Concept Note

Family wellness and resilience in the context of COVID-19

Commemoration of International Day of Families

May 15th, 2020

Background

The International Day of Families is observed on the 15th of May every year. Although families all over the world have transformed greatly over the past decades in terms of their structure and as a result of global trends and demographic changes, it is this diversity that makes the United Nations recognition of the family as the basic unit of society more important than ever before. The International Day of Families provides an opportunity to promote awareness of issues relating to families and to increase knowledge of the social, economic and demographic processes affecting them[1].

As one of the most fundamental and vital units of society, the family has great implications on the health and social situation of individuals, communities and nations. The family plays a direct role in generating health, promoting healthy choices, and encouraging behavior change, and what happens in the home, good or bad, resonates in the larger public health context. Likewise, issues that affect populations affect the family environment and the health of family members. As illustrated in below figure, the family remains a constant factor across the life course, even though over time the emphasis may shift from family of origin to one own's family.

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[1] https://www.un.org/en/events/familyday/

Figure 1: The changing influence of selected social determinants of health across the life course
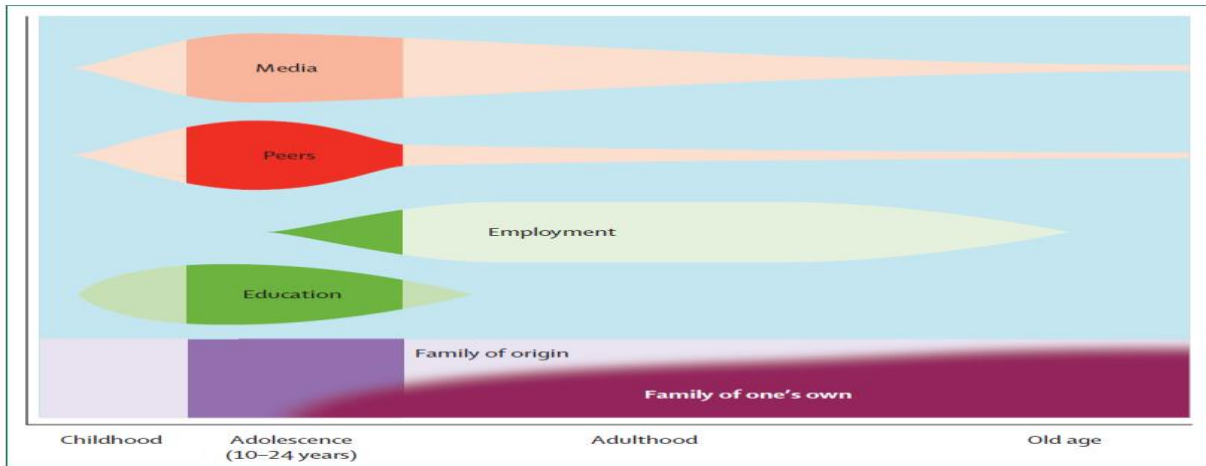
Source: Patton GC, Sawyer SM, Santelli JS, Ross DA, Afifi R, Allen NB, et al. Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. Lancet. June 2016

Families play several critical roles for society. They have sustained effects on the development, learning and wellbeing of their members. This influential role extends to the community and takes place in families with or without children. Families change overtime as their social and economic context changes. They also change as new members enter the life of a particular family unit such in the case of a pregnancy and the multiple changes that come with children. The family members interact and influence each other and these interactions changes as the child grows and develops and as the family composition changes as other members enter (i.e. when a sibling arrive or when a grandparent comes to live with the family) or exit (as in the case of a divorce). A nurturing, responsive, loving and sensitive caregiving promotes social-emotional competence, academic success, work productivity, and health behaviors. Most families are the main source of caregiving and have the potential to bring those positive effects to children and adolescents, as recognized in the WHO and UNICEF Nurturing care framework and the Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. Families also influence the health and social outcomes of older persons. Caregiving to older family members is an essential and socially important task. At the same time, older family members often deliver important caregiving services themselves when they look after their grandchildren or work as advocates for their needs or their communities'.

With this understanding of the family's influence on health, the family is often referenced in health and development. The 2030 Development Agenda indicates that the very achievement of many sustainable development goals and targets would benefit from explicit and implicit family policies and programs.[i] The World Health Organization (WHO) has the Family, Women, Children and Adolescents Cluster that addresses the health needs of vulnerable populations at all stages of life. And the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) includes family in one of its departments: Family, Health Promotion and Life Course.

The family in the time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global emergency with numbers of cases continuing to soar. Prevention of further spread of COVID-19 requires physical distancing and in case of suspected exposure voluntary self-isolation or obligatory quarantine. Prevention efforts have prompted national authorities to take measures which profoundly disrupts daily life, including closures of workplaces and schools, and limitations on the movement and gathering of people. Considering the epidemiological trends of COVID-19, it is expected that these measures may last for extended times.

The family unit is and should be an important target for prevention and containment messages to avoid household transmission, considering the proximity of family members of varying age groups and conditions residing together.

With closings of schools, universities, workplaces and increasingly parks and recreational spaces, families are spending obligatory extended times in the same household, sometimes crowded and limited in space, while at the same time dealing with the stress and anxiety and the tragic consequences of the pandemic, such as the loss of family and friends, as well as the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic, which can include loss of wages and employment or even homelessness.

Children and young people are finding themselves in a situation of uncertainty, anxiety and high stress levels and facing difficulties in understanding and expressing their own emotions. These conditions put pressure on the family relations and dynamics, and can negatively impact the health and wellness of the family members. it is essential that members come together to ensure everyone's health and well-being,

and receive the support needed to fulfill the family roles required under normal circumstances as well as deal positively with the added challenges brought on by COVID-19. Positive social interactions are critical for everybody and are especially formative and protective for children and young people.

National and local authorities as well as communities have a critical role to support families to deal with the COVID-19 situation and its repercussions in the most positive way possible thorugh fostering family resilience. Family resilience has been defined as "the family's ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges, strengthened and more resourceful"[2]. By affirming family strengths and potential in the midst of crisis, families can reinforce a sense of confidence and ability to cope. Walsh identified three processes of family resilience: 1)belief systems, 2)organizational patterns, and 3)communication processes (figure 2).

Figure 2: Processes of Family Resilience

Process	Elements
Belief systems	a) Making meaning of adversity; b) positive outlook; c) Transcendence and spirituality
Organizational patterns	a) Flexibility; b) Connectedness: c) Social and economic resources
Communication processes	a) Clarity of communication; b) Open emotional expression; c) collaborative problem solving

Source: Walsh F.;Strenghtening family resilience. 2nd ed. New York; Guilford; 2006.

Unfortunately, the confinement also exacerbates negative and dysfunctional family relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rise in domestic violence, sexual abuse and child abuse. Therefore, in addition to supporting families, the local COVID-19 response should also include measures to enable survivors and potential victims of family violence to safely exit the violent situation and obtain help.

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[2] Walsh F. The concept of family resilience: crisis and challenge. Fam Process 1996; 35:261-81

As mentioned, PAHO has a history of supporting families to improve the health and wellbeing of members of the family unit across the life course. The main goal of PAHO's commemoration of the International Day of the Family in 2020, is to reinforce the important role of families in health and wellbeing at all times, and in particular in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objective of PAHO commemoration of International Day of Families:

- To reinforce the important role of families in health and wellbeing across the life course
- To call attention to the impact of COVID-19 on families
- To generate/contribute to a regional dialogue on how national authorities and communities can help families cope in a positive way with the challenges brought on by COVID-19

Proposed activities

- Dissemination of communication messages and materials
- Two webinars on May 15th, one English and one Spanish
    - During the webinars, participants will have the opportunity to share their experience on how they are supporting families in the context of the pandemic and the sources of materials
    - Webinar details:
        - May 15th, 10.00 – 11.30: English webinar
        - May 15th: 12.00 – 13.30: Spanish webinar
        - Provisional title: " Family wellness and resilience in the time of COVID-19"; " El bienestar y la resiliencia de la familia en la época de COVID-19"

Materials/resources currently available or in production to support PAHO's activities

- o Background document on families and health under development at HL
- o The Familias Fuertes video and photo story
- o English and Spanish Infographics on families and adolescent health
- o WHO materials on Nurturing Care Framework, English and Spanish WHO infographics on Parenting and COVID-19 (6), mental health and Covid19, among others.
- o All available relevant resources developed before the pandemic and those created to respond to the pandemic will be gathered and disseminated.

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i UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development. 2016 Family Expert Group Meeting. Summary of the Proceedings. Available from: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=2ahUKEwid0Ia8_NLoAhWBbs0KHe4nDewQFjACegQIBBAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.un.org%2Fesa%2Fsocdev%2Ffamily%2Fdocs%2Fegm16%2Fsummary.pdf&usg=AOvVaw35Dw8gvCqqWtlGIbchb2ng