

Marriage Matters

Family Structure and Child Well Being

The implications of family structure for children have been a central focus of public policy and research for decades. This brief highlights trends in family structure for children in the United States over the last few decades and reviews the research evidence on the effects of family structure on children. Research tells us that children do best when they grow up with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. On *average*, children who grow up in other types of family structure are at greater risk for poor outcomes. At the same time, research indicates that most children who are *not* raised by both parents grow up without serious problems.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

General Trends in Family Structure and Implications for Children

An increased percentage of children live in single-parent families. In 1960, about 9 percent of all children lived in a single-parent family.¹ By 2003, that proportion had jumped to 28 percent.² Just looking at increases in single-parent families masks the diversity in children's families, however. Though many children experience their parents' divorce or are born to unmarried women, it doesn't necessarily mean that they live in a single-parent family. Today, two-parent families are more likely to be stepfamilies and blended families than they once were. And children who live with their unmarried mothers or unmarried fathers, in fact, may be living with both their biological parents. The remainder of this section describes the trends behind this diversity.

In the 1970s, divorce replaced parental death as the primary cause of single-parent families. Estimates show that about four in 10 children will eventually experience their parents' divorce.³

The increase in the proportion of births to unmarried women has contributed to a rise in single parenthood. In 1970, 11 percent of children were born to unmarried couples.⁴ By 2002, that proportion had grown to about one in three.⁵ Contrary to popular perceptions, teenagers account for fewer than three in 10 births outside of marriage, and women in their twenties account for more than one-half of these births.⁶

Couples who live together in a romantic relationship but who are not married account for an increasing proportion of births outside of marriage. In the early 1990s, 39 percent of all these births occurred to couples living together, up from 29 percent 10 years earlier.⁷ A recent national study placed this rate at 51 percent in urban areas in the years 1998 to 2000. The study also found that the majority of births outside of marriage (82 percent) were to parents who were romantically involved at the time of birth, either in a cohabiting or a visiting relationship.⁸ All in all, about 40 percent of all children are expected to spend some portion of their childhood living with cohabiting parents.⁹

Stepfamilies are becoming more common. About one-half of current marriages are actually a remarriage for at least one spouse. Some stepfamilies are also blended

families—families where each parent brings children into the relationship. Cohabitation is also increasingly common for stepfamilies, and about one in three children will spend some of his or her childhood living in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily.¹⁰ Moreover, many children born to the same mother do not necessarily have the same father.

Findings from many studies on family structure and children's well being are consistent. The majority of children who are not raised in a family headed by two married parents grow up without serious problems¹¹ and some do exceptionally well.¹² Yet, research also consistently indicates that children in single-parent families, children who experience divorce, and children who live in stepfamilies have, on average, a higher risk of negative outcomes compared with children who are raised by their biological or adoptive parents in a low-conflict marriage. Children in single-parent families are about twice as likely to have problems as children who live in intact families headed by two biological parents.¹³

Poverty is an important contributing factor.

Childhood poverty is consistently linked with some types of family structures (most clearly single-parent families). This link is one reason for the greater risks experienced by children in these families.

Divorce and Children's Well Being

Children whose parents divorce are more prone to problems than are children whose parents do not divorce. These problems include depression, antisocial behavior, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, low academic achievement, and behavioral difficulties in school.¹⁴ When children of divorced parents enter adulthood, they are more likely to experience divorce themselves, to have increased marital problems, to earn less money, to achieve lower levels of education, and to have children who also experience elevated risks of marital problems, compared with adults whose parents had not divorced.^{15,16,17}

Many of these problems may be due to factors that were present before the divorce. For example, lower parental education and financial standing are associated with a greater risk of divorce and poorer child outcomes,¹⁸ as is parental adjustment.¹⁹ These prior disadvantages account for some of the overall association between divorce and lower levels of child well being.²⁰ Reinforcing this pattern, a carefully designed study showed that much of the difference on measures of well being between children of divorced and intact families was apparent *before* divorce.²¹

High parental conflict during marriage is disruptive for children. Parental conflict measured before parents divorce is responsible for some of the lower levels of well-being found for children of divorced parents, according to the previous study. Indeed, studies that measure both divorce and relationship quality find that children from high-conflict families are eventually better off on several outcomes when their parents divorce rather than remain married.²² Other studies suggest that when married parents have a poor-quality relationship, their children's ability to communicate within their own future marriages may be affected.²³

Experiences after divorce also have an important influence. The period immediately following divorce is a time of adjustment for children and parents (although this stress subsides with time).²⁴ After divorce, women and children experience significant declines in income, and 39 percent of divorced women with custody of children live in poverty.²⁵ Such declines in income can determine the quality and safety of the neighborhood in which a family lives and of the schools that children attend, as well as the opportunities for trips, lessons, and other enrichment activities. In addition, children's relationships with nonresident fathers tend to diminish with time,²⁶ which may have particular implications for the financial support that children receive as they move into young adulthood.

Remarriage and Children's Well Being

Stepchildren do not fare as well as children living with married biological parents. On average, compared with children living with married biological parents, stepchildren have lower grades and scores on achievement tests, and have greater internalizing and externalizing behavior problems.²⁷ Stepchildren also fare worse in terms of dropout rates, school attendance, and high school or GED completion.²⁸

Factors other than income may contribute to poorer outcomes for children in stepfamilies. Income in stepfamilies tends to compare favorably with the income of families headed by biological parents, so economic factors do not fully explain these poorer outcomes. Similar to explanations for the effects of divorce on children, the stress of family disruption and reorganizing as a stepfamily may be one reason for the differences in outcomes shown between stepchildren and children raised by their married biological or adoptive parents.²⁹ Other factors may also account for these differences:

- ▶ Children in stepfamilies may experience multiple moves and possibly lower quality schools.³⁰
- ▶ Children in stepfamilies typically have gone through multiple family transitions as a result of becoming stepchildren.
- ▶ Conflict may still exist between the children's biological parents and that can add another layer of stress to the children's lives.
- ▶ Stepparents tend to spend less time with stepchildren than with biological children, and this may contribute to a child's difficulties.³¹

Cohabitation and Children's Well Being

Couples who live together are different from couples who marry. Parents who live together typically have lower earnings, lower levels of education, and higher rates of poverty,³² compared with parents who are mar-

ried. Unmarried couples who live together are also more likely to break up than couples who are married.³³ Parental education levels, wages, and work effort are lower among cohabiting couples, even when the comparison is limited to biological married and biological cohabiting parents.³⁴

Few studies have directly examined effects of cohabitation on children. Research on cohabitation and child outcomes, while growing, is less extensive than research on the effects of divorce and remarriage on child well being. Answers to the questions of whether parental cohabitation matters for children may depend on the question being asked.

Does it matter for children if their biological parents are married or just living together? Two studies provide mixed results. One recent study using data from the National Survey of America's Families found that children between the ages of five and 11 who lived with two biological married parents had significantly fewer behavior problems and showed more engagement in school than did children living with two biological cohabiting parents. (Parental education and income helped to explain some of this association.)³⁵ These patterns were similar among children between the ages of 12 and 17, except that the differences found were not statistically significant. An additional study of children younger than age 19 in the National Survey of Families and Households also found few statistically significant differences in social adjustment and academic outcomes between children living with married biological parents and children living with unmarried biological parents.³⁶

Children in cohabiting stepfamilies tend to have more problems. Other studies have examined how children living with biological married parents fare compared with children in cohabiting stepfamilies, typically with a biological mother and her boyfriend. Children tended to fare worse in these types of relationships. One study showed that in households with cohabiting unions,

children between the ages of five and 11 and teens were found to experience worse levels of emotional and behavioral problems and academic outcomes,³⁷ with the exception of school engagement among black teenagers.³⁸

Does it matter for children whether their single parent stays single, cohabits, or marries? Children living with a married stepparent appear to have similar levels of behavioral problems as children living with a cohabiting stepparent.³⁹ Hispanic teens have been found to have worse behavioral and emotional problems when their mothers live with a boyfriend versus living alone, and a similar pattern has been found for academic outcomes among white, Hispanic, and black teens.⁴⁰ However, the research base on this issue is thin, and more studies are needed.

Why Do Child Outcomes Seem to Differ by Family Structure? Three Key Reasons

A large portion of the differences in outcomes between children in two-parent families and children in single-parent families reflects economic factors. However, the importance of these factors probably depends upon the type of family structure considered. One comprehensive study estimated that about one-half of the difference in outcomes between children in families formed by biological or adoptive parents and children in single-parent families and stepfamilies was due to lower family income.⁴¹ Researchers in another study contrasted the influences of economics and parenting directly as a way to explain how family structure affects children's behavior, temperament, and academic outcomes. The researchers found considerable support for the idea that economic factors helped to explain the disadvantages experienced by families headed by single mothers, but that these factors accounted for a smaller proportion of the disadvantages experienced by stepfamilies headed by unmarried parents. Parenting behaviors accounted for much smaller proportions of disad-

vantage found in mother-stepfather families (either married or unmarried).

Some of the economic advantage of two-parent families may result from marriage itself. Families headed by married couples tend to accumulate more wealth over time than do single-parent families or even cohabiting families.⁴² Some researchers note the potential advantage of two incomes, compared with one, and the tendency of men to work more and earn higher wages when they marry, especially after the birth of a child.⁴³

In divorced families, child support payments help to reduce differences. Child support reduces the poverty rate for families affected by divorce by seven to 11 percentage points.⁴⁴ Among custodial parents with incomes below the poverty line in 2001, child support payments accounted for 40 percent of their total family income.⁴⁵ The average amount of these payments that year was \$3,000. Child support is also associated with better academic outcomes among children. Moreover, states with stronger child support enforcement have lower rates of divorce and births outside of marriage than do states with less effective enforcement.⁴⁶

Some factors place children at risk of problems regardless of their parent's marital status. Adults and parents with little education and poorer employment prospects have a higher risk of having unstable marriages, having children outside of marriage, and cohabiting. Whether their parents are married or not, these same factors put children at risk of academic and other problems, including living in poverty.

Multiple changes in family structure or living arrangements accumulate to undermine children's development. Regardless of the type of change, the number of changes in family structure during childhood influences behavioral and emotional problems in adolescence and young adulthood.⁴⁷

For Future Research...

Patterns of family structure continue to change, leaving many unanswered questions. In particular, only a few studies have addressed the question of whether it matters for children if their biological parents are married or living together as an unmarried couple. Further research is needed, in part, because available data are limited to small numbers of children living with cohabiting biological parents; this is especially true when it comes to studies involving older youth. In addition, most studies are unable to distinguish unmarried biological parents from couples in which only one parent is biologically related to the child.

An additional question for couples who share biological children *and* stepchildren is whether parental unions and marriage have the same effect for *all* their children. Research seems to suggest otherwise, although this assumption has not been fully evaluated. Overall, additional research is needed on the implications of varied family forms for children's well being, on the pathways that link family structure with children's development, and on differences among subgroups, such as low-income parents.

For a more detailed research brief on this topic, visit www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

Endnotes

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