



Family Transitions Project

FALL 2010 NEWSLETTER

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Three Decades of a Remarkable Study

by Rand D. Conger, Project Director

Back in 1989 when our research began, we never anticipated that what is often called “the Iowa Study” would last for more than five years, the duration of the original grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The initial work was concerned with how families and children living in Iowa would be affected by the downturn in agriculture of the 1980s, a period known as “the Farm Crisis.” Unfortunately, today’s economy also has created many of the same financial difficulties experienced by Iowa families when the study was started.

Because you and your family were willing to make significant contributions of your time to help further understanding of how families cope with stress and with the many changes in family life that occur over time, the NIH continued support for the research through the adolescent years. Again, because of your willingness to participate in the ongoing study, we were in a unique position to evaluate how experiences during the teenage years affected entry into adulthood and the formation of new families in the next generation. All in all, **we have collaborated with you for more than two decades in this widely recognized and landmark study.**

The exciting news today is that the NIH continues to recognize the tremendous efforts you have made to increase knowledge about families and human development. NIH has recently provided new funding to continue the Family Transitions Project as we move into the third decade of the study. In this issue of the newsletter we describe these new grants and how they will help further understanding of families and children and provide new information that will help individuals more successfully negotiate the many changes that each of us experience in life. A visit to our project website, now located at <http://transitionsproject.ucdavis.edu>, will acquaint you with the more than 300 scientific articles and book chapters that have come from the project and will also give you additional information about how findings from the research have been used to develop programs designed to enhance the lives of children, adolescents, adults, and their families.

Many of you will soon be contacted by a project staff member to determine when you might be available for a visit during the coming months. When you participate this year, you will be pleased to find that the **length of the questionnaires has been reduced by 50%** to focus on only the most critical issues and events in your lives. As always, we also will compensate you for your time. But new for this year, if you participate in an in-home visit, your compensation will be in **CASH**.

Most important, we hope you will continue to be proud of the significant role you play in this truly unique study! The Family Transitions Project continues to make fundamental contributions to our understanding of human development and ways in which people can be empowered to improve their happiness and success in life. I hope you will join us again as we begin the third decade of this remarkable study!

FTP Receives \$4.4 Million Grant for Genetics Study

In July 2010, the Family Transitions Project was awarded a new grant from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), entitled, “**A Genetic Study of Personal Traits that Promote or Inhibit Individual Well-Being.**” The grant totals \$4.4 million over five years.



“This is the ideal study in which to embed a thorough assessment of genetics and ... in which to specify gene-by-environment interaction effects on development.”

Grant reviewer

In planning for the future of this project, the research team realized that adding a genetic component to the study allows us to understand more than we presently can about how changing times and environments affect the development of individuals and families. Early research, for example, shows that certain genetic characteristics influence how people respond to both the good and bad events in their lives. Because of the rich archive of data from the past 20 years, we are in a unique position to further understanding of how these processes work across time.

This grant provides several exciting opportunities. First, it allows us to collect genetic samples from the entire

population of our study, including parents and siblings! **This marks the first time we have been able to collect data from parents since 2001 and from siblings since 1997.** While participation will be limited only to the collection of a genetic sample and will not require any questionnaires or in-home visits, we are excited to bring these valuable members back into the study. We expect to collect data from parents and siblings in 2010-11.

Second, we are able to **finalize collection of genetic samples from our targets, their romantic partner, and their oldest biological child (G4).** We began this effort in 2007-08, and we thank all of those who provided a sample to us at that time. Beginning this fall, more information will be sent to those people who have not previously supplied a sample. Data collection is painless and easy, simply requiring a saliva sample in a collection kit.

Third, this grant allows the Family Transitions Project to **join the ranks of only a handful of studies in the world** with a rich array of questionnaire data, invaluable observations of family interactions, and complete genetics data. This makes us truly unique and allows for

many interesting opportunities in the future.

Fourth, because this new area of research is so specialized, **we have teamed up with researchers at the Institute for Behavioral Genetics (IBG) at the University of Colorado at Boulder.** Led by Dr. Michael Stallings, the IBG team will provide scientific direction for the genetic aspect of the study. Grant reviewers agreed with our decision to involve IBG in this project, stating: “IBG is uniquely well-qualified to carry out the genetic analyses, [combining] rich, varied, longitudinal sociological data with genomic data [and offering] significant possibilities for important findings.”

Lastly, **a new principal investigator is joining the team – Dr. M. Brent Donnellan.** Dr. Donnellan was a postdoctoral scholar with Dr. Conger at UCD and is now an



associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University. Dr. Donnellan has collaborated with Dr. Conger on nearly two dozen publications using study data and is recognized as an up-and-coming scholar in the field of developmental psychology.

We've Moved!

The Family Transitions Project office is now located in Aspen Business Park in Ames, Iowa. Our long-time office at the Institute for Social and Behavioral Research (ISBR) at Iowa State University closed in June 2010. Project funding will now run through the University of California, Davis, where Dr. Rand Conger is located. However, the Family Transitions Project will remain based in Iowa where 70% of Targets still reside. Our new office, pictured here, allows us to remain in close proximity to families and to maintain the same network of highly experienced interviewers who have visited with families over the years.

The new facility will house key staff and project archives. The research office will be supervised by Dr. Tricia Neppl, who has been the associate project director since 2001 (more about Tricia on page 4). Assisting her will be Sarah Spilman, who serves as the data manager and web site administrator, Annalissa Brodersen, who will serve as our new project assistant, and Debbie Bahr, who will assist in project management.

The new telephone interview lab in Ames, Iowa (below).



At right, the entrance to our new project office at 1609 Golden Aspen Drive, Suite 102, Ames, Iowa

The facility has a large, secure room for the storage of questionnaires and video tapes, offices for project staff, and a new telephone interview lab. Our offices are locked 24 hours a day and monitored by a state-of-the-art security system in order to protect the valuable information stored inside. As always, your security and privacy remain our number one concern and we have taken several measures to ensure that your identity will always be protected.

Recruitment calls and data collection will be based out of the new office; all materials will be sent from and returned to this location. For more information, please visit the project web site at: <http://transitionsproject.ucdavis.edu>.

We invite you to call us or visit us at our new space at any time. This is YOUR office for the study for which you have been collaborating all these years! You can reach us locally at 515-233-4004 or toll-free at 1-800-455-4250. Additional contact information is found on the back page of this newsletter.



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***Be sure to visit the web site to update your contact information!**

Data Collection in 2010-2011

The Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) has awarded American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding to the project for one year to complete time-sensitive data collection. In particular, we will study the effects of the current economic recession on family functioning and individual well-being. With this funding, we will be conducting a full wave of data collection in 2010-2011. As the economy improves, we also hope to collaborate with participants in the future to determine how individuals and families were affected by these economic events.

The Family Transitions Project is uniquely situated to shed light on the effects of this economic recession. Not only do we have years of data from Targets and their families that predates the recession, but many of these Targets come from families hit hard by the farm crisis in the 1980s. As such, some Targets have come full circle as their generation experiences a similar, perhaps even more severe, recession in the national and local

economy as was faced by their parents 20 years ago. Thus, the Family Transitions Project is in a unique position to understand how pre-crisis social and personal processes and mechanisms promote resilience to economic hardship and similar life stressors. Increased understanding of these mechanisms is particularly important as it can be used to help families cope more successfully with financial adversity and can help shape policies for assisting families in times of economic need.

Joining Dr. Rand Conger as a Principal Investigator on this grant is **Dr. Tricia Neppl**, who has been the associate project director since 2001 and has served as a co-investigator since 2004. Dr. Neppl has collaborated with Dr. Conger on several publications regarding children in the third generation. She also has developed many of the protocols used during visits with Targets' children.



There will be some significant changes in the way we collect information this year. First, **we reduced the number of questions and questionnaires BY HALF** to lessen the burden on respondents and to decrease the time in the home for visits. Second, there will be more opportunities for Targets and their partners to complete questionnaires using **secure, on-line surveys**. Third, if participants complete an in-home visit they will be **paid during the visit in CASH** rather than by check.

We will begin mailing recruitment materials and contacting participants in December 2010. In-home visits with Targets and their romantic partners, as well as visits with Targets and their oldest biological child (G4), will begin in January 2011. This year, children in the study will range in age from 18 months to 18 years, with one-quarter of G4s now the same age or older than their Target parent was when the IYFP study began - amazing!

We hope to visit with you soon!