

CENTER CLOSE-UP

The Family Transitions Project

New study will track teens' adjustments to adulthood

Family relationships and how they affect adolescents entering their early adult years will be the focus of a new center project.

"The Family Transitions Project will provide the most extensive analysis yet on how family experiences influence the transition to adulthood," said Ron Simons.

The five-year, \$ 5.6-million Family Transitions Project was funded in late 1993 by the National Institute of Mental Health. Simons is one member of the project research team, which also includes Rand Conger, Glen Elder, Fred Lorenz and Les Whitbeck.

The project will continue following adolescents in almost 500 rural families from two previous studies—the Iowa Youth and Families Project and the Single Parent Project. The teen-agers are now high school seniors.

The researchers are interested in relating life stresses, family experiences, successes and problems during adolescence to the ability of the young people to succeed in their work, college, friendships, marriage and parenthood. The project will investigate how these factors predict risk or resilience to emotional and behavioral problems during the early adult years.

The researchers will monitor relations between the young adults and their parents, brothers and sisters, girlfriends and boyfriends, and eventually, spouses. They will study how these relations help or hinder the transitions that both children and parents go through when a child becomes a young adult.



Rand Conger, Fred Lorenz, Les Whitbeck and Ron Simons

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Ron Simons

They will study how parents adjust when their children leave home and as they move closer to retirement. The researchers hope to fill a gap in family research by studying how brothers and sisters affect one another's lives as they enter early adulthood.

They also will study how the parents in the 500 families are making the transition into mid-life. "We'll see how they adjust to their children leaving home, to becoming grandparents, to being put in the position of taking care of their own parents. We want to see how the transitions of both children and parents impact each other."

The earlier projects studied how families coped with stresses caused by the '80s farm crisis and continuing economic pressures in rural Iowa. In the new project, researchers will continue to study the impact of those stresses.

“Because of these stresses, many of these young people will be at risk,” Simons said. “For example, youth who grow up in highly stressed families may have more difficulties than less-stressed adolescents, in terms of continuing their education, launching a career or establishing their own families.

“What will be important is finding out why so many of them transcend the risks in their lives. A good percentage of young people escape the cycle of problems that can plague generations. Studies show, for example, that the family conflict often associated with family stresses only continues in the families of some young adults.”

Finding answers to these questions should provide the center with useful information for developing policy and programs that help families identify risks and ways to overcome them, Simons said.

The project will gather information from the young adults during their senior year in high school, a year after graduation and two years after that. The project will include interviews with family members, girlfriends and boyfriends, and, as time goes by, spouses.

The center hopes the Family Transitions Project sets the stage for following the young adults further into their 20s and 30s. “If successful, the research will provide the most extensive data yet on intergenerational influences,” Simons said.

Researchers also will try to answer questions on how community life impacts on these transitions. “How does a community’s characteristics—whether viable and healthy or suffering severe economic problems and farm bankruptcies—color one’s life experiences? How do they influence how families develop?”

FAMILY TRANSITIONS’ AIMS

There are four central aims of the Family Transitions Project:

- **Life course of youth.** Investigate the influence of economic stress and social dislocation on the emotional, interpersonal, educational, occupational and familial development of rural youth moving from late adolescence to young adulthood.
- **Life course of parents.** Assess the influence of economic stress and social dislocation on the emotional, marital, parental and occupational status of rural parents in mid-life as their children leave home and new priorities enter their lives.
- **Family relationships.** Examine how an individual’s response to economic stress affects other family members and the quality of family relationships.
- **Mediating and moderating mechanisms.** Study the resources (e.g., personal qualities or social supports) and vulnerabilities (e.g., prior problem behavior or emotional difficulties) that mediate or moderate the impact of economic stress and demands of the transition to adulthood.