

Center for Marriage and Families

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Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes

A *COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW* of recent academic research shows that family structure — whether a child's parents are married, divorced, single, remarried, or cohabiting — is a significant influence on children's educational performance. Family structure affects preschool readiness. It affects educational achievement at the elementary, secondary, and college levels. Family structure influences these outcomes in part because family structure affects a range of child behaviors that can bear directly on educational success, such as school misbehavior, drug and alcohol consumption, sexual activity and teen pregnancy, and psychological distress.

There is a solid research basis for the proposition that strengthening U.S. family structure — increasing the proportion of children growing up with their own, two married parents — would significantly improve the educational achievements of U.S. children.

Introduction

Over the past 35 years, the proportion of U.S. children being raised in two-parent homes has dropped significantly — from about 85 percent in 1968 to 70 percent in 2003 — while the proportion of children living in single-parent homes has nearly doubled. Before they reach the age of 18, a majority of all U.S. children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhoods in a one-parent home.

This sharp increase in the proportion of U.S. children who do *not* live with their own two married parents makes it important to understand how changes in family structure influence important areas of children's lives. One such area is educational outcomes.

Methodological Questions

There are important problems in studying the impact of family structure on outcomes for children. First, studies define family structure inconsistently. Some do not differentiate between stepparents and biological parents. Some do not make distinctions between a married stepparent and someone who is cohabiting with the biological parent. Second, there can be related problems with the data. For example, some data sets have very small numbers of unmarried cohabiting parents. Some contain data for only one point in time. Yet despite these limitations, a systematic review of a large body of research clearly suggests that family structure significantly affects children's academic and social development.

In addition, an important issue in this research is what scholars call “selection effects.” Do children living with their own two married parents do better educationally *because* their parents got and stayed married? Or alternatively, do they do better because those persons who get and stay married (persons who “select” into marriage) also tend to be people who, even prior to getting married, have more resources and better social and parenting skills? The answer is: Both. Selection effects do exist. And they do explain *some* of the greater educational gains experienced by children living in married-couple, two-parent homes. But they do not explain all of them. When it comes to educational achievement, even after selection effects are taken into account, children living with their own married parents do significantly better than other children.

Preschool Readiness

As early as age three, children’s ability to adapt to classroom routines appears to be influenced by their parents’ marital status. For instance, three- and four-year-old children growing up with their own married parents (or in an “intact” family) are three times less likely than those in any other family structure to experience emotional or behavioral problems such as attention deficit disorder. Overall, children living with their own married parents have fewer behavioral problems compared to children whose parents are living together but not married. In terms of physical health, young children in single-parent families are less healthy overall than are children in all other family types.

Children living with their own married parents are more likely to be involved in literacy activities (such as being read to or learning to recognize letters) than are children from single-parent homes. Not growing up with their own married parents appears particularly damaging for young children, because the cognitive and social behaviors developed early on persist throughout childhood, affecting the course of their entire education.

Elementary Education

In the primary grades, the ability of children to perform in basic subject areas and at their grade level is weaker for those children not living with their own married parents. Fourth grade students with married parents score higher on reading comprehension, compared to students living in stepfamilies, with single mothers, and in other types of families. Living in a single-parent family is linked with decreases in children’s math scores. Lack of income or other resources explains some, but not all, of the worse outcomes experienced by children from non-married parent families. Marriage itself also has a measurable impact on these educational outcomes.

High School Achievement and Completion

The effects of family structure on academic success continue through high school. Children growing up with non-intact families engage in more adolescent misbehavior, which harms grades and test scores. Family structure substantially influences outcomes such as high school dropout rates, high school graduation rates, and age at first pregnancy. For example, young people from non-intact families are significantly more likely to drop out of school, compared to students living in intact families.

Studies comparing the effects of family structure on educational attainment in the U.S. and Sweden yield fascinating results. In both countries, children living in non-intact families do worse educationally, such that each additional year a Swedish or an American child spends with a single mother or stepparent reduces that child's overall educational attainment by approximately one-half year. These similarities between U.S. and Swedish children in non-intact families are particularly striking in light of these two nations' dramatic differences in both family policy and in areas such as income inequality.

College Attendance

The effect of family structure on children's college attendance has received considerable attention. For young people, growing up without their own married parents is linked with lower college attendance rates and acceptance at less selective institutions.

Young people, especially women, who grow up with their own married parents tend to marry later. Research has shown a link between delayed marriage and higher educational attainment among young women.

Misbehavior at School

Marital breakup is associated with a higher incidence of antisocial behavior in the classroom for boys. Children from homes headed by their own married parents have the fewest incidences of misbehavior at school.

Family structure affects teenagers' school attendance and tardiness. Students from non-intact families miss school, are tardy, and cut class about 30 percent more often than do students from intact homes. These differences exist in part because parents in non-intact family homes appear less able to supervise and monitor their children. Children in families with high levels of marital conflict are more likely to have behavioral problems than are children in families with low levels of conflict. Children whose parents have high-conflict marriages often have even higher scores on measures of behavioral problems than children whose parents divorce. However, today in the United States, the majority of divorces occur in cases of low-conflict marriages.

If U.S. Family Structure Was as Strong Today as It Was in 1970:

643,000 fewer children each year would fail a grade at school

1,040,000 fewer children each year would be suspended from school

531,000 fewer children each year would need psychotherapy

453,000 fewer children each year would be involved in violence

515,000 fewer children each year would be cigarette smokers

179,000 fewer children each year would consider suicide

71,000 fewer children each year would attempt suicide

Source: Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children*, Fall 2005

Smoking, Illegal Drugs, and Alcohol Consumption

Teenagers from non-intact families are more likely to smoke, use drugs, and consume alcohol, even when controlling for important factors such as age, sex, race, and parent education.

One study found that family structure had a significant relationship to family attachment (with intact families reporting higher levels of attachment), and in turn, family attachment had a direct and deterrent effect on adolescent cigarette smoking and illicit drug use.

Sexual Activity and Teen Pregnancy

Teenagers from non-intact families are more likely to be sexually active. There appear to be no significant differences in sexual behavior between adolescents from stepfamilies and those from single-parent families. The similarity of sexual behavior among these two groups of adolescents suggests that remarriage presents some risks with regard to monitoring adolescent behaviors effectively and transmitting values that deter early sexual relationships.

Teenagers from divorced single-mother homes are significantly more likely than teens in never-married single-mother homes to become pregnant. However, while parental remarriage seems to offer little protection regarding teen sexual activity, a recent study on remarriage's effect on teen pregnancy points in a different direction. It found that young women whose parents remarry after divorce have lower rates of teen pregnancy than do young women in single-parent homes — rates that are similar to those of young women raised by their own married parents. This study suggests that remarriage, as well as marriage, might act as a demonstrative or socializing tool in preventing teen pregnancy. However, the effects of remarriage on teen pregnancy remain inconclusive, with earlier studies showing no such protective effect.

Illegal Activities

Being in a stepparent or single-parent family at age 10 more than doubles the odds of a child being arrested by age 14. One study found that male adolescents in all types of families without a biological father (mother only, mother and stepfather, and other) were more likely to be incarcerated than teens from intact-family homes. Young people who have never lived with their biological fathers have the highest odds of being arrested.

Psychological Problems

For children, growing up without their own married parents is linked with higher rates of stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem during the teenage years — problems that can significantly reduce their ability to focus and achieve in school. Research consistently shows that parental divorce has lasting negative emotional effects throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Policy Implications

FAMILY STRUCTURE clearly influences educational outcomes for U.S. children. The weakening of U.S. family structure in recent decades, driven primarily by high and rising rates of unwed childbearing and divorce, has almost certainly weakened the educational prospects and achievements of U.S. children. Put more positively, there is a solid research basis for the proposition that strengthening U.S. family structure in the future — increasing the proportion of children growing up with their own, two married parents — would significantly improve the educational achievements of U.S. children.

Policymakers and leaders of civil society who are concerned about this issue can take action on two levels.

FIRST, GIVEN THAT MANY U.S. CHILDREN NOW GROW UP IN NON-INTACT FAMILIES, PROGRAMS AND POLICIES SHOULD HELP FAMILIES OFFSET AS BEST THEY CAN THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS LINKED TO THESE FAMILY STRUCTURES.

For example, all parents should be encouraged to have high expectations of their children's school performance. Research shows that parent expectations are important predictors of children's educational outcomes. Parental involvement in children's educational and social life should be encouraged. When parents do not spend significant time with their children, or when they are not involved in their children's activities, they are far less able to transmit important values and behaviors.

Lower levels of income account for some of the differences in educational outcomes between children living with their own married parents and those in other family structures. For this reason, improving the economic circumstances of one-parent families would probably improve children's educational outcomes in those families.

At the same time, stepfamilies, which have significantly greater economic resources than do single-parent families, nevertheless have educational outcomes for children that look more like those of children in single-parent homes than those of children in intact families. Income matters, but income alone does not explain the better educational outcomes experienced by children in intact families.

THE SECOND LEVEL OF ACTION IS MORE SYSTEMIC. THESE FINDINGS ABOUT FAMILY STRUCTURE AND CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES CLEARLY SUGGEST THAT EDUCATION POLICY AND FAMILY POLICY LOGICALLY GO HAND IN HAND.

It should be clear that policymakers and others who want better educations for our children should also want to strengthen U.S. family structure, because the former is at least partly dependent on the latter. In short, for those who care about education, strengthening marriage is a legitimate and important goal of public policy.

It is vital to support the conditions in which the greatest numbers of children can grow up to be educated and socially competent. Accordingly, these findings about family structure and children's educational outcomes should encourage policy makers and social leaders to think creatively about supporting marriage in ways that will allow more of our youngest citizens to succeed educationally and flourish socially.

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About this Research Brief

This research brief summarizes the findings of a comprehensive literature review by a team of researchers led by Professor Barbara Schneider at the University of Chicago. The full review, including a bibliography, is published as Barbara Schneider, Allison Atteberry, and Ann Owens, *Family Matters: Family Structure and Child Outcomes* (Birmingham: Alabama Policy Institute, June 2005). A downloadable pdf of the paper is available free of charge at www.alabamapolicyinstitute.org. The views expressed in this brief regarding policy implications are those of the Center for Marriage and Families.

About the Center for Marriage and Families

The Center for Marriage and Families, based at the Institute for American Values, issues research briefs, fact sheets, and other material related to marriage, families, and children. The Center is directed by Elizabeth Marquardt. Its Scholarly Advisory Board includes William Doherty of the University of Minnesota, Norval Glenn of the University of Texas, Linda Waite of the University of Chicago, W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia, and James Q. Wilson of UCLA (Emeritus). We are grateful to Arthur and Joann Rasmussen for their generous financial support. To learn more about the Center, and to obtain other research briefs and publications, please visit www.americanvalues.org, where you can sign up for our newsletter and for electronic or print mailings of future publications.

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