Family Conversations about Inequality  
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**Background**

An important part of social development involves learning about one’s community and broader society. In elementary and middle school, children begin to notice that some people in their communities have more resources than others. At the same time, children develop beliefs about where these inequalities come from, and what they mean. In this study, we looked at how family conversations about economic issues shape children’s beliefs about how fair or unfair society is.

**Study**

We used two short surveys. One parent survey collected information on family conversations about economic issues. One child survey for 3rd through 8th graders collected information on 8- to 14 year-olds’ beliefs about societal fairness.

**Results**

- Parents reported several different types of family conversations about economic issues.
- On average, parents reported more conversations about why people may be more or less successful and the importance of compassion than about current events or the importance of changing unfair things in society.
- Most children believed that U.S. society is structured fairly. They agreed with statements such as “Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve” and “Everyone has a fair chance at wealth and happiness”.
- However, children who had more family conversations about current events and positive change viewed society as less fair.

**Ideas for Parents and Teachers**

As they move from elementary to middle school, children are increasingly interested in what is happening in broader society and what it means for their community. During this time, children’s beliefs about inequality and societal fairness are actively developing. Importantly, children who had more family conversations about current events and positive change were more aware of the economic aspects of U.S. society that are (or are not) fair. Parents and teachers have an important opportunity to help children become engaged and active citizens. By discussing current events in developmentally appropriate ways, we can encourage children’s interest in making positive change in their communities.

*For questions or comments about this study, please contact our Research Coordinator at k.lukenraz@rochester.edu, or Dr. Elenbaas at laura.elenbaas@rochester.edu.*