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Children's Social and Academic Functioning is Impeded When Their Families Move More Often

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Cumulative, Timing-Specific, and Interactive Models of Residential Mobility and Children's Cognitive and Psychosocial Skills

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America is a mobile society, with most children and their families moving once or more during childhood. Moving can bring new opportunities if families relocate to safer, more comfortable homes, or to communities with better schools. However, previous research has found that more frequent residential moves can lead to stress and disrupt children's routines, with negative repercussions for healthy development. Now a new study has found that each additional residential move that children experience is associated with a corresponding decline in reading and math scores, as well as less positive social skills and higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems. The study compared children who move frequently with those who don't move or who move less frequently.

The research was conducted at Boston College and appears in the journal *Child Development*.

The study analyzed data from a nationally representative U.S. sample of 19,162 children in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Class of 1998-99) who were followed from kindergarten through eighth grade. Researchers sought to determine whether the effects of moving on children accumulated over time or were more salient during specific periods, and whether moving was more disruptive when it occurred in conjunction with changing schools.

They found that moving is differentially harmful for children's well-being—that is, the effects depend on when the moves occur. "Moves during both early and middle childhood were associated with decreases in children's social skills and increases in emotional and behavior problems, and these effects lasted for years," explains Rebekah Levine Coley, professor of applied developmental and educational psychology at Boston College, who led the study.

"In contrast, moves during middle childhood and early adolescence—after children had started school—had shorter-term effects on children's reading and math skills, and those effects diminished over time," Coley

adds. The study also found that while residential and school mobility was associated with small decreases in children's functioning, these detriments could accumulate over multiple moves.

The researchers highlight the importance of addressing the myriad social and economic factors that might influence a family's decision to move, such as changes in mothers' employment, receipt of public assistance, family structure, or household income. These factors were accounted for in analyses predicting children's functioning, and results revealed links between moves and children's cognitive skills, social skills, and emotional and behavior problems, after considering the effects of these social and economic influences on moving residences.

The study also examined the role of moving homes and moving schools, finding that moving schools had unique and slightly stronger associations with children's cognitive skills above and beyond the effects of just moving homes. Even without changing schools, though, the disruptions in daily routines and contexts caused by moving homes can interrupt children's focus on their schoolwork and inhibit learning, the study concluded.

The study's findings suggest that schools may play an important role in exacerbating or stabilizing the lives of children who move. Children might benefit from short-term supports from parents or school personnel after a move to help them retain their focus on academic work, according to the authors. The findings also confirm the importance of stability for children.

"As employment instability and high housing prices continue to destabilize American families, policymakers, school leaders, and teachers must develop strategies to counter the interruptions that home and school moves pose to children's education and healthy development," suggests Melissa Kull, formerly a doctoral student at Boston College, now a research scientist at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the study's coauthor.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Cumulative, Timing-Specific, and Interactive Models of Residential Mobility and Children's Cognitive and Psychosocial Skills by Coley, RL (Boston College), and Kull, M (formerly at Boston College, now at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene). Copyright 2016 The

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