

PSYCHOLOGY

Old Patterns, New Findings

Research shows specific ways family relationships can affect kids in school.

By Susan Hagen

“HAPPY FAMILIES,” LEO TOLSTOY DECLARED in *Anna Karenina*, “are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

It’s a great line with which to open a novel, but new research by Rochester psychologists suggests it’s not such a good way to understand family relationships.

A study by Melissa Sturge-Apple, an as-

healthy family relationships lead to a host of specific difficulties for children during their early school years.

“Families can be a support and resource for children as they enter school, or they can be a source of stress, distraction, and maladaptive behavior,” says Sturge-Apple.

The three-year study, published in the journal *Child Development* and conducted in conjunction with researchers at Notre

amounts of warmth, but they struggle with high levels of hostility, destructive meddling, and a limited sense of the family as a team. Disengaged families are marked by cold, controlling, and withdrawn relationships. Although the study demonstrates evidence of family-school connections, the authors caution that dysfunctional family relationships aren’t responsible for all or even most behavior difficulties in school.

Other factors, such as high-crime neighborhoods, high-poverty schools, troubled peer circles, and genetic traits also play roles, says Davies.

While building on the long-established family systems theory, which consistently has identified the three types of families using clinical observations, the study is the first to confirm empirically their existence across multiple relationships within the family: in marriage, in child-parent interactions, and in interactions between both parents and a child.

“We were really able to look at the big picture of the family,” says Davies, “and what was striking was that these family relationship patterns were not only stable across different relationships but also across time,

with very few families switching patterns.”

“Much of what we read in the popular press is focused on how parents may best prepare children for academic success in school,” Sturge-Apple says, “but this research emphasizes that families are critically important for fostering children’s emotional and social adjustment to school.

“Creating a home environment that serves as a secure base for children, where they have access to parents and resources when distressed in school, where communication and relationships are fostered and conflict is dealt with and resolved can help facilitate children’s functioning in school.”

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sistant professor of psychology, and Patrick Davies, a professor of psychology, suggests that unhappy families are typically unhappy in one of two distinct ways. The research team identified three family profiles: one happy, termed “cohesive,” and two unhappy types, one called “disengaged” and the other “enmeshed.” Both patterns of un-

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Dame, “shows that cold and controlling family environments are linked to a growing cascade of difficulties for children in their first three years of school, from aggressive and disruptive behavior to depression and alienation,” Sturge-Apple says. “The study also finds that children from families marked by high levels of conflict and intrusive parenting increasingly struggle with anxiety and social withdrawal as they navigate their early school years.”

Davies and Sturge-Apple examined relationship patterns in 234 families with six-year-old children. They found that harmonious interactions, emotional warmth, and firm but flexible roles for parents and children characterize cohesive families.

Enmeshed families, by contrast, may be emotionally involved and display modest