

Strong social networks mean less stress for parents

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A U of A professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy has found that those conversations with fellow parents around the barbeque or at the playground can be important to maintaining a happy family.

The Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine's David McConnell, PhD, led a study which involved close to 1,000 Alberta families and parents, and looked at the [relationship](#) between socio-economic status and child well-being. McConnell and his team found that during financial hardship, the parents' stress had an impact on the child and exposure to poverty in early childhood has long-term consequences for health and well-being.

But even more interesting, they found that not all families in poverty or significant financial hardship were experiencing high levels of parental stress.

“We asked ourselves, ‘How come? There must be other factors protecting certain families, parents and kids.’” McConnell explains.

And what they found protecting some families were strong social networks and social interactions with other parents and the community.

“With social support, they’re much less likely to be stressed,” he says, “which could transition to parenting problems and increase the chances of challenging child behaviour.”

Rhonda Breitkreuz, PhD, another author of the study, says she did not

realize how important social networks are for parents.

“What was surprising to me was just how important social support was in this study for all families,” says Breitzkreuz, an assistant professor in the Department of Human Ecology at the U of A. “The linkages between higher social support and lower parenting stress held, regardless of the extent to which the family experienced [financial hardship](#) or child difficulties. This suggests that social support is a key factor in reducing parenting stress for all families.”

With busier and busier lives, McConnell is worried about the resulting social isolation and how that will impact families.

“We need to help families out of poverty but we need strengthen communities and the opportunities for social interaction,” says McConnell, who is the father of three boys. “As a dad, I never think that my chats around the barbeque are that important – but they’re vitally important.”

Provided by University of Alberta

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