

# The Health Significance of Families Seen through the Recent Measles Outbreak

*Department of Sociology, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA*

Molly A. Martin, Associate Professor, Pennsylvania State University, Sociology, 212 Oswald, University Park, PA 16802, United States, Tel: +814-863-5508; E-mail: [mam68@psu.edu](mailto:mam68@psu.edu)

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The recent rise of measles demonstrates the importance of our families' social characteristics for a host of infectious and non-infectious diseases. We need to recognize that families are more than their shared genes; families are distinctive health environments and our family relationships affect our health and health behaviors. Although families are a relatively understudied health context, I recommend several avenues by which we can grow this exciting field within social epidemiology. With a greater understanding of how families' social characteristics influence health, we can inform clinical and public health practices and better meet our public health goals.

least) two people to get married and birth or adopt children and couples coordinate their employment decisions [13]. Individual action creates and reinforces the family; but once created, families are more than the sum of their parts [14] and become important health contexts unto their own.

They are two broad dimensions of family life that matter for individual health – the family's interpersonal processes and their structural traits. I next describe each dimension and demonstrate their importance for children's risks for contracting measles.

### Family interpersonal processes

They include the content and patterning of their communication and behavior; family members can influence each other's health. This dimension comprises families' dynamic relationships, though it is not fully captured with measures from a single point in time. It includes adults' joint decision-making, caregiving relationships, and children's socialization. Hierarchies within the family govern these interactions, such that each family member does not have equal authority and influence. Over time, repeated patterns and communication styles create an emotional climate [15], which influences individuals' physical and psychological health [16,17].

Family interpersonal processes can directly alter biological states or indirectly influence health by influencing individuals' behavior. Direct influence can occur; for example, in abusive situations [18-20] or when family conversations produce a hyper-reactive stress response [21]. Yet most health influences are indirect, such as when parents safeguard their children's long-term health by teaching them to wash their hands. In fact, the avenues of indirect family influence are numerous: family members help establish our health-related identities and norms [22,23], transmit health-related information and resources [24-26], care for us through illness and other needs [27], and serve as healthcare consultants [28].

Returning to the measles example, we can see how family interpersonal processes matter. First, it is clear that anti-vaccination



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