

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because It Shows Us How Families Can Thrive

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By Norma J. Bond Burgess, Ph.D., President, National Council on Family Relations (NCFR)

Do you ever wish you had a parenting handbook for raising your children? A guide to navigating a disagreement with your partner? A better understanding of your relationship with your in-laws?

For many of us, family is the cornerstone of our lives. Our family can also help us learn to navigate relationships and manage life's challenges. Simply being in a family, however, does not mean we intrinsically know everything about building and maintaining *healthy, well-functioning* families.

[Family science](#) — the scientific study of families and close interpersonal relationships — helps us to understand all types of families and how family relationships affect us, our families, and society. Family science research shows us strategies to build strong relationships and marriages, ways to parent effectively, and so much more to support families' well-being, which creates a better society for everyone.

Families are the “fundamental group unit of society” [according to the United Nations](#), which observes the [International Day of Families](#) each year on May 15. Families are unique from other groups of people; a conflict with a family member has different dynamics than with a friend or coworker. Family also has a greater influence on our lives than almost any other group, from small things like how we squeeze a toothpaste tube to major decisions about where we live or whom we marry.

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Family science, therefore, is crucial to address the big societal issues of the 21st century. The work of family scientists makes a tremendous impact on how we understand and strengthen family relationships; it informs policies, programs, and practices to support all families. Some examples of the impact of family science research include:

Enriching couple relationships. The [Prepare/Enrich](#) assessment tool developed by family scientist David H. Olson, Ph.D., has provided evidence-based skills to help more than 4 million couples prepare for marriage or nurture their relationship, and it has been confirmed to improve couples' relationship satisfaction.

Creating better public policies for families. The [Family Impact Institute](#) headquartered at Purdue University has offered Family Impact Seminars to bipartisan groups of state-level policymakers for several decades, providing nonpartisan research on numerous topics related to families. [According to the institute](#), policies that are focused on families rather than on individuals have been proven more effective in areas like violence prevention, disease prevention, and support of positive youth development.

Promoting positive outcomes for teen mothers of Mexican origin. Through the [Supporting MAMI](#) (Mexican-origin Adolescent Mothers and their Infants) Project based at Harvard University, family science scholars are working to better understand how teen mothers of Mexican origin experience pregnancy and parenting, particularly focusing on family relationships, development, and cultural factors. The project aims to identify resources that can create positive outcomes for the teen mothers, their own mother figures, and for their children.

Explaining and decreasing health disparities for same-gender couples. The [National Couples' Health and Time Study](#) of same- and different-gender couples is investigating numerous factors affecting couple health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic — relationship functioning, stressors, discrimination, use of time, and more. Data could [provide](#) insights into family dynamics, like how a discussion between partners about one person's stress around discrimination affects the other person's stress level. The data will help inform researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to create programs and policies to decrease adverse health impacts for all families.

Training educators to be inclusive of culturally diverse families. A training program developed by a family science researcher — [Culturally Responsive Family Engagement](#) — provides strategies for educators to better connect with families, specifically to build authentic relationships and inclusively engage with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Managing grief and loss in families. Family scientist and therapist Pauline Boss, Ph.D., has expanded our understanding of grief and loss and how professionals can work with families experiencing these situations. Boss coined the term [ambiguous loss](#) for circumstances when a family member is missing physically (e.g., in a natural disaster) or psychologically (e.g., due to traumatic brain injury), but without verification of death or certainty that the person will return to the way they were. Boss has worked with family members of those with dementia, as well as families who have lost relatives in catastrophic events, including the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

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Families and family science scholarship like the examples presented are at the core of the nonprofit, nonpartisan National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). NCFR and its members conduct and publish research and provide evidence-based resources to improve how we understand and strengthen all families; the organization's [three scholarly journals](#) feature the best research from around the world about families. You can learn more about family science at [WeAreFamilyScience.org](#), and access family science articles, policy briefs, and more [from NCFR](#).

Almost everyone is or has been part of a family and has experienced the joys and challenges of family life. Family science provides research-based insights into the unique dynamics of families — the building blocks of society — so that all families can be empowered to thrive.



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