

Center Close-Up

Iowa Youth and Families Project

Rural families coping with a changing world

For the past four years Iowa State University researchers have been following the ups and downs of hundreds of Iowa families living on farms and in small towns.

"Rural areas are a much different world economically and socially than they were a few years ago. The Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP) seeks to understand how rural families cope in this changing world," said Rand Conger, director of the Center for Family Research in Rural Mental Health and leader of a team of sociologists, statisticians and other researchers working on the IYFP.

"Some families are going to cope better than others. We want to identify the skills and strategies those families use," Conger said.

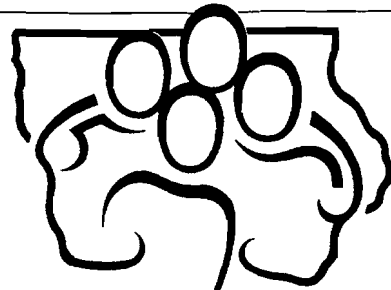
"The practical information we learn will be used in outreach and educational programs to prevent or remedy stress experienced by rural families. If we can help families be better prepared to deal with change, especially that associated with stressful economic conditions, then chronic family problems may not develop."

Prevention will be a key word in programs that develop out of the IYFP research. "Just as prevention is important in keeping medical costs down, the same is true for people's emotional health," Conger said. "We are learning that close and supportive ties among family members can promote health."

The IYFP is part of a renaissance in studies of farm and rural families, said Glen Elder, Jr., an internationally recognized expert on economic hardships and families at the University of North Carolina. Elder collaborates with ISU on the project.

"Until the IYFP, we had not used life records to view the transformation of rural America and agriculture through its communities, families and children," Elder said. "As we learn how families adapt to adversity, we can use the information to help families confront and come to terms with problems more effectively."

A family album on the IYFP would contain photos of more than 1,800 parents and children from 450 rural families



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living in eight north-central Iowa counties. Add several more pages for the 75 faculty and staff members involved, including collaborators at three other universities.

Since the IYFP began in 1988, project workers have collected information during annual visits to the families' homes. Through interviews, questionnaires and videotaped family discussions, the families are providing a wealth of details on home life, work, school and other issues.

The IYFP interviewers have spent an estimated 9,500 hours with the participating families. Family members have completed more than 24,000 questionnaires — each averaging 35 pages. Trained observers have devoted 62,000 hours to studying 3,300 hours of videotapes.

The tapes are a unique aspect of the IYFP, Conger said. "They add an extra dimension to the study, allowing us to observe differences in the ways family members discuss and resolve important issues."

Elder agreed. "There's never been anything like this. The videotapes are a valuable part of the study, and also valuable to the families to be able to sit down and talk about things that everyone in the family is concerned about. In the past they may have let such matters slide."

The IYFP focuses on four members in each family — two parents and two children — an adolescent who was in seventh grade at the start of the study and a brother or sister close in age. "We wanted to study how adolescents handled their own physical, emotional and academic changes as the family dealt with economic changes, and how parents' responses to the world around them affected the adolescents' plans for the future," Conger said.

Researchers are beginning to get a clearer picture of

successful coping strategies in rural families. Conger said initial findings suggest that:

- Supportive spouses can make a difference. Spouses who listen carefully to each other and can behave flexibly when their partner is stressed can reduce the risk of emotional problems.
- Families that can step back from their problems and brainstorm on alternative solutions in a calm, supportive manner can effectively reduce family conflicts.
- When parents are supportive of each other during tough economic times, their children seem to be more self-confident and do better in school and social relationships.
- Remaining active in community life is important.



Discussions around the kitchen table are often a focal point in visits to the homes of participating families in the Iowa Youth and Families Project. The IYFP's research leaders are (from left) Les Whitbeck, Ron Simons, Fred Lorenz and Rand Conger.

Family members who maintain their involvement in community activities and organizations — even when they experience many stressful life changes — are more likely to maintain their emotional well-being.

- Good sibling relationships are important in weathering stressful times.
- "Many of the interpersonal and problem-solving skills required in these examples are things that can be taught. Family members can learn them through educational programs," he said.

Specialists with ISU Extension and the Iowa Department of Human Services are working with the IYFP researchers to develop programs and publications that address rural family needs. In the next year, they will be testing programs that could become national models for helping rural families with changing economic times, Conger said.

Armed with information from the IYFP, the researchers discuss their findings with legislators, human services officials and other decision-makers who may influence policies regarding rural America.

"We try to make it clear that rural families face many of the same economic difficulties as urban families," Conger

said. "We tell decision-makers about what we see happening to rural families, and suggest to them the kinds of programs needed to reduce the adverse effects of social and economic changes. For example, what we learn may help people who run rural crisis hotlines deal more effectively with problems they encounter."

The IYFP has received more than \$3.5 million in funding from federal agencies and private foundations over the past four years. Another ISU Center for Family Research project similar to the IYFP is studying 200 single-parent families in rural Iowa.

The researchers will be analyzing data from the first four years of the IYFP for the next several years, and that may be just the tip of the iceberg.

"We're hoping to receive funding to continue to follow these families for years to come," Conger said. "We hope the IYFP will be similar to studies that have continued for 40 or 50 years. We believe it will become a landmark study in the social and behavioral sciences."

Elder said, "If we can follow the adolescents into adulthood, we'll be able to understand the changes that take place as one generation takes the place of another and finds itself in a different world — and that's what rural Midwest families are facing today."