

Staying together 'for kids' sake' isn't always best

June 1 2009, By Susan Lang

(PhysOrg.com) -- The research is clear: Adolescents tend to fare better -- academically and behaviorally -- when they live with both biological parents. But when their parents frequently argue, young adults are significantly more likely to binge drink than other teenagers. They also tend to smoke, and their poor school grades are similar to those of their peers who don't have both biological parents at home.

"Our findings suggest that exposure to parental conflict in adolescence is associated with poorer [academic achievement](#), increased substance use and early family formation and dissolution, often in ways indistinguishable from living in a stepfather or single-mother [family](#)," said Kelly Musick, Cornell associate professor of policy analysis and management.

Musick is the lead author of a study that looked at how teenagers in 1,963 households in the National Survey of Families and Households fared from their teens to early 30s. She compared those who lived with married parents who often fought with those living in stepfather or single-mother households. Musick and co-author Ann Meier of the University of Minnesota looked at such outcomes as school success, substance abuse and childbearing out of wedlock.

Their work, which has been presented at meetings of the Population Association of America and the American Sociological Association, is published as a report from the California Center for Population Research at the University of California-Los Angeles; it is summarized

in "The Rural New York Minute," a publication of Cornell's Community and Rural Development Institute.

"Our results clearly illustrate that the advantages of living with two continuously married parents are not shared equally by all children," said Musick. "Compared with children in low-conflict families, children from high-conflict families are more likely to drop out of school, have poor grades, smoke, binge drink, use marijuana, have early sex, be young and unmarried when they have a child and then experience the breakup of that relationship." Income and parenting styles did not account for these differences, she added and the timing and sequence of such young adult transitions, are important indicators for success in later life. Interestingly, for half these outcomes, "associations with parental conflict are statistically indistinguishable from those with stepfather and single mother-families, said Musick. While [young adults](#) from high-conflict households, compared with stepfather or single-mother families, are significantly less likely to drop out of high school, have early sex and cohabit, and are more likely to attend college; they are also significantly more likely to binge drink.

"The odds of binge drinking are about a third higher for children from high-conflict families compared to single-mother families," Musick said.

The bottom line, she said, is that children in high-conflict married households tend to do no better than those in stepfather and single-mother families. How well parents manage their anger and conflict is obviously important for the outcomes of children, but, she stressed, policy initiatives that promote marriage "need to take account of how variation within marriage relates to child well-being."

More information: [The full report \(pdf\)](#).

Provided by Cornell University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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