

Is Moving During Childhood Harmful?

Multiple residential moves take a toll on children, but the effects may fade with time.

by REBEKAH LEVINE COLEY AND MELISSA KULL

Moving to a new home in childhood can impede school performance, social skills, and behavior, a new study finds, and the negative effects accumulate such that children who move multiple times are at greater risk.¹ Moving has different effects at different ages, and changing schools adds to the stress. This is concerning given that many families, particularly low-income families, are frequently on the move. In the current study, children moved on average 2.5 times between birth and eighth grade, with some moving up to 11 times.

Different Ages, Different Effects

The timing of the move in childhood has different effects. Residential moves between birth and kindergarten, for example, impeded social-emotional but not cognitive func-

tioning in kindergarten. Moves in elementary school, on the other hand, affected both cognitive and social-emotional functioning in fifth grade. Moves in middle school undermined eighth grade cognitive skills.² However, regardless of their timing, all effects were small.

Frequent Moves Add Up for Children's Social-Emotional Functioning

Frequent moves take a toll on children's social-emotional well-being. At all ages, each additional move is associated with small declines in social skills and emotional and behavioral problems. Although the effects are small, these deficits can accumulate, leaving multiple movers at greater risk.

Academic Effects of Moving Are More Immediately Felt

Children appear to bounce back from any negative effects on their academic skills, as measured by reading and math tests. The effects of moving in elementary school, for example, largely fade by middle school.

Changing Schools Also Inhibits Children's Functioning

Home and school moves each had unique effects on children, but school moves had slightly stronger effects on their cognitive scores and emotional problems, above and beyond the effects of residential moves. Still, moving schools does not fully explain why residential moves are challenging for children, as problems persist when they don't move schools.

KEY FINDINGS

- Residential moves during early and middle childhood have long-term effects on social-emotional outcomes, suggesting that stability is particularly important early in life.
- Residential moves during middle childhood and early adolescence impede school performance, but effects fade with time.
- Moves to a new school are also stressful for children, disrupting their academic skills as well as emotional functioning.

Policy Implications

Both residential and school moves can be difficult for children. **Providing extra support at school and home during and after moves** to help children and families establish new routines could be helpful. Schools in particular could become a hub for both parents' and children's support networks by hosting informal get-togethers during nonworking hours and providing resources and other supports during transitions. Because they regularly deal with mobility, the Department of Defense schools are a good model for supporting children.³ As a *Harvard Education Letter* reported, in these schools, "Teachers prepare their students to welcome new classmates. Informal assessments are provided as soon as new students enroll, a full-time staff member focuses on the transfer of records, and a counselor contacts each new student their first day at school. When a student leaves, friends prepare memory books or other keepsakes to communicate that the student will be missed."⁴

Another model is the "Welcoming Practices" partnership between the University of Southern California School of Social Work and five school districts in the San Diego area. They offer a mobile app to help families and children adjust to their new school and connect with people who can answer questions. This network also identifies staff members to take responsibility for creating welcoming routines for new students, among other efforts.⁵

Likewise, the foster care system has policies in place to alleviate disruption for youth moving to new schools. The McKinney-Vento Act and the Fostering Connections Act, for example, allow homeless and foster care children to attend their same school even if they move out of the district.⁶

More broadly, school districts could ease the transition for students by **sharing student information and better aligning curriculum across districts** to minimize adjustments when children move schools. Local districts could add "housing status" to new student registration protocols to better track students' housing and mobility situations. Home-visiting programs, which have proved effective in bolstering healthy child development, could pay particular attention to children in highly mobile families. In

Massachusetts, the Department of Early Education and Care established an interagency agreement with the Department of Housing and Community Development to work more closely together.⁷ Other states could mirror those efforts.

Preventing unnecessary moves that low-income families frequently face is also important.⁸ Some nonprofit organizations help families find stable housing and avoid moving by helping them navigate landlord issues or providing emergency funds and other services. But more funding is needed to expand these services. In recent years, each round of funding for housing and counseling services has been lower than the previous year.⁹ Furthermore, a 2012 Urban Institute roundtable found that many housing counseling agencies are unable to address school disruptions because they are unfamiliar with school districts' policies.¹⁰ Programs are needed to connect these agencies with local schools so they can more effectively integrate support services.

Study Design

The study draws on a nationally representative sample of 19,162 children in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, following them from kindergarten through eighth grade. Data were collected in the fall and spring of kindergarten and first grade, and the spring of third, fifth, and eighth grades. Cognitive skills were measured with validated reading and math tests. Social, emotional, and behavioral skills were reported by teachers in kindergarten, third, and fifth grades (not eighth) with an adapted version of the Social Rating Scale on self-control, interpersonal skills, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems. The study addressed potential selection issues and other factors that could influence outcomes above and beyond a move. ■

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Endnotes

1. Rebekah Levine Coley and Melissa Kull, “Cumulative, Timing-Specific, and Interactive Models of Residential Mobility and Children’s Cognitive and Psychosocial Skills,” *Child Development* (2016): 1-17.
2. The study did not measure social and behavioral skills in eighth grade.
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ABOUT THE HOW HOUSING MATTERS TO FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES RESEARCH INITIATIVE

This brief summarizes research funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its How Housing Matters to Families and Communities Research Initiative. The initiative seeks to explore whether, and if so how, having a decent, stable, affordable home leads to strong families and vibrant communities. By illuminating the ways in which housing matters and highlighting innovative practices in the field, the Foundation hopes to encourage collaboration among leaders and policymakers in housing, education, health, and economic development to help families lead healthy, successful lives. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the MacArthur Foundation.

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