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What we do & Why it matters

The Department of Human Development and Family Studies is comprised of highly productive faculty committed to addressing challenges regarding human development, relationships, and families through cutting-edge research, award-winning instruction, and culturally sensitive outreach. HDFS faculty and student scholarship is always conducted with a view to relevant contextual issues and to practical implications be they for community or health professionals, families/parents, schools/teachers/youth program leaders, or policymakers.

SUSAN SILVERBERG KOERNER (department head)
Dr. Koerner advances knowledge about the emotional and physical well-being of adults who provide care for elder family members who are frail, ill, or disabled (e.g., older parents or spouses). Through her research on caregiver daily stress reactivity, family members’ conflict and disagreement regarding elder care, and the unique experiences of Hispanic/Latino caregivers, she aims to inform interventions and culturally relevant programs for family caregivers at risk.

KELLY BOST (professor)
Dr. Bost examines how families and parent-child attachment relationships impact children’s socioemotional and health-related outcomes. Her work is advancing knowledge about the role of self-regulatory processes in the development of pediatric obesity, and cuts across disciplinary boundaries to examine complex interactions between biological and family factors to ultimately improve the health and well-being of children and families.

AARON EBATA (associate professor, Extension specialist)
Dr. Ebata applies community-based Extension strategies and technological innovations in supporting families, including families with young children and those with children on the autism spectrum. He also investigates the impact of nature on family health and how family-based nature activities can promote strong family relationships.

GAIL FERGUSON (assistant professor)
Dr. Ferguson is a leader in understanding how the identities and well-being of youth and families internationally are being impacted by 21st-Century globalization. She has pioneered theory and research identifying Americanization and U.S. media viewing as risk factors for unhealthy eating and family conflict among teenagers and parents in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Through international transdisciplinary collaborations spanning psychology, advertising, and nutrition, she has catapulted these cutting-edge findings into an innovative global health family intervention.

BARBARA H. FIESE (professor, director of the Family Resiliency Center)
Dr. Fiese explores the effects of shared mealtimes on child and family health. She applies this knowledge to advance research and policy in the prevention of childhood obesity starting at birth and the reduction of childhood hunger through private-public partnerships.

JENNIFER HARDESTY (professor)
Dr. Hardesty is advancing the understanding of intimate partner violence, separation/divorce, and parenting after separation. Through studying how different types of violence during marriage relate to different co-parenting experiences and health outcomes after separation, she will be able to inform prevention and intervention efforts with divorcing parents.

ROBERT HUGHES, JR. (professor)
Dr. Hughes studies divorce and its effects on children and their parents. He is particularly interested in developing educational programs that can help children and their parents develop healthy ways of dealing with changes and stresses in their families. He has worked with Sesame Street and many other groups to develop interesting and engaging activities for coping. He is also developing social media strategies to engage teens and young adults.

ROBIN JARRETT (professor)
Dr. Jarrett conducts research on resilience in ethnic-racial group families. Her work advances our understanding of how, despite the adversity of poverty and residence in resource-poor neighborhoods, families promote the positive development of their children. As an urban ethnographer, she uses a wide array of qualitative data collection strategies that highlight the strengths of ethnic-racial group families.
KAREN KRAMER (assistant professor)
Dr. Kramer is advancing the understanding of the relationship between the division of work and care in families, and career and family outcomes of individuals. She investigates how policies such as paid and unpaid parental leave affect the division of care between parents, future career outcomes of mothers and fathers, and the health and well-being of families.

SOO AH KWON (associate professor)
Dr. Kwon uses qualitative ethnographic methods that focus on the role of young people in local community-based organizations, international NGOs, and universities, and how they mediate power relations and social inequalities. Given that youth in the United States and around the world stand as metaphors for society, her work advances contemporary understandings of race, citizenship, and governance.

REED LARSON (professor)
Dr. Larson’s research identifies the types of key experiences that young people have in arts, STEM, and leadership programs that facilitate their development of skills for problem solving, learning from emotions, and sustaining motivation in challenging work. These findings are used to train program staff and design programs that empower youth.

CHRISTY LLERAS (associate professor)
Dr. Lleras addresses some of the most critical problems of our time including racial health disparities, educational inequality, and poverty by examining how schools and neighborhoods affect child and adolescent health and development and maternal well-being. Her work examines how exposure to chronic social stressors including adverse childhood experiences, poverty, and crime affect mental health, immune functioning, and disease risk among racial minority populations.

BRENT MCBRIDE (professor, director of the Child Development Laboratory)
Dr. McBride is one of the leading researchers in the area of father involvement in families of children with disabilities. His cutting-edge research provides critical insight on how to better support fathers struggling within this challenging parenting context, as well as early intervention personnel working with these families. Additionally, he studies the role of child care contexts in influencing children’s obesity and inappropriate weight gain during the early childhood years.

NANCY MCELWAIN (professor)
Dr. McElwain advances understanding of the dynamic early-life interactions between parents and children that shape children's developing abilities to regulate stress. She adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines neuroscience, psychophysiology, linguistics, and developmental psychology. Through investigating stress regulation during early development, she aims to promote healthy parent-child relationships and children’s long-term social and emotional well-being.

BRIAN OGOLSKY (associate professor)
Dr. Ogolsky examines how relational partners maintain healthy romantic relationships across the life course. His work has the potential to inform practitioners and promote policy initiatives designed to enhance family dynamics.

RAMONA OSWALD (professor)
Dr. Oswald is advancing knowledge about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families living in smaller communities. Even though many LGBT families live outside of major cities, most research ignores this fact. She looks at what support these families need, and how their residential communities can provide it in ways that fit local culture.

MARCELA RAFFAELLI (professor)
Dr. Raffaelli examines how individuals and families facing challenges are able to maintain positive functioning such as demonstrating resilience. Her work extends theoretical models by focusing on diverse populations around the globe (e.g., Latino immigrants in the U.S., homeless youth in Brazil). By identifying modifiable risk and protective factors, this work informs the creation of interventions and policies.

SHARDÉ SMITH (assistant professor)
Dr. Smith is finding ways to contribute to the reduction of mental health disparities for African Americans. She does this by examining racism, social support, and mental health in the family context. She also investigates the barriers to, and facilitators of, mental health treatment among African American youth and their families.
MARGARITA TERÁN-GARCIA (research assistant professor, Extension specialist, College of Medicine course director)
Dr. Terán conducts transdisciplinary research on obesity and other nutrition-related diseases (e.g., diabetes, hypertension) among low-income populations. She works on promoting health and wellness among families of Hispanic-heritage and translates evidence-based science to community-based programs that serve children and families in need. Her aim is to better understand the biological and psychological dimensions that could be modified in individuals and families, to tailor more efficient and practical interventions to prevent obesity and chronic diseases.

KELLY TU (assistant professor)
Dr. Tu is advancing the understanding of adaptive stress responses among children and adolescents. She investigates children's physiological and behavioral responses to stress and parents’ role in helping children navigate and manage challenges. Her work will inform broader efforts to promote positive youth development and well-being.