

Article 26: Family Issues and Family Support Programs

Family issues can profoundly impact individual well-being and relational dynamics, often creating cycles of stress and dysfunction that require external intervention (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019; Reczek, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). In response, **family support programs** offer essential resources designed to mitigate these challenges, providing a structured framework for addressing common stressors such as communication breakdowns, financial instability, or behavioral issues. Following that lead, these programs aim to build resilience and improve coping mechanisms within the family unit by offering a blend of therapeutic services, educational workshops, and community resources (Graaf et al., 2024; Hails et al., 2024; Lippens et al., 2024).

Causes and Scope of Family Issues in the United States

The scope of family issues in the United States has diversified significantly, moving beyond the traditional nuclear model to encompass a broad array of complex challenges. Primary causes for these modern struggles include economic pressures like the high cost of raising a family, shifting cultural norms that delay marriage and increase single-parent households, and pervasive mental/physical health struggles, including substance abuse. These factors contribute to widespread stress, family instability (which disproportionately affects low-income and minority families), and socio-economic challenges that affect millions of children and adults across diverse family structures (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019; Reczek, 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

For instance, a study assessed how greater family instability—defined as repeated changes in parents’ relationships—was linked to worse developmental outcomes for children in the United States. Thus, the researchers used national long-term data gathered through large surveys conducted across multiple years. Particularly, the surveys followed families over time and allowed the researchers to observe how each transition in a parent’s union status altered a child’s household, routines, and emotional environment. Overall, the evidence showed that rising rates of cohabitation, divorce, and re-partnering had made family instability a common experience for many American children, especially those already facing social or economic disadvantage. Furthermore, findings indicated that frequent shifts—such as a parent leaving, a new partner entering, or repeated changes in household composition—contributed to behavior problems, lower academic performance, and early or risky relationship patterns later in life. The researchers emphasized that instability affected children not simply because of one major event but because ongoing disruptions created uncertainty, stress, and fluctuating support systems. They also noted that children’s experiences varied: some adapted well when transitions removed conflict or introduced more supportive caregiving. In any case, the overall pattern across U.S. research showed that multiple family transitions often intensified existing inequalities, worsening instability among families with fewer resources and compounding its effects. The researchers concluded that understanding family issues in the United States required looking beyond single events to the broader, cumulative instability many children faced, and they called for expanded measures that also considered shifts in caregivers, household structure, and economic conditions (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019).

Another study examined how greater material hardship in childhood was linked to higher levels of adolescent depression and anxiety in families across the United States. Hence, the researchers used data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), analyzing six waves of

national long-term observations from 4,898 parents and their children born between 1998 and 2000. Data were collected at birth and again at ages 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 to capture changes in family resources, coparenting quality, and parent–child relationships over time. Findings showed that material hardship increased the likelihood of adolescent depression and anxiety mainly through indirect pathways. Particularly, hardship reduced cooperative coparenting, which then weakened parent–child closeness, and lower closeness was associated with greater emotional distress in adolescence. The study also found that hardship directly undermined coparenting, further restricting the emotional support children received. Overall, the pattern showed that economic strain shaped family dynamics in ways that heightened mental health risks for adolescents. The researchers concluded that reducing material hardship and strengthening parenting and coparenting supports could help protect youth from depression and anxiety in economically stressed U.S. families (Wang et al., 2025).

On a related note, a study explored why some adults in the United States cut ties with their families of origin—a process known as family estrangement. Following that lead, the researchers used in-depth interviews with 68 U.S. adults to gather detailed accounts of how and why they ended contact with family members. Particularly, they identified common “cultural repertoires,” or ways of thinking about family relationships, that people used to justify estrangement. A key repertoire—called “democratized kinship”—emphasized mutual respect, emotional safety, personal boundaries, and the belief that family relationships should be earned rather than maintained unconditionally. The findings showed that many people relied on this repertoire, shaped in part by broader social messaging such as therapy language and online discourse, to interpret harmful or strained relationships. Furthermore, these cultural tools gave individuals a framework to explain why staying connected felt unsafe or unsustainable. Overall, the study revealed that estrangement often emerged from persistent conflict, disrespect, or emotional harm that undermined people’s ability to function within their families. Thus, the researchers concluded that family estrangement reflects wider social challenges in the United States—including shifting norms around intimacy, rising expectations for emotional well-being, and the lack of support for resolving deep interpersonal conflict—which together make family disconnection an increasingly visible family issue (Reczek, 2025).

Effectiveness and Impact of Family Support Programs

Family support programs have demonstrated considerable effectiveness in mitigating the widespread issues affecting modern American households by addressing core stressors with targeted interventions. The measurable impact includes improved parenting skills, enhanced child development outcomes, and reduced instances of domestic conflict or substance abuse within participating families. By linking vulnerable populations with essential community resources and therapeutic services, these programs build crucial resilience and help families navigate complex social and economic challenges more effectively. Ultimately, evidence suggests that investing in these support systems yields significant positive returns, fostering healthier, more stable environments for millions of children and adults nationwide (Graaf et al., 2024; Hails et al., 2024; Lippens et al., 2024).

On that note, a study examined the relationship between access to family support services and parents’ ability to cope with stress in households across the United States. Thus, the researchers used national long-term data from the 2016–2019 National Survey of Children’s Health, which provided parent reports on support-service use, material hardship, and parenting demands. These surveys, conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau, allowed the researchers to compare families who received

support services with those who did not. Findings showed that parents who accessed counseling, parenting programs, or community-based help reported stronger coping and lower stress. These benefits were especially evident in families facing material hardship, where support services helped soften the negative impact of financial strain on daily functioning. Overall, the results indicated that support services operated as meaningful protective factors for stressed parents. Therefore, the researchers concluded that expanding access to family support programs can strengthen family resilience and reduce stress-related risks for U.S. families, particularly those managing economic challenges (Graaf et al., 2024).

Another study assessed the impact of a digital parenting support program on parenting quality and parental well-being among U.S. families with young children. Hence, the researchers used data from a randomized controlled trial with 356 parents of children aged 1.5–5 years, comparing parents who received the Family Check-Up Online (FCU-O) intervention with those who did not. Data were collected through online assessments and follow-ups conducted three months after the program began. Furthermore, the intervention combined app-based parenting modules with optional telehealth coaching to support skills like positive-behavior guidance, limit-setting, and proactive parenting. Findings showed that parents who received FCU-O improved more than the control group, reporting stronger parenting confidence, better support for their children’s positive behavior, and more effective limit-setting. These gains were accompanied by reductions in depressive symptoms that were not seen in the non-intervention group. The results suggested that FCU-O acted as a meaningful preventive support for families facing mental health or socioeconomic challenges. Therefore, the researchers concluded that accessible online parenting programs can strengthen family functioning, reduce stress, and improve parenting practices in at-risk U.S. households (Hails et al., 2024).

Lastly, a study examined whether intensive family preservation services (IFPS) and related family-support programs effectively improve outcomes for at-risk children and families. Following that lead, the authors performed a systematic review of data from 33 controlled trial studies published between 1985 and 2023. Most of the studies were conducted in North America or Europe. Particularly, the authors looked at information on outcomes like out-of-home placement, family functioning, juvenile delinquency, and parent mental health. The analysis showed positive effects overall, with stronger benefits in several areas, including reductions in out-of-home placements, improvements in family functioning, decreases in juvenile delinquency, and reductions in parents’ mental health difficulties. However, the authors noted considerable variability: program intensity, target population, and outcome domain influenced how effective the programs were. They also observed that follow-up assessments often showed larger benefits than immediate post-treatment checks, suggesting gains could grow over time. Ultimately, the authors concluded that intensive family preservation services and family support programs showed some capacity to improve family stability, reduce the risk of children being removed from home, and support parent mental health. However, they emphasized the need for careful design, targeted implementation, and ongoing evaluation of such programs to better mitigate risks in this context (Lippens et al., 2024).

References

- Cavanagh, S. E., & Fomby, P. (2019). Family instability in the lives of American children. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45(1), 493–513. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022633>
- Graaf, G., Hughes, P. M., deJong, N. A., & Thomas, K. C. (2024). Family support services and reported parent coping among caregivers of children with emotional, behavioral, or developmental disorders. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 45(1), e54. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000001230>
- Hails, K. A., McWhirter, A. C., Sileci, A. C. B., & Stormshak, E. A. (2024). Family Check-Up Online effects on parenting and parent wellbeing in families of toddler to preschool-age children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 70, 144–153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.09.009>
- Lippens, L., Clercq, L. D., Vandeveld, S., Pauw, S. D., & Geert-Jan Stams. (2024). Evaluating the effectiveness of intensive family preservation services: A multi-level meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 160, 107198–107198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107198>
- Reczek, R. (2025). Mapping the cultural repertoires of family estrangement: A new theory of democratized kinship. *Social Problems*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf026>
- Wang, D., Frost, A. M. H., & Jiang, Q. (2025). Family relationships mediate the association between material hardship and adolescent mental health. *Journal of Family Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0001406>