Effects of a Family Move on the Social Adjustment of Children and Adolescents

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how a family's move to a new community affects children's and adolescents' social adjustment to a new school. In the fall and spring of a school year, students (N = 1,137) in the third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, and twelfth grades answered questions about their self-esteem, their parent-child relationships, and the quality of their best friendships. Parents, teachers, and peers also provided information about the students' social adjustment. Surprisingly, the social adjustment of students new to a school district was similar in most respects to that of students who had been in the school district in previous years. In particular, new students did not have lower self-esteem, a higher frequency of disruptive behavior at school, or lower-quality relationships with parents or best friends. New students did, however, interact less frequently with their best friends. In addition, new students were less likely to be named by their classmates as high in popularity and leadership.

Introduction

Although geographical moves are fairly common occurrences for children and adolescents in the United States (Schachter, 2004), they may contribute to problems in social adjustment. In particular, moves can be stressful for families, and so have negative effects on parent-child relationships. In addition, when children and adolescents move, they typically leave behind a set of best friends and a group of classmates with whom they are familiar. After the move, children and adolescents typically enroll in a new school where they must make new friends and form positive relationships with their new classmates.

Some research indicates that children with a history of frequent family moves have more difficulties in social adjustment than those who have never moved or moved infrequently (Adam, 2004). However, the findings are not easy to interpret because families who move frequently often differ from more stable families in certain characteristics (e.g., SES). To reduce this possible confounding, the sample for the present study included children and adolescents who had at least one parent in the Armed Forces. Military personnel of all ranks move often, so studies with samples of their children should provide a clearer picture of the effects of moving than studies of civilian samples have. In addition, the present study was designed to assess the immediate effects of a recent family move rather than the long-term correlates of a high frequency of family moves.

More specifically, the goal of the study was to examine how students' geographic mobility affects their social adjustment by comparing the adjustment of students new to a school district with that of students who had been in the same school district in previous years. A basic assumption was that the move to a new community and school can be stressful for students of all ages. Moreover, changes in social relationships with family members, friends, and classmates can be considered simultaneously as causes and as symptoms of the problems in social adjustment associated with such a move. Thus, the primary hypothesis for the study was that

new students would display poorer social adjustment than students who had been in the school district longer.

Method

The study included 1,137 students (506 boys and 631 girls) with a parent in one branch of the Armed Forces who completed surveys in both the fall and the spring of a school year. The students were in the third (n = 331), sixth (n = 286), eighth (n = 256), or eleventh and twelfth (n = 264) grades. Most students were European American (52%), but many were Hispanic (17%), African American (14%), or Asian American (5%).

The fall-semester survey included a question about how long the students had been in their current school district. Based on their answers to this question, students were classified as having been in the district for 0-3 months, 4-12 months, 1-2 years, or more than 2 years. The ten percent of the students who said that they had been in the district for 0-3 months were considered as new students. Nearly half of the students had been in the district for more than 2 years (47%), but sizable numbers had been in the district for only 4-12 months (22%) or for 1-2 years (21%).

In both the fall and the spring, students' social adjustment was assessed with multiple measures. The surveys completed by students included the items for three subscales of Harter's (1985) Self Perception Profile for Children: social acceptance, behavioral conduct, and general self-esteem. The internal consistency of these subscales was moderate to high (alpha coefficients greater than .70 in the fall and spring). Students also reported on multiple features of their best friendship (e.g., intimate self-disclosure, prosocial behavior, conflict, and rivalry), using items adapted from the interview devised by Berndt and Perry (1986). The final measures of positive friendship features and negative friendship features that were created by averaging the scores for different questions had alpha coefficients ranging from .74 to .93.

To obtain measures of students' social adjustment that were not dependent on self-reports, teachers and parents completed items from the Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) that focused on students' social skills and their problem behaviors. Reports on students' adjustment were also obtained from their classmates, by asking classmates to complete the Revised Class Play, a peer-nomination measure from which subscales for popularity/leadership and for problem behaviors were derived (see Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). Finally, both students and their parents responded to questions designed to assess the degree of warmth and conflict in the parent-child relationship. The measures derived from these sets of questions had high internal consistency (αs = .80 or higher).

Results

Repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with grade, sex, and time in the school district as between subjects factors and semester (fall vs. spring) as a within subject factor were done with the measures of adjustment as dependent variables. Most striking was the lack of evidence that the social adjustment of new students differed from that of other students. New students did not differ significantly from any other group of students in their general self-esteem or self-reported conduct. Neither parents nor classmates judged new students as displaying more problem behaviors than other students did. New students did not differ from other students in their reports on the positive and negative features of their friendships or in their reports on the warmth and conflict in their relationships with parents. Parents, too, gave similar reports on the

warmth and conflict in parent-child relationship when their children were new students and when their children had been in the same school district in previous years.

On two measures, however, significant differences were found between new students and other students. First, new students differed from other students in their perceptions of their social acceptance by peers, $F(3, 1057) = 5.80$, $p < .001$. In particular, new students (M = 2.74) had less positive views of their acceptance by peers than did students who had been in the district for 1-2 years or for more than 2 years (Ms = 2.93 and 2.98, respectively). Students who had been in the district for 4-12 months (M = 2.86) also had less positive views of their social acceptance than students in the district for more than two years. These findings imply that even students in their second year in a new school district viewed their social acceptance by classmates less positively than did students in the district for several years.

Finally, the ANOVA for classmates' reports on the students' popularity/leadership yielded a significant interaction between semester (fall vs. spring) and the time students had been in the school district, $F(3, 578) = 5.95$, $p < .001$. In both the fall and the spring, new students were less often nominated as popular and as leaders than were students who had been in the district longer, but the differences in these nominations between new students and other students were smaller in the spring than in the fall (see Figure 1). Apparently, classmates became better acquainted with the new students during the school year and so viewed them more positively in the spring than in the fall.

Conclusions

The primary hypothesis for this study was that new students would show poorer social adjustment than those who had been in the same school district for some time. The findings are quite consistent in not providing support for this hypothesis. On broad indicators of students' social adjustment such as their self-esteem and their own and other people's reports on their problem behaviors, no significant differences were found between new students and students who had been in the school district longer. The same is true if social adjustment is defined in terms of the quality of important social relationships. New students did not differ from other students in the quality of their relationships with their best friends or their parents. The lack of significant differences on this array of measures strongly suggests that family moves and the associated transition to a new school should not be viewed as stressful events that have negative effects on children's and adolescents' social adjustment.

New students do face the challenge of getting to know and to become known by their classmates. In the fall and in the spring, classmates were less likely to name new students as high in popularity and leadership than students who had been in the district for more than two years. But between the fall and spring assessments, classmates increased in the number of positive nominations of new students. Apparently, classmates felt more positively about the new students as they got to know them better.

By contrast, new students' perceptions of their social acceptance by peers did not change significantly between the fall and the spring. Apparently, new students were not aware of the improvement that had occurred in their reputation with classmates. In addition, the lack of explicit and unambiguous feedback from classmates may explain this discrepancy between classmates' nominations and students' self-perceptions. In addition, the lack of clear feedback may partly explain why it takes so long—more than a full school year—for new students' perceptions of their social acceptance and their actual reputations with classmates to match the

self-perceptions and reputations of students who have been in the same school district for more than two years.

These findings have important implications for educators and parents because they indicate more precisely what it means for students to make a successful social adjustment to a new school after a family move. After a move, students appear not to suffer from low self-esteem, to increase in disruptive or other problem behaviors, or to experience reductions in the quality of their relationships with best friends and parents. But these students do need opportunities to become acquainted and spend time in positive interactions with their new classmates. The opportunities provided by brief orientations at the beginning of a school year are not likely to be adequate for most new students. Programs or activities extending throughout the school year that allow new students to become more familiar with their classmates, and vice versa, are likely to be much more effective in helping new students feel that they belong in the large and complex social world of a new school.

<div align="center">References</div>

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Figure 1