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Family Structure and Child Well-Being

I. Proposed Core Hypothesis/Question:

Differences in family formation and living arrangements (collectively referred to as “family structure”) shape the structure and quality of children’s home, childcare, school experiences, and economic opportunities. These experiences, in turn, affect children’s developmental trajectories:

- a. Physical development and health – Health outcomes, frequency of illness/disease, nutrition, and engagement in risk behaviors are expected to differ by family structure.
- b. Cognitive – The school readiness/academic achievement of children are expected to differ by family structure.
- c. Social-Emotional Development/Mental Health – Prevalence of delinquent behavior, civic activity, and formation of friendships are expected to differ by family structure.
- d. The relation between family structure and developmental trajectories of children will be mediated and/or moderated by multiple variables including:
 - i. Timing of changes in family structure
 - ii. Timing of entry into children’s lives
 - iii. Frequency of changes/shifts in family structure
 - iv. Quality of parent-child relationship
 - v. Quality of parent-partner relationship
 - vi. Quality of child’s relationship with non-residential parent
 - vii. Parental involvement/investment
 - viii. Quality of parental support system (social capital)
 - ix. Quality of child’s support system
 - x. Quality of home
 - xi. Quality of childcare
 - xii. School experiences
 - xiii. Economic factors
 - xiv. Ethnic/cultural factors
 - xv. Community factors
 - xvi. Religiosity

II. Workgroup(s)

Development and Behavior in collaboration with Social Environments

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III. Contact Person for Proposed Core Hypothesis

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IV. Public Health Significance

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1996, there were 71.5 million children under 18 years of age living in households across America. Of these children:

- 56% were living in traditional nuclear families;
- 5% (3.3 million) lived with an unmarried parent and the parent's partner (cohabitation);
- 17% lived in blended families (of these 4.9 million lived with at least one stepparent);
- 25% (18.2 million) lived in a single-parent home;
- 14% (10.3 million) lived in extended family households;
- 1.5 million lived with adoptive parents; and,
- 0.3 million lived with one or more foster parents.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that one-third of children today are born to unmarried mothers and may grow-up in single-parent families or spend significant portions of their lives with other relatives or stepparents. It is estimated that half of all children in America under the age of 16 would someday live in a single-parent household. These rates vary by ethnic-racial groups. For example, in 1996, only 38% of African-American children lived with two parents, compared to 79% of White non-Hispanic children. It is difficult to accurately determine the magnitude of differences that exist in living arrangements of children in the United States because these figures are based on census data that measure formal arrangements. The reality is that living arrangements of children across this country are changing, and these changes are having a dramatic and profound impact on the well-being of America's children.

Different family structures can increase or decrease children's risk of poor outcomes. For example, single-parent families are more likely to be poor or low-income. In addition to a decrease in economic opportunities, these children tend to experience less parental supervision and monitoring, and have more limited contact with their biological fathers. Numerous studies indicate

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that children from married-parent families have better educational attainment, are less likely to have health problems and psychological disorders, and less likely to have committed crimes. All of these factors have the potential of placing both an economic and social burden on the family, community, and society in general. Children in single-parent families, children born to unmarried mothers, and children in stepfamilies or cohabiting relationships face higher risks of poor outcomes than do children in intact families headed by two biological parents. However, the mechanism acting through which family structure affects developmental trajectories of children is not clear.

This proposal seeks to understand the complex factors associated with family structure and child well-being. These findings will have important implications for public policy. It can provide researchers and policymakers with information on the complexity of family structure, and can help inform public policy discussions.

V. Justification for a large, prospective, longitudinal study

A large, longitudinal study is necessary to examine the effects of family structure on child well-being, particularly sense the effect of family structure may vary as a function of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography. The longitudinal design of the study will allow researchers to examine how shifting and changing family structures, and the frequency in which it occurs, impact the developmental trajectories of children over time. A large sample will increase the likelihood of obtaining a sufficient number of families within the different family structures, some of which exist in small proportions to the overall population. It will also provide the opportunity to disentangle multiple compounding variables in an effort to identify the mediating and/or moderating factors acting through which family structure affects the overall well-being of children.

VI. Scientific Merit

a. What theory supports the hypothesis?

Children's well being is affected, for better or worse, by the child's family structure. Some researchers suggest that growing up with only one biological parent frequently deprives children of important economic, parental, and community resources, and these deprivations ultimately undermine the child's chances of future success. Many of these researchers acknowledge, however, that although living in a single-parent home increases the likelihood of negative outcomes for children, it is not the only or even primary explanation for these findings. In other words, not all children who grow up in single-parent families will experience negative outcomes. The reason for these differences is unclear.

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b. Current scientific understanding (data supporting the hypothesis)

- A child living in a married-parent family is only about one-fifth as likely to be poor as a child in a single-parent household.
- Children from one-parent families are about twice as likely to drop out of school compared to children from married-parent families.
- Children living with both parents are less likely to use alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana or other illicit drugs compared to other children.
- The risk of having a teen birth is much lower among children growing up in married-parent families, about 30 to 50% less likely compared to teens growing up in one-parent families.
- The home environment makes a difference in the health of American youth. When teens feel connected to their families and when parents are involved in their children's lives, teens are less likely to engage in risky behavior.
- Children whose fathers are married to their mothers have higher educational attainments, lower dropout rates, lower teenage pregnancy rates, and lower unemployment rates
- Children whose parents are divorced are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems, including depression, antisocial behavior, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, and school behavior problems.
- The outcomes of children growing up with stepparents appear to be similar to those for children in divorced and single-parent families. Research indicates that these children have poorer social relationships, behavior adjustment, and academic achievement.
- Considerable within-group variation exists in terms of family structure and child well-being.

c. How will answering this hypothesis/question advance our understanding?

This study has the potential to help researchers better understand what role family structure and the variables associated with it play in influencing the developmental trajectories of children. This will provide much needed information that has the potential to inform policy and enhance program services to families so that a one-size-fits-all approach to service delivery can be avoided.

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VII. Potential for innovative research

This study will provide information that is lacking in current literature. It has the potential to inform the science base on the long-term consequences (whether positive or negative) of children growing up in differing family structures, and to identify other factors that may play a role in impacting child well-being. This study will also provide the opportunity to examine whether the effects of differing family structure on child development differs by race and/or socioeconomic status.

VIII. Feasibility

This work will require assessment at multiple, critical time periods throughout childhood and adolescence to examine the role that timing of changes in family structure plays in affecting the developmental trajectories of children. It will be critical to obtain a sufficient number of families in each type of family structure of interest. Some of these family structures have low rates of prevalence (i.e., adoptive families) and may require over-sampling. Measurement tools with strong psychometric properties currently exist for assessing family structure and child development in large-scale studies. Some training will be required for administration of assessments, but it will not be extensive in nature. Efforts will be made to select instruments that are reliable and valid, require limited training, and are low in cost. More information on the specific instruments will be provided at a later date.