

# American family life should not be this volatile <sup>[1]</sup>

Welcome to the age of tremors.

**Author:** Haspel, Elliot

**Source:** The Atlantic

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 27 Jul 2023

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

### Excerpts

Parenthood has always involved unpredictability: wake-ups at 2 a.m., calls from school, the dreaded words my stomach hurts. This daily variance frequently stems from a sick or scared child, and is part of the basic dynamic of family life. Yet today's parents in the U.S. also face rising external disruptions and a degradation of the institutions that are meant to provide stability. The result is that many families are regularly knocked off their feet by problems that are more than inconvenient but less than catastrophic. This breeds parental stress, insecurity, and exhaustion. Americans have entered, in short, an age of tremors.

The nation has been on this course for the past half century. Starting in the 1970s, a series of economic- and social-policy decisions led to what the political scientist Jacob Hacker has termed the "great risk shift" from government and corporations onto households. Hacker's idea mainly refers to economic changes, such as the private sector's shift from guaranteed pensions to stock-market-dependent 401(k)s. But this notion of a "DIY society" can extend to the numerous ways parents—especially mothers—are asked to "hold it all together," the University of Wisconsin at Madison sociologist Jessica Calarco told me. For example, the rise of double-earner households was not met with policies like affordable child care or mandatory paid leave. Instead, families have been forced to navigate confusing and competitive marketplaces to acquire basic services such as day care and summer camp, and they are largely on their own to deal with any breakdowns.

What's new in the 2020s is that these breakdowns are occurring more frequently. Consider the series of challenges families have faced in recent years. There has been a terrible shortage of infant formula, as well as children's medicines such as Tylenol, amoxicillin, and Adderall. Child care has become even scarcer and more expensive—and, because of staffing shortages, programs regularly close or reduce hours with little notice. Extreme heat has forced school closures; wildfire smoke from Canada has caused some U.S. summer camps to delay their start times.

Some of this volatility is because of climate change, public-policy decisions, or corporate-profit maximizing. Some of it is the result of multiple factors. The infant-formula crisis was caused mainly by a single factory shutting down, a predicament foreshadowed by policy makers enabling a handful of companies to control nearly the entire market. Additionally, as the labor economist Aaron Sojourner told me, there has been a significant rise of "just-in-time scheduling"—a model where businesses operate with the barest minimum of employees who can be called in or sent home on very short notice—in low-wage industries including retail, food service, and call centers. This leads to instability in the lives of workers, especially parents, and increases the risk of something going awry for customers if a sole employee quits or cannot make their shift. Yet only one state and a few cities have laws limiting just-in-time scheduling.

At the same time, decades of neglect are causing public systems to break down.

...

Parents of children with disabilities are facing down record-long application-processing times and extremely limited support staff.

...

Such constant precarity takes an emotional toll regardless of one's bank account. Research shows significant declines in parents' mental health since before the pandemic, and recent years have brought high levels of parental exhaustion and burnout, as well as loneliness. About three-quarters of parents are very or somewhat concerned that climate change will harm their children or other young children they know. This stress and insecurity can easily trickle down to the whole family.

...

A permanent age of tremors is not, however, inevitable. Policy makers can both stabilize the ground and help families deal with the quakes. The first step is making healthy, predictable family life a policy priority. Laws that strengthen the child-care system, provide robust paid leave, reinvest in public services and lower their administrative burdens, and restrict just-in-time scheduling are all ways to shift risks from families back onto government and corporations. As a guiding principle, policy makers should reduce chaos, liberating parents and children to deepen their connections to one another and their community.

Perhaps the saddest thing about the status quo is that this should be an age of wonders for families. We live in an era when modern medicine has eliminated many childhood diseases and is regularly developing new treatments.

...

Parents could have so much to enjoy and look forward to—if they weren't constantly bracing for the next shake.

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** family policy <sup>[4]</sup>

social policy <sup>[5]</sup>

---

**Source URL (modified on 4 Oct 2023):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/23/10/american-family-life-should-not-be-volatile>  
**Links**

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/23/10/american-family-life-should-not-be-volatile> <sup>[2]</sup>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2023/07/parenting-challenges-american-families-child-care/674839/> <sup>[3]</sup>

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> <sup>[4]</sup> <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family-policy> <sup>[5]</sup>

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/social-policy>