

Problems of Development & Learning

Instability on Child Development

9.1 The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development

Children's early experiences shape who they are and affect lifelong health and learning. To develop to their full potential, children need safe and stable housing, adequate and nutritious food, access to medical care, secure relationships with adult caregivers, nurturing and responsive parenting, and high-quality learning opportunities at home, in child care settings and in school.

The recent financial crisis of the Great Recession has taken a negative toll on families across the country and beyond. High parental unemployment, home foreclosures, and strained household resources have weakened the stability and quality of home environments for many children and limited access to proper care and nutrition. As parents struggle to provide financially for their families, the chronic stress they face may make it difficult for them to give their children the care and attention they need. Some children who have grown up during this time period have experienced a great deal of instability in their lives. This lack of security and continuity can have deep and lasting impacts on children's development physically, emotionally, and cognitively.

Although instability has been a longstanding issue for some families, its increased prevalence during the recession has heightened awareness of the issue. Coupled with recent advances in the study of toxic stress and its adverse effects on child development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007), there is a growing need to understand what it means for children to experience instability and how any negative effects can be prevented.

Bodies of research from various fields of study—developmental psychology, sociology, economics, public policy, demography and family studies— independently explore different domains of instability in the supportive structures that predict children's outcomes. However, there has been little effort to look across research disciplines and study contexts to synthesize the knowledge base and draw connections among the various domains of instability.

We build this knowledge base by exploring the literature on the effects of instability on children’s developmental outcomes and academic achievement. In our discussion, we review and synthesize research evidence on five identified domains of instability that have been well established in the literature: family income, parental employment, housing, family structure, and the out-of-home contexts of school and child care. We also discuss some of the key pathways through which instability may affect development. Specifically, research points to the underlying role of parenting, parental mental health, and the home environment in providing the stability and support young children need for positive development. We conclude with recommendations for policy and practice to alleviate the impact of instability.

9.2 What Do We Mean by Instability?

The term *instability* is often used in social science research to reflect change or discontinuity in one’s experience; however, operational definitions of instability vary by field and are often determined by the data and measures available for research. Whereas some literature looks at the effects of *change* measured broadly, change itself can have both positive and negative implications depending on the context, including whether the change is voluntary, planned in advance, or moving the individual or family to better circumstances. For the purposes of this synthesis, *instability* is best conceptualized as the experience of abrupt, involuntary, and/or negative change in individual or family circumstances, which is likely to have adverse implications for child development. Examples include a father unexpectedly losing his job and income, a residential move as a result of foreclosure, and the dissolution of a parental union. When parents lack choice or control over change, they may be less able to support their children in adapting to the change.

Instability has been studied from various angles, with the underlying theme that certain kinds of change, and changes at certain points in their lives, predict negative outcomes for children (Moore, Vandivere, and Ehrle 2000). These changes do not occur in isolation. A disruption in one domain (e.g., parent employment) often triggers a disruption in another domain (e.g., child care) in a “domino effect” fashion. In some cases, the causality of instability is not one-dimensional but a result of a complicated series of events that compound over time. This domino effect may be most predominant among low-income or lower middle-class families who lack savings and assets that they can tap into during temporary periods of transition (McKernan, Ratcliffe, and Vinopal 2009; Mills and Amick 2010). The relationships among different domains are complex and involve

a balancing act, such as cutting back or giving more to some domains to maintain overall stability for the family.

For example, employment instability is connected to economic instability, since parental employment and family income are directly related. Family economics are also connected to the family structure and housing. As parents separate or form new unions, a family may change residences and the household income may vary. A change in residence may lead to a change in schools or child care providers, which may also vary as a result of changes in parental employment or income. The domains of instability are depicted as overlapping circles that form an outer ring around the child, who is at the center of the model. Parenting and the home environment act as a buffer between instability and the child. When they are positive and supportive, parents can protect the child from the effects of instability; however, instability can potentially weaken the quality of parenting and the home environment, thus negatively influencing the child.

This literature synthesis does not directly examine the interrelationships across domains, but it does highlight how these domains are related. Because of methodological challenges, few studies consider changes across multiple domains and how they relate to each other and to children's development across the life span. Another key challenge is disentangling the effects of family income from the effects of instability in a given domain, since instability is somewhat more frequent among low-income families, and poverty itself has a strong negative association with child development (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Maritato 1997). Specifically, research suggests there are two forms of instability: *chronic instability* that is inherent of being low-income and *episodic instability* that occurs from external shocks, such as a job loss or parental divorce. This synthesis includes literature that demonstrates that both forms of instability are negatively associated with children's developmental outcomes.

More generally, while some literature on instability attempts to estimate the causal impacts of instability on children, other studies are more descriptive in nature, documenting associations that may or may not be causal. It is thus difficult to identify the leading causes of the instability and how targeted external supports can alleviate the effects of instability. This synthesis advances the study of instability by drawing together disparate literatures on the effects of instability in different

domains and identifying common themes across multiple domains in how instability relates to children's development.

9.3 Why Does Instability Matter?

Children thrive in stable and nurturing environments where they have a routine and generally know what to expect from their daily lives. Although some change in children's lives is normal and anticipated, sudden and dramatic disruptions can be extremely stressful and affect children's feeling of security. Within the context of supportive relationships with adults who act as a buffer against any negative effects of instability, children learn how to cope with adversity, adapt to their surroundings, and regulate their emotions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007). Unbuffered stress, however, that escalates to extreme levels can be detrimental to children's mental health and cognitive functioning (Evans, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 2011; Shonkoff and Garner 2011).

Recent research from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child shows that experiencing some stress is normal and even essential for healthy development (2007). Young children deal with emotionally stressful situations everyday: an infant separates from his mother on the first day of child care, a toddler argues with a peer over a preferred toy, or a preschooler gets a shot at the doctor's office. Such common events produce positive stress, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in stress hormone levels. Human bodies are built to respond to environmental stress in ways that protect us from harm. Even more moderate levels of stress, such as the loss of a pet, are viewed by experts as being tolerable for children when buffered by supportive adults.

Yet children exposed to strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity, or *toxic stress*, are at risk for cognitive impairment and stress-related disease (2007). Toxic stress causes an over-activation of the stress response system so the body is constantly in a heightened state of arousal, which disrupts normal brain and organ development and, consequently, damages brain architecture and neurocognitive systems. The result is poor academic performance, a lack of social competence, and an inability to regulate emotions. Even adult cognitive abilities have been shown to be impaired in part by elevated chronic stress during childhood (Evans and Schamberg 2009).

Although it may not be clear how much stress is tolerable, when stress becomes toxic, and how these levels vary across individuals, it is evident that extreme forms of stress can have lasting impacts on development. Moreover, supportive relationships with adults are necessary for children to recover from distressing life

events. Most transitions in children's lives do not provoke stress at a toxic level; however, this emerging body of research raises the question of what we know about the impact of more pervasive stress stemming from instability. The research also highlights how stress may be a mechanism through which instability affects development.

9.4 Theoretical Framework

Grounding our review of the research literature within an existing theoretical framework can help shape the way we conceptualize instability and the effects it has on children and families. Three selected research theories each contribute to our understanding of how environmental factors influence young children's experiences within their families.

The first is the family stress theory (McCubbin and Patterson 1983; Patterson 2002), which is often applied in the fields of family studies and psychology. This theory suggests that three factors interact to predict the likelihood of a crisis or the inability to maintain stability: a stressful event, a family's perception of the stressor, and a family's existing resources. If the family has the resources to handle the burden of the stressor, then a crisis can be avoided. During difficult life circumstances, families implement coping strategies, such as turning to their support networks and community resources, to effectively manage the stress. Effective coping, or family resiliency, leads to adaptation that can restore balance to the family's functioning. However, some families experience a "pile-up" of stress when they have difficulties coping and managing change, which can lead to maladaptation and poor family functioning over time.

To build on that theory and explore how family functioning relates to children's outcomes, we turn to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979). According to this framework, multiple and complex layers of social contexts influence and support children's development, although "the family is the principal context in which human development takes place" (1986, p. 723). When children are engaged in positive interactions with their caregivers, children are more capable of meeting their full potential (e.g., high competence, low problem behaviors) (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994). However, when interactions are negative or absent, then children's capacities are not realized and they demonstrate more difficulties. Under this framework, we would view parents' roles as buffering their children from the negative effects of stress and stimulating positive development through active engagement and sensitive caregiving.

A third theory, the parent investment model (Mayer 1997), more closely identifies the types of parental contributions to their children. According to this model, children's success depends on the time, money, energy, and support their parents invest in their "human capital." From this perspective, parents foster children's development by providing them with a safe and stimulating home environment and engaging and supporting them in learning opportunities inside and outside of home. Family income influences children's development by way of parents' decisions about how to allocate their resources.

The money families spend on their children, such as the purchasing of toys, books, and learning materials for the home or enrollment in higher quality child care and extracurricular activities, are investments that contribute to positive child outcomes. The time and energy spent on children are also important investments. Families with lower financial resources that cannot physically provide for their children may be able to compensate in other ways that do not require additional spending. Moreover, cultural endowments, such as the value parents place on education, work, and service, contribute to children's motivation to learn and to give back to society. Under this framework, we would posit that instability may hinder parents' ability to provide for their children in multiple ways economically and emotionally. However, parental motivation and high expectations may help to drive children to overcome the challenges of limited resources.

Researchers often integrate two or more of these theories to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding how the interplay between family stress and parental investments shape children's developmental outcomes and future adult potential (see Conger 2005; Whittaker et al. 2011). The overarching view is that, when parents face extremely stressful life situations and are unable to effectively cope, their ability to provide the necessary resources and support for their children is constrained. Their children then experience a great deal of unbuffered stress—potentially toxic stress, in the most extreme cases and have more difficulties reaching their full potential, academically and socially. This research synthesis draws from these frameworks as we examine how instability in children's lives, marked by stressful life events, lead to adverse outcomes.

9.5 Economic Instability

Economic instability—also referred to as income instability or economic insecurity—describes a drop in family income from which families may or may not recover. Family income can include job earnings, public income support, such as temporary cash assistance, and private income support, such as child support

(Mills and Amick 2010). Though economic instability is directly tied to instability in other family domains (i.e., parental employment, family structure), in this section, we review what the literature tells us about the importance of income and the stability of income for children's development.

Research shows that some fluctuations in income are common: two in five adults living with children lose a quarter of their income at least once at some point over a year (Acs, Loprest, and Nichols 2009). Economic instability is most prevalent among low-income families, followed by those in the highest income range (Acs, Loprest, and Nichols 2009). Specifically, in the lowest income quintile about 20 percent of individuals with children lose at least half their income at some point during the course of a year, and only about 50 percent recover to pre-drop income levels within another year. Among the highest income quintile, 16 percent of individuals with children experience substantial income drops, and only 23 percent fully recover (Acs, Loprest, and Nichols 2009; Acs and Nichols 2010).

Economic instability occurs for various reasons. A parental job loss (particularly an involuntary one) and a change in family structure (specifically an adult family member leaving the household) are the most common causes of economic instability. Both of these life changes are significantly associated with experiencing a substantial 50 percent drop in income over the course of four months (Acs, Loprest, and Nichols 2009; Acs and Nichols 2010). Long-term unemployment often leads to families falling into poverty; the poverty rate triples from 12 to 35 percent among parents experiencing six or more months of unemployment (Zedlewski and Nichols 2012).

Families facing economic instability have greater material hardship than more economically stable families. They are more likely to have trouble paying utility bills and skip seeing a doctor when needed because of the cost (Mills and Amick 2010). Economic instability may also lead to food insecurity—or a lack of reliable access to proper nutrition—which currently affects 10 percent of US households with children (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2012). Extensive research highlights the link between food insecurity and adverse child outcomes. Children who experience food insecurity have higher rates of school absenteeism than their food-secure peers (Alaimo, Olson, and Frongillo Jr. 2001; Cook and Frank 2008; Ramsey et al. 2011) and are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade in elementary school (Alaimo et al. 2001). Children, especially girls, who become food insecure between 2nd and 3rd grade—an important period for literacy development—demonstrate poorer reading skills than children who continue to be food secure during this period (Jyoti, Frongillo Jr., and Jones 2005). Moreover, young girls

who experience food insecurity in kindergarten show greater weight gains and body mass index (BMI) and fewer gains in mathematics achievement by 3rd grade (Jyoti et al. 2005).

Without liquid assets to rely on as a safety net during difficult times, families may experience even greater material hardship (Mills and Amick 2010). As Kalil and Wightman (2011) describe, financial assets serve as a “psychological buffer” by alleviating economic pressures and protecting families against the impacts of stress. Rothwell and Han (2010) found that among low-income working families, the possession of assets (i.e., cash savings, home values, and retirement funds) was related to a reduced sense of family strain during an economically stressful event.

Of course, for families lacking such assets, the accompanying feeling of economic strain has implications for children’s experiences and their development. A recent analysis showed that children of low-income parents with savings below the median were less likely to experience upward economic mobility—or greater future earnings—than their low-income counterparts whose parents had a large amount of savings (Cramer et al. 2009). Therefore, although high-income families also experience high volatility, the impact on family resources and, subsequently, child development, may be buffered by financial assets. Moreover, if families quickly recover their lost income, then the consequences of a short-term drop in income may be modest (Acs and Nichols 2010).

A large body of research reveals significant associations between family income and children’s physical health, socioemotional and behavioral outcomes, cognitive abilities, and school achievement, even after controlling for family characteristics other than income (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; Conger 2005; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN] 2005). Low-income children are at a greater risk of failure in school and more likely to experience grade retention, receive special education services, and drop out of high school (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Maritato, 1997; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Laird et al. 2006). Poor children, in contrast to children whose families have incomes of at least twice the poverty line, are more likely to complete two years less of school, earn less than half as much, use public assistance, report poor overall health and high levels of psychological distress, be overweight as adults, and, for females, have a child out of wedlock before the age of 21, and, for males, be arrested as adults (Duncan, Ziol-Guest, and

Kalil 2010). As described by Evans, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (2011), adverse early experiences are “*stressing out the poor.*”

Although being raised in persistently poor conditions had severely detrimental effects on children, children who fall into poverty during an economic recession may fare worse long-term than children whose family incomes stay above the poverty line throughout a recession (First Focus 2009). A report from First Focus shows that children age 5 to 14 who experience poverty during a recession are less likely to graduate high school and are less likely to attain postsecondary education. Once these children become adults, they earn less, have less stable employment, are more likely to live in or near poverty, and report having worse health than their peers who stayed out of poverty (2009). Note, however, that this study did not control for underlying parental and child characteristics that are associated with both child outcomes and the likelihood of the family falling into poverty.

Studies show that the measured effects of family income on cognitive abilities and early academic achievement are notably larger than the effects on any other outcome (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith 1998). The period of early childhood is most sensitive (Guo 1998) since this is when children are developing critical skills such as executive functioning, language, and memory, which serve as a foundation for all future learning (Farah et al. 2006). Although persistently low family income leads to the worst outcomes, even a short-term spell can have a significant effect on children.

One national study shows that children who are not low-income through age 3 and then experience a drop in family income between ages 4 and 9 (median income under 200% of the federal poverty level) demonstrate less favorable academic and social outcomes than children who never experienced low income (NICHD ECCRN 2005). These results suggest that economic instability may be detrimental as young children are transitioning into kindergarten and being exposed to the academic and social demands of a school environment. Few other studies systematically examine the effect of a short-term decrease in household income on child development, particularly among average income earners who might not necessarily fall into deep poverty. Additional research is needed to understand the level of income change and duration of instability that make a difference in developmental outcomes.

The research on the effects of poverty provides some insight into the potential mechanisms through which economic instability affects child development. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997; 2000) discuss six potential mechanisms:

- 1) Health and Nutrition;
- 2) Parental Mental Health;
- 3) Parental Interactions with Children;
- 4) Home Environment;
- 5) Neighborhood Conditions and
- 6) Quality of Child Care.

More specifically, the nutritional diets of low-income children are often lacking the proper nutrients for optimal development, causing malnutrition, health problems, and potential brain damage (Tanner and Finn-Stevenson 2002). Family income largely influences parental mental health (i.e., stress and depression) and, as a result, parent-child interactions that promote children's learning and development (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Liaw 1995; Gershoff et al. 2007; Whittaker et al. 2011).

The influence is bidirectional, and underlying parental mental health issues can affect family income, as well as parent-child interactions. Changes in family income are associated with changes in the quality of the home learning environment, which is associated with children's cognitive and language skills (Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor 2001). Low-income children are more likely than their advantaged peers to be exposed to harmful lead paint toxins in poor quality home and care environments (Bellinger et al. 1987), which are associated with negative physical health and cognitive outcomes.

Living in a poor neighborhood with crime, safety hazards, and fewer community resources, including high-quality child care centers, negatively impacts children's experiences and, in turn, their development. However, developmental outcomes have shown to be more strongly associated with family income than neighborhood income (Klebanov et al. 1998).

In summary, fluctuations in family income are common, and economic instability is most prevalent among low-income families. Families that lack a safety net of liquid assets experience greater material hardship than those that maintain sufficient savings. Economic instability is largely affected by involuntary job loss and the dissolution of parental unions. Many families have difficulties recovering from instability. Long-term unemployment increases the likelihood of falling into

poverty, which has detrimental effects on child development and later adult outcomes. Family income is most strongly related to cognitive development and academic achievement, among other child outcomes. Having a low family income during early childhood is more strongly predictive of poor cognitive outcomes than is low income later in middle childhood or adolescence. These findings provide evidence that economic instability may begin to influence children's development very early in life.

9.6 Employment Instability

A family's economic security is most directly affected by the stability of parental employment. When parents experience job loss, their families are more likely to experience material hardship and have fewer resources to support their children's development (McKernan, Ratcliffe, and Vinopal 2009). Factors such as the length of unemployment, whether the unemployed parent is the sole earner for the family, and whether the family has any savings, assets, or social safety net also affect the family's situation (Isaacs 2013; McKernan et al. 2009). For example, families facing long-term unemployment (six or more months) are three times as likely to fall into poverty (Zedlewski and Nichols 2012). Given the importance of parental employment, researchers have questioned how employment instability has affected not only family spending and economic security but also the outcomes of children within those families (Kalil 2009).

Research indicates that children whose parents experience a job loss are at an increased risk of negative academic outcomes, such as grade retention and lower educational attainment (Kalil and Wightman 2011; Kalil and Ziol-Guest 2008; Stevens and Schaller 2011). National survey data show that an involuntary parental job loss among children age 5 to 19 increases the probability of grade retention during the current or subsequent school year by nearly 1 percent, from roughly 6 to 7 percent of children (Stevens and Schaller 2011). The effect is strongest for children with parents with a high school education or less and stronger for boys than girls. Parental divorce and household moves are noted as potential mechanisms for children's academic difficulties, since these events are also significantly associated with parental job loss (Stevens and Schaller 2011). As explained in later sections, family stability and residential stability have both been linked to children's academic outcomes.

Some evidence suggests a father's job loss may be more strongly related to children's academic outcomes than a mother's job loss. Among dual-earner

families in which mothers earn more than fathers, fathers' involuntary job loss is associated with a higher likelihood of grade repetition and school suspension and expulsion for school-age children compared to mothers' job loss (Kalil and Ziol-Guest 2008). Researchers conclude that the adverse effect of a father's job loss may relate more to changes in family dynamics and stress in the home, and perhaps less with material hardship resulting from loss of income.

Moreover, the experience of job loss followed by long-term parental unemployment predicts lower educational attainment for children. Children whose middle-income parents are unemployed six months or more at any point during their childhood are less likely to obtain any postsecondary education by age 21 compared to their peers with consistently employed parents (Kalil and Wightman 2011). The association is three times stronger for blacks than for whites and stronger for male and first-born children. One possible explanation for this association is that parents facing job instability lack the ability to finance their children's postsecondary education and so children are less likely to attend. Similarly, families may rely on older children to work and to help financially support the family.

Parental job loss can also lead to poor social-emotional outcomes for young children (Hill et al. 2011; Johnson, Kalil, and Dunifon 2012). One study found that low-income children between the age of 8 and 10 whose mothers experienced job loss within the 5 years prior demonstrated significantly more problem behaviors and lower social competence in their early elementary classrooms than did their low-income peers whose mothers did not experience job loss (Hill et al. 2011). Each additional job loss was associated with a further small decrease in social competence. Long-term unemployment had particularly negative effects on children's classroom behavior.

Similarly, findings from the Women's Employment Survey (WES) conducted post 1996 welfare reform suggest a link between low-income mothers' employment patterns and their young children's behavior (Johnson, et al. 2012). The survey tracks women who received cash assistance and their children over a seven-year span, starting when children were an average of four years old. Children whose mothers experienced employment instability—characterized by involuntary job loss or quitting an unsatisfactory position followed by unemployment—exhibited more internalizing behaviors (e.g., sadness, anxiety, and depression) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., bullying, impulsiveness, and disobedience), and a greater likelihood of school absenteeism than children whose mothers held stable jobs or voluntarily changed jobs. The effect of employment instability on child

behavior was stronger than the effect of mothers' working low-wage jobs full-time or having fluctuating work hours. This evidence suggests that job instability may be more harmful than stability in what might be considered less than favorable situations. Moreover, job change alone is not associated with poor outcomes for children, but rather the change must be unpredictable or forced and lead to a negative situation for families (i.e., unemployment).

The economic constraints resulting from an unstable employment context creates an environment that makes it more difficult to support children's developmental needs. Families who experience a substantial loss of income or reduction in work hours are more likely to cut back on household spending, move residences, and experience divorce or separation (Yeung and Hofferth 1998), thus demonstrating how these different domains of instability are interconnected. In addition to reducing the amount of money available to provide stable housing, food, and other basic needs, frequent and long-term unemployment can disrupt children's lives in other ways. Families' schedules and routines are likely not as predictable, parents are more stressed as they face the need to secure a new job and while providing for their families without a reliable paycheck, parental relationships become strained, and caregivers often change or become less stable (as will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections). For some children, parental employment instability can be a motivation to get a good education and achieve upward mobility, but such movement depends on factors such as household wealth and duration of unemployment (Kalil and Wightman 2011).

In sum, most research to date on the effects of employment instability has been conducted by economists examining the future educational attainment and prosperity of children experiencing parental joblessness. A more limited number of studies have considered behavioral outcomes, particularly social competence and problem behaviors during the early elementary years. Together, these findings highlight the importance of stable parental employment for children's success.

9.7 Family Instability

The structure of the family plays a large role in children's experiences and the support they receive in the home. According to 2012 U.S. Census data, 68 percent of children under age 18 live in a two-parent household, whereas 28 percent live in a single-parent household, mostly headed by mothers.² Family structures are diverse even within two-parent households, including married and unmarried

parents, biological parents, adopted parents, step parents, and cohabiting partners. These structures are not static as families often change over time. A recent study estimates that more than one-third of children experience a family structure change—a (re)marriage, separation, or a start or end of a cohabiting union—between birth and the end of 4th grade (Cavanagh and Huston 2008). Children born into cohabiting parent families experience the most family instability, followed by single-mother families (Cavanagh and Huston 2006). This high rate of family instability combined with the increase in the number of births outside marriage means that about one half of children will reside at least temporarily in single-parent households (Amato 2000).

While there has been considerable debate about the effects of divorce or a new marriage on children, and whether it is the change in parental unions or the underlying characteristics and behaviors of parents that impact children the most, increasing evidence has increasingly documented the negative effects of family instability on children. Studies show that parental divorce has the potential to cause short-term family crisis and long-term, chronic strain on the family (Amato 2000).

Also, the temporary nature of some cohabiting relationships leads to changes in children's primary caregivers and instability in household resources. For children, family instability may mean loss of contact with one parent, changes in the home and care environments resulting from constrained financial resources, an increase in parental stress and depression from a lack of social support, and a decline in parenting quality (Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, and Waldfogel 2012). Some changes in family structure can be positive for the child if such changes are in the context of strengthening the family's support system or reducing parental conflict in the home, in the case of a separation. Experts posit, however, that most changes in family structure, depending on the context, introduce stress and emotional and financial insecurity in children's lives. Therefore, family instability is associated with negative outcomes for children who are at the center of parental relationships (Amato and Keith 1991; Craigie et al. 2012).

A number of studies identify a link between parental divorce and lower academic achievement and poor behavioral outcomes, even at early ages (Amato 2000; Amato and Keith 1991; Craigie, et al. 2012). According to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, children born to married parents who divorce by the time children are 5 years old have lower vocabulary and pre-reading skills and more aggressive behaviors at age 5 than children in stably married families (Craigie, et al. 2012). Similar findings are seen in children born to cohabiting parents; children whose unmarried parents live together at birth, but subsequently separate,

demonstrate more aggressive behaviors and higher rates of obesity and asthma at age 5 than children in stable cohabiting or stable cohabiting-to-married families (Craigie et al. 2012). In addition to parental separations, the formation of potentially unstable parental unions may have negative associations with child well-being. One study found that adolescents who transitioned from a single-mother family into an unmarried, cohabiting family (i.e., living with a mother's boyfriend) demonstrated more delinquent behaviors and lower school engagement than their peers who moved into a married stepfamily and their peers who remained in stable single-mother families (Brown 2006).

The number of changes in family structure experienced from birth through kindergarten is also related to children's problem behaviors during the transition to 1st grade (Cavanagh and Huston 2006). Among children born to married parents, those with more family transitions are rated by their teachers as having more externalizing behaviors than their peers with fewer transitions. Similarly, among children born to single parents, those who experience more instability display more negative behaviors than their peers. Together these findings reveal that even one change in family structure has the potential to be disruptive to child well-being, but each additional change that contributes to family instability predicts worse outcomes.

An examination of potential mediators suggests that the link between family instability and weak vocabulary is a result of a loss of family income and parenting stress, but not parental depression or level of father involvement. Specifically, the absence of a spouse or partner in the home leads to lower economic resources in the home and poor quality parenting, both of which impede children's language development (Craigie et al. 2012). Family instability, partly due to parental depression and aggravation, increases children's anxiety and depressive behaviors (Craigie et al. 2012). Children's behavior during the transition to 1st grade is moderated by their mothers' sensitivity (i.e., supportiveness, respect for autonomy and lack of hostility) and the quality of the home environment (Cavanagh and Huston 2006). Having a mother with low sensitivity or living in a home with low levels of support and stimulation during this transition worsens the problem behaviors of children experiencing family instability. When young children lack the support at home that they need to smoothly handle the transition, they demonstrate more negative behaviors.

These associations may be exacerbated by low family income. Low-income children experiencing family instability during the first five years of life demonstrate more aggression and other negative behaviors toward their peers in 1st

grade than do their low-income peers from more stable families (Cavanagh and Huston 2006). Yet in higher-income families, these behaviors are observed at similar levels regardless of family instability. Financial resources might facilitate continuity in children's lives and buffer some of the negative effects of instability. Meanwhile, children from families facing material hardship and other poor psychological factors on top of family instability are the worst off (Cavanagh and Huston 2006).

The effects of family instability on child outcomes may also vary by race. Among white children, the number of changes in family structure since birth positively predicts white children's externalizing behaviors at ages 5 to 14, as well as delinquent behavior when children are ages 10 to 14. Among black children, family instability has shown to have little effect on children's behavior, whereas current family structure matters more—with children of single mothers having more problems than children of married mothers (Fomby and Cherlin 2007). Fomby and Cherlin (2007) controlled for other adults in the household since, as Cherlin and Furstenberg pointed out (1992), grandparents and other kin are more likely to play a key caregiving role in black families than in white families.

The timing of family instability during childhood may influence the effect on child outcomes. Transitions that occur early in children's development and in adolescence appear to have strong effects (Adam and Chase-Lansdale 2002; Brown 2006; Cavanagh and Huston 2008); however, more studies exploring family instability across childhood are needed to support this evidence. Cavanagh and Huston (2008) describe how the experience of family instability between birth and the end of kindergarten predicts children's behavior, social competence, popularity with peers, and loneliness in 5th grade, even when controlling for children's behaviors in 1st grade.

However, family instability that occurs between 1st and end of 4th grade is not significantly related to 5th grade outcomes. The authors also find that the effects of family instability are stronger for boys than girls. Similarly, in a study among low-income, African American females, high levels of family instability prior to age 6, marked by more frequent separations from parental caregivers, predicted academic performance in adolescence (Adam and Chase-Lansdale 2002). These findings suggest that very young children are sensitive to early experiences of family instability, with some "sleeper effects" not appearing until later in childhood (Cavanagh and Huston 2008). This evidence supports what we know about young children's need to build secure relationships with their adult caregivers.

Several studies of adolescents have identified a significant link between family transitions and child well-being (Adam 2004; Adam and Chase-Lansdale 2002; Brown 2006). According to a national longitudinal study, adolescents experiencing family instability demonstrate more delinquent behaviors and lower school engagement than peers in stable, two-biological-parent families (Brown 2006). In examining the types of family structures, moving out of a single-mother family into a cohabiting stepfamily decreased adolescent well-being, more so than moving into a married stepfamily. Whereas moving out of a cohabiting stepfamily into a single-mother family was associated with improvements in school engagement (Brown 2006).

Moreover, family instability is often linked to residential and school mobility. In a study exploring the effects of both housing moves and parental separations on African American females, family instability across child development was related to academic and social adjustment problems in adolescence (Adam and Chase-Lansdale 2002). Family instability at any age predicted externalizing behaviors in adolescence, but more recent family instability, experienced after age 12, had the strongest effects on behavior. When we consider the developmental needs of adolescents—having close peer relationships, a strong parental role model, and consistent but sensitive discipline—the effects of family instability on adolescents appear disruptive to normal development.

In sum, the evidence is strong that family instability negatively influences children's social-emotional development and behavior. There is some indication that children's academic achievement is affected by divorce, as children have difficulty adjusting to change and concentrating in school (Amato 2000). However, there is less supporting evidence of a connection between family instability more broadly defined and children's cognitive development or academic achievement. In several studies, the relationship between family instability and academic outcomes is not significant when controlling for demographic characteristics, such as mother's age and education level (Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Schoon et al. 2011). A few studies examining family instability take into account the presence of other adults in the household, such as grandparents who play a key caregiving role or provide financial or social support to parents. Additional research on this topic is needed to distinguish the effect of having a single adult in the household and having a single parent. Overall, the research highlights the need to provide support to children undergoing changes in parental figures in the home.