



# Chaotic experiences and low-income children's social-emotional development

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## ABSTRACT

Development in early childhood is increasingly likely to take place in multiple contexts. Continuity and discontinuity in children's experiences across multiple contexts have important implications for their development. This study examines the extent to which children experience chaos in their homes and in their preschool settings is linked with their social-emotional development over the course of the preschool year. Data from a large, representative sample of low-income preschool children attending Head Start was used to test a series of multi-level models. Children whose experiences of their homes were highly chaotic, regardless of the how chaotic their experiences of their classroom were, decreased in their social-emotional skills over the preschool year. Chaotic experiences in the home environment thus appear to have more influence on children's development than do chaotic preschool experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

Children's early development occurs in and is influenced by each of the environmental contexts children experience, from their homes and neighborhoods to their child care centers or preschools (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Developmental processes that occur in each context are not independent from each other, such that experiences of one context can interact with their experiences of another to produce lasting developmental changes in the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The capacity for children to learn from early experiences depends on the extent to which key contexts provide opportunities and supports for growth (Scarr & McCartney, 1983; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). According to ecological theory, environments that provide opportunities and supports for growth are those in which interactions between children and their environments, known as proximal processes, are typically both consistent and predictable (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In contrast, when children's experiences of their environment are chaotic, characterized by high levels of frenetic activity, a lack of structure, unpredictability in everyday activities, and high levels of ambient stimulation, the extent to which proximal processes are either consistent or predictable is limited (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Wachs & Evans, 2010).

As women have entered or returned to the workforce after becoming mothers at increasing rates over the past several decades (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), the amount of time children spend in

various out-of-family contexts has also increased. There is an ever greater need to understand how children's experiences across multiple contexts combine to influence their development and how chaotic experiences in one or more contexts may interfere with development. Using a national sample of low-income children attending Head Start, the overall purpose of the present study is to examine how continuity or discontinuity in children's chaotic experiences of their home and early childhood education classroom settings influences their early social-emotional development over the preschool year.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Chaotic experiences in developmental contexts

The term "environmental chaos" is a theoretical construct denoting a system of overly stimulating environmental characteristics that is adversely related to children's development and well-being (Wachs & Evans, 2010). Prior research has long shown that the relation between stimulation and development is non-linear—both excessive stimulation and too little stimulation are problematic for most children's development, with the developmentally optimal level of stimulation falling somewhere in the middle (Wohlwill, 1970; Wohlwill & Heft, 1987).

Definitions of chaotic experiences are numerous and varied; examples include, "environmental confusion" (Matheny, Wachs, Ludwig, & Phillips, 1995; p. 430), "frenetic activity, lack of structure, unpredictability in everyday activities and high levels of ambient stimulation" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 121), "chronic and persistent instability" (Lichter & Wethington, 2010, p. 15), "disruptions in multiple domains, including sensory overload, physical crowding, and routine

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family life” (Fiese & Winter, 2010, p. 49), “sudden, unexpected, and unintended disruptions” (Dunn, Schaefer-McDaniel, & Ramsey, 2010, p. 178), and “an environment characterized by high levels of noise, crowding, and instability as well as a lack of temporal and physical structuring (few regularities, routines, or rituals; nothing has its time or place)” (Wachs & Evans, 2010, p. 5). Chaotic experiences pose risks for children’s development because they are disruptive to multiple developmental processes, the most central of which, according to ecological theory, is the disruption of predictable and sustained proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Wachs & Evans, 2010).

Measurements of chaos are similarly numerous. In practice, researchers have selected variables on the basis of theoretical or conceptual importance and analyzed them individually or combined them as an index. The empirical basis for individual variables that may contribute to environmental chaos (e.g., crowding, noise, lack of routine, residential mobility) is large. In comparison, the empirical basis for chaos defined as an aggregate variable, which may be the most appropriate for representing chaos as a system or pattern, is relatively small (Ackerman & Brown, 2010), though two central constructs within chaos have been highlighted: disorder, characterized by high levels of noise, excessive crowding, clutter, and a general lack of structure; and turbulence, characterized by a lack of predictability and routines and by instability (Brooks-Gunn Johnson, & Leventhal, 2010). While “chaos,” variously defined and measured, has consistently predicted poorer functioning in children over and above the influence of socioeconomic status, exactly which are key aspects of chaos for children’s development is left uncertain (Wachs & Evans, 2010). The field is thus left with an intriguing concept whose operationalization is either under-developed or overly broad.

Drawing from these numerous conceptual and operational definitions of chaos in the literature, for the purposes of this study we define children’s chaotic experiences as being times in which *disruptive environmental characteristics interfere with a child’s ability to engage in predictable, controllable, and consistent interactions in and exchanges with their environment.*

One note about chaos and socioeconomic status (SES). Chaos is not evenly distributed throughout the population—children from low-income families are more likely to have chaotic experiences compared to their higher-income peers (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Garcia-Coll, 2001; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005). Children growing up in low-income or poor families are more likely to live in crowded, noisier, and poor-quality housing, to experience less structure, routine, or predictability in their daily lives, to be exposed to family disruption, to change residences, and to experience lower-quality child care than children growing up in non-poor families (Evans, 2004; Evans et al., 2005). That said, there is consistent evidence that chaos is distinct from SES from three lines of research: chaos has been linked to children’s development in middle-class samples (Hygge, Evans, & Bullinger, 2002); the significant association between chaos and development persists after aspects of SES, including income, parental education, and parental occupation, have been controlled (Dumas et al., 2005; Evans, 2006); and longitudinal studies have shown that changes in chaos are associated with changes in developmental outcomes even when no changes in SES have occurred (Corapci & Wachs, 2002; Wachs & Evans, 2010). Following from this research, we consider chaos to be a construct separate from family SES.

## 2.2. Risk across early childhood contexts

Decades of research have established that a single risk rarely reflects the reality of most children’s lives; rather, it is the constellation of risks or advantages that best captures the contextual complexities in which children develop (Sameroff, Gutman, Peck, & Luthar, 2003). The best predictors of children’s development are those that incorporate children’s risks and advantages across multiple contexts

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, Clarke-Stewart, & Dunn, 2006; Sameroff et al., 2003).

Young children cannot seek out their own environments and thus must cope with the environments their parents choose for them, the two most prominent of which are the home and the setting in which they receive care outside the home, whether it be in a child care center, preschool, or family care setting. Only a handful of studies to date have considered how children’s experiences in multiple settings interact to predict developmental outcomes, and none have examined how chaotic experiences of multiple settings may combine to influence children’s development. In the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, children’s experiences of cognitive stimulation accumulated across their home, child care, and elementary school settings to predict their rate of learning, but the cumulative function only held true when one of the contexts in which children were exposed to high levels of cognitive stimulation was the home environment (Crosnoe, Leventhal, Wirth, Pierce, & Pianta, 2010).

Quality in children’s home and child care environments similarly accumulated across contexts to predict children’s social–emotional functioning in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (Watumura, Phillips, Morrissey, McCartney, & Bub, 2011). Children who were exposed to both low-quality home environments (assessed using observations of maternal sensitivity and the home environment) and low-quality child care environments (assessed using observations of the child care setting) had the highest levels of problem behaviors and the lowest levels of prosocial behaviors. Consistent with Crosnoe et al. (2010), high quality home environments promoted positive development regardless of whether the quality of the child care setting was high or low.

These findings suggest that children can have varying experiences across their home and early learning contexts, but that the primacy of the home environment may dictate how the experiences combine to influence development.

## 2.3. Chaotic experiences across early childhood contexts

The prior work suggests children’s chaotic experiences across multiple environments may similarly cumulate or combine to predict children’s development, but no study has examined how chaotic experiences, specifically, interact across settings to affect development. This is, in part, because the study of chaos has almost been entirely limited to the home environment. The most commonly used measure of chaos, the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS; Matheny et al., 1995), only assesses the level of chaos in the home. The few studies examining the influence of chaotic early education and care settings on children’s development (e.g. Evans, 2006; Maxwell, 1996; Smith & Connolly, 1977; Tran & Winsler, 2011) have measured individual dimensions of chaos (e.g., overcrowded classrooms, caregiver turnover). Only a single study has previously attempted to develop a construct of classroom chaos. Using an adapted version of the CHAOS (Matheny et al., 1995), Wachs, Gurkas, and Kontos (2004) assessed child care teachers’ perceptions of the use of space, crowding, environmental traffic, and the degree of control and organization in the classroom. Children in child care settings rated to be chaotic showed fewer compliant behaviors than other children. In another study among first-grade students, lower levels of teacher-reported chaos using the Wachs-adapted version of the CHAOS predicted greater gains in reading from fall to spring, and higher levels of chaos predicted fewer gains in mathematics for boys, but not girls (Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Brock, & Nathanson, 2009).

## 2.4. Present study

The present study examined children’s experiences of chaos in both their home and early education settings. In doing so, the study adds to our understanding of how children develop across environments, and to our understanding of how to evaluate chaotic experiences in settings

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