emphasized that the findings shouldn't be used to suggest that the parents are at fault for the chaos in their households.

"We're not blaming the victims here – there is a larger system involved," she said.

"These mothers can't help it that their jobs don't give them the flexibility to deal with sick kids. They can't afford a larger house or apartment to deal with overcrowding. With their work schedules, they often don't have time to keep a clean home and they don't have the money to spend on organizational systems or cleaning services used by middle-class families to keep their homes in order."

What these mothers and fathers need most is jobs that allow them to maintain regular schedules and have the flexibility to deal with sick children, Kamp Dush said. Having to maintain two jobs is also detrimental to keeping households free of [chaos](#).

Provided by The Ohio State University

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