Strong bonds among family members are important markers of stable, supportive families that contribute to the growth and development of societies. Moreover, the quality of the socio-emotional relationships and strength of bonding among families are important indicators of children's developmental trajectories. From a global perspective, the factors that promote bonding and resilience may differ across countries and cultures. But what happens when family bonding is broken? When family disruptions occur, they have the potential to undermine socio-emotional relationships and ultimately widen the gap of socio-economic inequality (McLanahan, 2004).

As a student from Japan observing child development and the family life cycle in the United States (U.S.), this paper focuses on families in the U.S. and on intervention models developed in the U.S. as well as some imported from abroad. Family disruptions are typically measured by positive and negative changes in the family structure including marriage, pre- and post-marital births, separation/divorce, and remarriage. Rates of divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and non-
marital childbirths have generally increased over the years. In 2011, 41% of all children in the U.S. were born to unmarried couples (Wilcox & Cavallé, 2010). This has led to an increase in complex family structures in the U.S. and “fragile families.” Research shows that children increasingly live in fragile families which have been termed “fragile” when children live in non-biological, two-parent households and in single parent households (Waldfogel et al., 2010).

Approximately one third of all children in the U.S. are estimated to experience a family change between birth and 10 years old (Standrom & Huerta, 2013). In considering the proliferation of the new types of family structures, estimates are that 50% of all children will live in single-parent families, even if only briefly (Sandstrom & Huerta). In fact, children residing in single parent families are estimated to be at 29%, which is the third highest percentage worldwide, after South Africa and Colombia (Wilcox & Cavallé, 2010).

**Instability as One Marker of Family Disruption**

There are several markers of family disruptions. I focus on two markers: (1) instability and (2) intensity of the instability:

- Instability refers to “a change or discontinuity in one’s experience” (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013, p.4). Instability in the context of family disruptions occurs as a change in core relationships (Sandstrom & Huerta). Due to separations, unions, or reunions among family members as they transition between the status of their relationships, many children experience instability. Researchers have identified two forms of instability, namely *chronic instability* and *episodic instability* (Sandstrom & Huerta). Additionally, family disruptions that are initially episodic may become chronic, if disruptions are repetitive.
• The intensity of the instability might be amplified if it is unpredictable, involuntary, and/or repetitive (Adams & Dubay, 2014). The degree of intensity can produce ripple effects that lead to economic instability, employment instability, residential instability, and housing and childcare instability (Adams & Dubay). For instance, divorce might result in a change in residence and a possible change in school placement for the children (Sandstrom & Huerta). Or, family disruptions could result from the loss of one parent’s financial custody support, which could be a major or minor loss of support. For instance, reduction of or non-financial support might necessitate changes in child care arrangements.

**Policy Interventions: Promoting Resilience or More Disruption?**

Evidence has shown that a stable, positive child-parent relationship has the potential to buffer the negative effects of family disruptions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC), 2015). In contrast, children living in fragile families who experience family disruptions may lack opportunities to develop resilience due to instability (NSCDC, 2015). Additionally, there have been concerns raised that some current policy interventions designed to protect these children residing in fragile families do not always facilitate resilience. For example, some child welfare policies that dictate the simple removal of a child from an unsafe environment created by one parent, may also disrupt the potential resilience factor of a positive child-parent relationship with the other parent (NSCDC, 2015).
Another consideration policymakers must evaluate is investment in parental resources. Policies that aim to reduce poverty often require parents to work (NSCDC, 2015). This requirement has the potential to result in low-income, working parents being unable to find and afford high quality childcare (NSCDC, 2015). Some might be forced to make a choice between employment and childcare. This burden might make developmentally supportive programs less attractive and adult economic self-sufficiency more challenging (NSCDC, 2015).

**Supporting Fragile Families and Promoting Resilience: Two Models**

One program that works with parents to influence child outcomes is called the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) (Baker et al., 1999). HIPPY was originally implemented in Israel and tailored for its immigrant families. It was adopted for families in the U.S. in 1984, and has now been implemented in over 120 cities (Baker et al., 1999). The HIPPY program is an evidence-based, home-based, family support intervention program designed to improve the home environment by teaching parents of four and five year old children how to interact with their children to promote school readiness. In this program, parents are trained to improve the quality of time with their children in order to reduce the achievement gap of children from low-income and middle-income families (Baker et al., 1999). This program includes home visits by paraprofessionals as well as attendance at parental group meetings.

Another model that aims to support fragile families is the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiative of the Administration for Children & Families (Administration for Children & Families (ACF), 2014). This program is comprised of two separate initiatives with the same
mission, to “strength[en] families to improve the lives of children and parents and promote economic stability” (ACF, 2014).

1. The Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) focuses on married, engaged, and marriage-interested couples. It provides marital and pre-marital support through marriage and pre-marital education and relationship skills education in high schools. The relationship skills education aims to reduce separation and divorce through conflict resolution. Some programs include marriage mentors in which successfully married couples mentor vulnerable couples. Besides marriage and relationships, practical parenting skills, budgeting, and job and career trainings are also provided.

2. The Responsible Fatherhood Initiative targets fathers, with the goal of providing fathers with information related to building relationship skills, controlling aggressive behaviors, and promoting healthy parental involvement with their children. It also provides fathers with financial management seminars and career advancement services as well as connects fathers with appropriate welfare-to-work programs.

Conclusion

Strengthening a family’s socio-emotional bonds has the potential to influence children's developmental trajectories for a positive social, emotional, and intellectual development. There have been clear indications that due to the complexities of family structures in the U.S., those children residing in fragile families benefit from intervention and prevention programs when they are tailored to each family’s needs (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2011). Good, effective policies and programs, if implemented correctly, can strengthen familial bonds to support and enhance marriages, facilitate stable relationships, and increase quality parenting, thereby
facilitating social, emotional, and intellectual development and mobility, while reducing socio-economic and achievement gaps.

Family cohesion is currently challenged in various ways in societies around the world. Whether the above models are useful in diverse countries and cultures is an open question. Nonetheless, it would appear that exploration of culturally relevant models that engender family bonding and resilience in children would be a worthwhile pursuit.
References


