



# Contact with Extended Family

The Science of Resilience

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## Definition

Contact with extended family can be used to describe the degree to which an individual has a relationship with family members outside of their immediate household (Kelada et al., 2019). This can refer to anyone in an individual's relative pool such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, etc. (Brown, 2008). Contact can vary widely in terms of the extent to which the extended family member is involved within a person's life and the degree to which the relationship is positive (contributing to the wellbeing of the person) or negative (not contributing to the wellbeing of the individual).

Some research defines contact with an extended family network as referring to the level to which there is an exchange of resources (material and not) and emotional support between an individual and their family of origin (St. Vil, McDonald, & Cross-Barnet, 2018).

## Relationship to Resilience

A recurrent theme within the literature related to the role of the extended family in promoting resilience, is that more contact with extended family can lead to a larger support network. The total number of supportive relationships can greatly affect an individual's ability to overcome adversity (Scales & Gibbons, 1996). Individuals can also gain resilience through family members that can serve as positive role models; namely, adults that model resilience in the face of adversity (Stone et al., 2020)

Studies have revealed that among children and youth, having a relationship with non-parental figures, such as extended family members, served to provide emotional support, experiential support (advice and information), as well as modelling behaviour. Sánchez, Reyes, and Singh (2006) found that youth received eight forms of support from non-parental adults, these included: relationships, school/education, career/jobs, self-concept, values/morals, religion/spirituality, finances, and substance use. Extended family members such as grandparents and cousins provided encouragement that lead youth to make positive decisions in their lives such as working hard to pursue a career goal based or abstain from drug use. Furthermore, these adults served as an outlet for youth to talk through issues they were facing when they were too nervous, embarrassed, or afraid to discuss it with their parents. The study revealed that strong positive relationships between youth and non-parental adults had four main benefits (Sánchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). *Intrapersonal development benefits*, referring to a change within the individual (i.e., improved self-concept, higher motivation). *Interpersonal relationship benefits*, referring to enhanced relationship skills such as within a friendship or romantic partnership. An example given by Sánchez, Reyes, and Singh (2006) was a cousin stepping in and giving advice and guidance on leaving an abusive relationship. *School-related benefits*, referring to increased motivation in academic success, such as encouragement leading to improved grades and applying to college. Lastly, *behavioural benefits*, referring to a positive

change in behaviour, such as holding a job responsibly and avoidance or decrease in drug and alcohol use.

Other studies have investigated the role of extended family in the resilience process, such as when adversity imparted through racialization. Brown (2008) examined African American resilience, and specifically looked at social support as a protective factor. Extensive social support networks, consisting primarily of family members, are common culturally among African American individuals and has been attributed to an increased ability to overcome adversity (Pipes- McAdoo, 2002). St. Vil, McDonald, & Cross-Barnet, 2018 noted that studies have shown that extended family is highly associated with resilience in the lives of Black families. Their study assessing the impact of extended family on Black married couples, they found that extended family affected their marriage positively through having assistance with childcare, increased emotional support and outlets for advice. Conversely, if one spouse was disliked by the other's family, contact with extended family and the close nature of the family was associated with greater stress. This indicates that contact with extended family is beneficial depending on the nature of the relationship (e.g., is it positive or negative).

A meta-analysis delving into the relationship between resilience and attachment found that resilience and secure attachment can be developed in youth who have experienced adversity, through formation of stable relationships with adults in one's life such as extended family (Rasmussen et al., 2019). A secure attachment style (Seay, Hansen, & Harlow, 1962; Bowlby 1958; Ainsworth, 1969) can foster resilience as it increases an individual's ability to overcome adverse experiences in the context of interpersonal relationships. Other studies have supported this idea, showing that contact with family members can foster relational resilience in children who may not have formed strong attachment with their parents as caregivers (Lynch, 2011). In a study on foster care, Lynch (2011) found that children in the care of extended family showed more adaptive behaviour, fewer behaviour issues, better mental health, and overall successful adaptation following adversity compared with children residing in foster care with non-familial caregivers. In studies examining the role of extended family in youth/children who do not have much if any support from their parents, contact with extended family can be critical (Oliver & Leblanc, 2015). Relationships with extended family members might provide the emotional connection that youth are lacking from not having a close attachment with their parents. Oliver and Leblanc (2015) conducted a literature review examining the importance of extended family in resilience. From the available literature they found that extended family was of specific importance in the lives of children and youth. The extent of support and satisfaction the relationships provided and the total number of positive relationships with family was associated with better mental health. Oliver and Leblanc (2015) relate this to how extended family members can take on many roles within an adolescent's life, including: teacher/model, guide/supporter, challenger, controller/antagonist, and pal/companion (Foster-Clark, 1993). Lynch's (2011) study on foster children and Rasmussen et al.'s, (2019) study exemplify that secure attachment can be developed through positive relationships with extended family members in the absence of parental figures. Specifically,

Lynch (2011) found that children who resided with extended family adapted to life after adversity much better than children residing in foster care. Rasmussen et al., (2019) conducted a meta analyses on attachment and resilience and found that the presence of family relationships and family closeness, particularly early in life, was significantly corelated both with secure attachment and resilience later in life.

Additionally, research has identified that contact with extended family can lead to the promotion of other factors which promote resilience. Relationships with family members can lead to an exchange of resources and social support (St. Vil, McDonald, & Cross-Barnet, 2018). St. Vil, McDonald, and Cross-Barnet (2018) identified three types of support which individuals might receive through extended family: financial, emotional, and practical. Families may offer *financial support* by offering money in times of economic hardship. They might also offer *emotional support* and be a source of advice and understanding. Lastly, they might also be a source of *practical support*, helping with tasks such as child-rearing and housework. Other research by Taylor, Chatters, and Hardison (2001) has explored how extended family can be a source of instrumental and tangible aid, examples being emotional support, advice, information, and sharing of material resources.

There are many examples within the literature of the benefit of positive relationships with extended family in the lives of adolescents. Sánchez, Reyes, and Singh (2006) found that extended family members can increase prosocial behaviour in teenagers. Examples provided included decreased drug use, higher academic success, increased self-esteem and confidence, increase in financially responsible decisions, etc. The key to this being that the family members act as positive role models advocating for prosocial behaviours. In a study examining resilience in youth who are multiple service users, Stevens et al., (2014) found that the young people who were in the higher resilience group had more positive and active relationships with at least one adult member of their extended family although not necessarily their parents. Youth identified extended family members as supporting them through emotional support, material support, and giving them a sense of belonging.

Several studies also exemplified how contact with extended family can foster resilience in children suffering from cancer. Brody and Simmons (2007) found that contact with extended family fostered resilience within fathers of children with cancer through the social support they provided. Conversely, the social support provided by family members during these tough times also resulted in greater contact and stronger relationships with extended family members. Brody and Simmons (2007) identified that support from family members was in many cases better than help from friends because the help was often more reliable and committed. Extended family provided emotional support, childcare of other siblings, and transportation among other things. Knowing that the family was available to assist with such tasks was a source of reassurance. In their study on family resiliency in childhood cancer (McCubbin et al., 2002) interviewed 26 families to assess factors which promoted resilience during family recovery. 80% of families noted extended family as being important for their recovery. The

families discussed that extended family was an important resource as they provided sibling care, transportation, emotional support, instrumental support. Extended family was especially important to single mothers who did not have the support of a partner.

## Improving

Improving this aspect might involve family therapy to repair or strengthen relationships within one's family network. As stated by Oliver & Leblanc (2015), family ties can be crucial in resilience; however, these ties require support, flexibility, and awareness that family reconnection is not always possible without sustainable supports and programs. Furthermore, where contact with extended family might not be a possibility for some individuals, familial relationships can be fostered through a network of close friends and 'chosen' family.

For adolescents, youth/adult partnerships with non-parental adults can be fostered and strengthened with extended family. Ungar (2013) states that the following processes make can make adult-youth relationships transformative through engagement. These strategies position the adult in a more equal relationship with the youth they are trying to engage. If successful, this suggests that the result will be an increase in a young person's social capital and access to the resources that predict resilience when facing adversity (Ungar, 2011). Some ways to foster positive relationships between youth and adults include:

- Gain clarity and consensus on the purpose of including youth in decision-making processes in their families, schools, and communities.
- Mobilize and coordinate a group of diverse stakeholders so that youth are assured of advocates who can support them in their choices. In addition to youth as participants, adult stakeholders are also needed to mobilize support and avoid decisions being ignored.
- Create favourable organizational narratives about the advantages of including youth voices in decision-making processes. It is important that families, schools, and communities develop a positive attitude towards youth engagement and document anecdotal evidence for its effectiveness.
- Construct explanations for why youth should have a say over the decisions that affect them.
- Affirmatively address issues of role and power while acknowledging the asymmetrical power between youth and adults. Work to find solutions to balancing this power while still providing youth with the structure and support they require to make good decisions within their means.
- Institutionalize new roles for youth and make these the norm through mandated structural changes to families, schools, and communities.

## Interventions

Family resilience and familial relationships can be strengthened through family therapy interventions (Ungar, 2016). With support, family relationships can be developed in a number of ways: by encouraging increased contact (e.g., spending time with elderly relatives, helping them out; celebrating extended family member's birthdays together, especially younger relatives), through relationship counselling or interventions to address underlying problems that affect family relationships (i.e., treatment for parental alcohol abuse, or addressing issues of family violence), and providing guidance and physical resources to families (for example, transportation) to enable them to have meaningful contact (Stevens et al., 2014). Ancestry and tracing relations could also be a method of feeling a sense of connectedness or shared history. Further research and development of intervention is necessary.

## Assessment

Most studies measure the extent of family contact through inclusion of questions within a demographic questionnaire, or through a semi-structured interview that specifically question level of contact with extended family. That being said there are several tools available for measuring levels of social support, most of which include extended family and if not could otherwise be modified to include questions about extended family specifically. There are also several tools which can assess family functioning within an extended family network. Other measures which assess family closeness, trust, and support, could be adapted to encourage respondents to think about family beyond their household.

### **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988)**

- 12 item scale. Assesses perceptions of social support from family, friends, and significant others.

### **The Family Inventory of Resources for Management (FIRM; McCubbin, Comeau, & Harkins, 1981)**

- 69 item scale. Measures psychological, social, financial, and community resources available to a family. This includes level of extended family support.

### **The Family Assessment Measure III (Fam III; Skinner, Steinhauer, & Santa-Barbara, 1983)**

- 50 item scale. Assesses overall family functioning in terms of task accomplishment, role performance, communication, affective expression, and control.

### **Family Functioning Scale (FFS; Bloom, 1985)**

- 75 item scale. Measures family functioning on 15 dimensions which can be categorized under the following themes: relationship dimensions, personal growth or value dimensions, and system maintenance dimensions.

**McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD; Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983)**

- 60 item scale. Measures an individual's perception of his/her family on seven dimensions: problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behaviour control, general functioning.

**The Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos, 1974)**

- 90 item scale. Measures interpersonal relationships among family members, the directions of personal growth emphasized in the family, and the basic organizational structure of the family.



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