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## What Are the Effects for Children?

**A** decade ago, the prevailing view was that single parenthood had no long-term effects on children; even though earlier studies suggested negative effects, many were based on small clinical samples and few considered the influence of social class. Even though some studies continue to show no effects, recent evidence from more representative samples suggests children who live with only one parent do less well than children who live with both parents on several measures of child well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989; Hetherington, 1993; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Similarly, a recent review of 92 studies of divorce involving 13,000 children, reported children of divorce experience lower levels of well-being than children from nondivorced families across several domains (Amato & Keith, 1991).

This section reviews how single parenthood affects such child outcomes as educational attainment; poverty status and welfare receipt; sexual activity, childbearing, and family formation; psychological adjustment; conduct problems; and relationships with parents. There are many, sometimes conflicting, studies on family structure and its consequences for children. We do not attempt to review all of the findings, but rather to summarize the areas of research where the findings are most consistent. Furthermore, we examine how widespread these effects are and whether they are large enough to warrant our concern.

When possible, we try to separate out the four different types of single-parent families widowed, divorced, separated, and never married. In 1990, of the children who lived with one parent, 39 percent had parents who were divorced, 31 percent had parents who were never married, 24 percent had parents who had separated, and 7 percent had one parent who had died. These different subgroups have different rates of employment, income, poverty, and welfare receipt. In general, never married mothers are the most likely to be poor, to receive welfare for long periods, and the least likely to work (Ooms, 1992).

At the outset, it is important to point out that these studies cannot rule out the possibility that single parents are different in important ways from those parents who choose to stay together; for example, parents who choose not to marry or to live apart may be less committed to the family, and this difference may be responsible for the negative consequences rather than family structure (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Some studies suggest that much of the effect of divorce on child well-being can be attributed to conditions that existed before the break-up occurred (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, & Teitler, 1991), while others contend the effects result from the disruption itself (Morrison & Cherlin, 1992).

## **Educational Attainment**

Children living with only one of their parents do less well in school (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989), obtain fewer years of education, and are twice as likely to drop out of high school as children who live with both parents (McLanahan & Booth, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; Zill, 1983; Zill, et al., 1993).

## **Poverty Status and Welfare Receipt**

Children from single parent families are six times as likely to be poor (McLanahan & Booth, 1989) as children from two-parent families; poor families provide a less healthy, safe, and nourishing environment for their children (Ooms, 1992). Young adults from single parent families are also half as likely to find and keep a steady job as young adults from intact families (McLanahan & Booth; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). Furthermore, the daughters of single mothers are more likely to receive welfare benefits as young adults than daughters from two-parent families (McLanahan & Booth, 1983). A majority of welfare families are initiated when a teen mother gives birth (Ooms, 1992).

## **Sexual Activity, Childbearing, and Family Formation**

Daughters of single parents are three times as likely to bear a child out-of-wedlock (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). As young adults, children from single parent families have a more difficult time achieving intimacy and forming a stable marriage (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Those who do marry are much more likely to divorce (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

In divorced and remarried families, one recent study indicates that the absence of the father and the presence of a stepfather is related to earlier physical maturity (Hetherington, 1993). For example, girls in divorced families menstruated 4 months earlier than girls in nondivorced families, while girls in remarried families menstruated 8 months earlier than girls in nondivorced families. Furthermore, these early maturing girls were more apt to be sexually active if they lived in a divorced family (65 percent) than in a remarried (54 percent) or nondivorced family (40 percent); early maturation among girls has been linked to involvement in problem behaviors in several studies.

## **Psychological Adjustment**

Psychological problems are two times more likely in children from single mother families and three times more likely in remarried families than in intact two-parent families (Moore, 1992). Approximately 30 percent of teens whose parents had separated or divorced by the time the child was 7 years of age had received

therapy by the time they were adolescents, compared with 10 percent of those in nondivorced families (Zill, 1983). Even young adults, 18 to 22 years olds, were more likely to show high levels of emotional distress if they had experienced family disruptions between birth and age 16 (Zill et al., 1993).

### **Conduct Problems**

Some studies report that offspring from single mother families are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and engage in delinquent acts (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985; McLanahan & Booth). Similarly, studies of children whose parents divorce report higher levels of involvement in such problem behaviors as frequent alcohol use, binge drinking, daily cigarette use, and illicit drug use (Zill et al, 1993, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993). Some studies report higher levels of misbehavior, aggression, or delinquency among children from divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), while others do not (Zill et al., 1993).

### **Relationships with Parents**

In a nationally representative sample, children who live with their mother and father report that they feel both their mother and father really care about them. Virtually all children who live in a single parent family believe that their mother cares about them, while just over half feel that their father cares about them (National Commission on Children, 1991). For children experiencing divorce, one of the most important predictors of healthy outcomes is the ability of the child to maintain a good relationship with both parents (Zill, 1983). Unfortunately, in studies of children of all ages, children from divorced families had less positive relations with their mothers and fathers than children from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991).

For adolescents whose parents separate or divorce, only 1 in 5 are able to maintain a good relationship with one or both parents during adolescence, compared with almost 3 in 5 in nondivorced families. Over half 57 percent of children who experience divorce or separation, however, are able to maintain a good relationship with their mother, while only about one-third have a positive relationship with their father. In nondivorced families, 69 percent have a close relationship with their mother and 66 percent with their father (Zill, 1983). Similarly, youth, aged 18 to 22 years old, were twice as likely to have poor relationships with their mothers and fathers when the parents had divorced (Zill et al., 1993).

In the majority of families, divorce or separation seriously disrupts the relationship between children and the noncustodial parent, usually the father. Nearly half of all children have not seen their noncustodial parent in the past year (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986). When children are asked who they include in their family, only half of children with nonresident fathers

included them on their list. Not only is the time fathers spend with their children greatly reduced, but the role of the father also changes. Nonresident parents tend to engage in leisure activities with the child, but rarely help with school work, get involved in decisions affecting the child's upbringing, or exercise control over the child's behavior (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985).

### **How Widespread Are the Effects?**

Single parenthood appears to disadvantage children regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or sex; single parenthood appears to be related to lower child well-being among Cubans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans, but not Asians (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press). In the few instances where differences are found, white children and middle class children are more strongly affected than black children. Divorce and remarriage seem to increase risk levels for both males and females (Amato & Keith, 1991; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), although children living with the same sex parent seem to do better (Peterson & Zill, 1986).

Nor does the age of the child appear to make a difference (Hetherington, 1991, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, in press; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Hetherington has followed white, middle class children involved in divorce from 4 years of age to 15. In her earlier studies with younger children, Hetherington (1993) reported that parents and children adjusted reasonably well by two years after the divorce. Yet, in her most recent study, as the children aged into adolescence, those children who were previously functioning well, started to show problem behaviors again. While some studies suggest that divorce may have more detrimental effects during early childhood (Zill et al., 1993) or middle childhood (Amato & Keith, 1991), others contend that the long-term consequences for adult functioning may prove more consequential (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Finally, the type of family disruption does not matter much. Whether children live with a divorced or never married mother, the consequences appear similar according to a recent study using four nationally representative data bases (McLanahan & Sandefur, in press).

### **Are These Differences in Well-Being Large Enough to Warrant Our Concern?**

One researcher in this field argues that single parenthood doubles or more than doubles the risk that children's well-being will suffer. In the health field, a doubling of a risk is considered a substantial hazard. For example, many Americans have lowered their intake of cholesterol to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, even though cholesterol does not double the risk of heart disease (Zill et al., 1993).

Some might interpret the negative outcomes documented above as evidence that divorce and single parenthood are the primary cause of many of the country's most serious problems, including rising high school dropout rates, early child-bearing, and juvenile crime. While single parenthood may increase the risk of many of these problems, it is not the major or the only cause (McLanahan and Sandefur, in press). For example, if all children grew up with both parents, births to unwed black teens would drop from 30 percent to 20 percent. If there was no marital instability, the high school dropout rate would decline from 12.5 to 10 percent. Clearly, family structure is an important factor in children's well-being, but not the only factor.

Another way to assess the size of these effects is to determine how many children in each family structure exhibit problems serious enough to score above standard cutoffs in clinical tests. One in ten children in two-parent families exhibit serious problems compared with one in four in divorced nonremarried families, and one in three in remarried families (Hetherington, 1991). Thus, rates of psychopathology are more than two to three times greater for children in divorced or remarried homes compared to nondivorced homes; yet, the behavior of two-thirds to three-fourths of children from disrupted families falls within the normal range. Thus, while the incidence of problem behaviors is higher, a minority exhibit such behaviors; the majority of young people from disrupted families finish high school, do not display high levels of problem behaviors, and enjoy reasonable relationships with their mothers (Whitehead, 1993).