

Family stability may be more crucial than two parents for child success

August 31 2009, by Jeff Grabmeier

The advantage that children get from living in two-parent families may actually be due to family stability more than the fact that their parents are married. A new study finds that children who are born and grow up in stable single-parent homes generally do as well as those in married households in terms of academic abilities and behavior problems.

"Many of the studies that show an advantage for children who grow up in married households versus those who grow up with single parents don't distinguish between family structure and family stability," said Claire Kamp Dush, author of the study and assistant professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"Our results suggest that the key for many children is growing up in a stable household, where they don't go through divorce or other changes in the family - whether that is in a single-parent home or a married home."

This study examined children who were born to always-single mothers - not those whose mothers were single as a result of a divorce, she said.

Kamp Dush said she is not suggesting that there are no advantages for children living in two-parent homes. Particularly for black families, the study did find ways in which children did better with two parents. However, careful study suggests that white and Hispanic children can do well living in single-parent homes if they have a stable [home environment](#).

The study appears as a chapter in the new book "Marriage and Family: Perspectives and Complexities" (Columbia University Press), which Kamp Dush edited with H. Elizabeth Peters, professor of policy analysis and management and director of the population program at Cornell University.

For her study, Kamp Dush used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a nationally representative survey of people nationwide conducted by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research. Men and women aged 14 to 22 in 1979 were interviewed annually from 1979 to 1994, and once every two years from 1996 forward. The NLSY also studied these participants' children and Kamp Dush used detailed information gathered on these children, who were between the ages of 4 and 15 between 1986 and 2004.

The full sample for her study included 4,910 mothers and 11,428 children.

She analyzed data on four variables for the children: reading and math test scores; a measure of behavioral problems; and a measure of home environment, which looked at levels of cognitive stimulation and emotional support.

But rather than comparing children based simply on whether they lived with married parents versus single parents, Kamp Dush examined family stability, as well. Stable single parent families were defined as those where the children always lived only with the single parent. Stable married families were those in which the children always lived with their married parents. Unstable families were those in which children underwent some transition in their parenting.

In one analysis, Kamp Dush matched pairs of mothers who were similar in nearly every way - including family stability -- except one was

married and one was not. She then examined how their children fared.

Results showed that for white and Hispanic children from stable single-parent and married families, there was no significant difference in math and reading test scores. However, black children had lower test scores if they lived in a single parent home than if they lived in a married home.

There were no significant differences in behavior problems for children of any race if they lived in stable single-parent homes or in stable married households.

The only consistent advantage among all races for children in married households was a better home environment in terms of cognitive stimulation and emotional support.

Overall, Kamp Dush said the results deliver good news to single parents who provide a stable home environment for their children.

"I don't think we can say that growing up in a stable single parent home is necessarily worse than growing up with two married parents," she said.

The issue is especially important because the federal government promotes "healthy" marriage for single mothers under its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program - the aid program that replaced welfare in 1996.

"Based on this study, we can't say for sure that marriage will be a good thing for the children of single mothers - particularly if that marriage is unhealthy and does not last," she said.

Other research suggests that single mothers in the TANF program would be at great risk of divorce if they did get married, because of their lower levels of education, lower income and the fact that they have a child.

And a divorce would cause the family instability that truly does have negative consequences for [children](#).

"My message to single moms is to think carefully before they decide to get married or live with a partner," she said.

"Both romantic relationships and parenting are hard work. Unless you think that you and your partner can make it for the long haul, I think it would be better for single moms to avoid moving in with romantic partners. Family transitions are hard for kids."

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Family stability may be more crucial than two parents for child success (2009, August 31) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-family-stability-crucial-parents-child.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.