

Children's well-being and varying degrees of family instability

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A forthcoming issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family states that children today are less likely to be born into a "traditional" family structure, defined as two biological married parents. Growing numbers of children in the United States experience multiple family living arrangements during childhood. How these transitions affect the individual child's well-being needs to be fully addressed by researchers and policymakers alike. This article fully reviews the existing research from the past ten years on these topics in an effort to guide and inform current policy debates about the role of marriage in reducing poverty and improving child outcomes.

Author Susan L. Brown observed that, "Family instability appears to negatively affect a child's well-being in the short- and long-term. But researchers are still exploring why family instability can be detrimental. Is it because of the number of transitions [children](#) experience, the types of transitions, duration of time spent in diverse family environments, or some other factors?"

In her article Brown devotes special attention to new scholarship on unmarried, primarily low-income families, also the target of recent federal [marriage](#) initiatives, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families Healthy Marriage Initiative. Brown noted that, "Child well-being is of critical importance. What is clear is that living arrangements for children are increasingly varied and complex, and family instability is typically not good for children. Children's family trajectories depend in part on their

[family structure](#) at birth, as children born to unmarried mothers tend to experience greater family instability during childhood than do children born to married parents."

Moreover, Brown asserts that children born to unmarried parents are unlikely to experience parental marriage, and parental marriage does not necessarily improve child well-being for those born to unmarried mothers. She points out that according to the research these more subtle factors may have modest but enduring consequences for the child in the long-term. Brown concluded, "Marriage is not a panacea. It is possible that the negative outcomes are not due to family structure or [family](#) instability, but rather other unmeasured characteristics of the parents."

More information: "Marriage and Child Well-Being: Research and Policy Perspectives." Susan Brown. Journal of Marriage and Family; Published Online: September 29, 2010
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