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

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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 (n = 331), sixth (n = 286), eighth (n = 256), or eleventh and twelfth (n = 264) grades were asked 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 who moved to a new school district was similar in most respects to that of students who had been in the same 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, have less positive views of their acceptance by peers. In addition, new students were less likely to be named by their classmates as high in popularity and leadership.

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 relationships when their children were new students and when their children had been in the same school district in previous years.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary hypothesis for this study was that new students would show poorer social adjustment than students who had been in the same school district for more than two years. The findings were quite consistent with 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 for 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 intense 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 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. The lack of explicit matches between parents and 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 adjustment and the 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 problem behavior, 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, would likely be much more effective in helping new students feel that they belong in the large and complex social world of a new school.

REFERENCES


[Presentation at the Society for Research in Child Development, April 2009, Denver] [A copy of this poster is available at http://www2.psych.purdue.edu/~berndt/]

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 (9%).

The fall-spring 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 who had been in the district for more than 2 years (47%), but sizable numbers 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 friendships (e.g., intense 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.