

Mother's education trumps marriage or co-habitation when it comes to well-being of children, study shows

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(Phys.org)—It is more important for a child's well-being that they have well educated parents than that they have parents who are married or live together, according to a new study.

[Family Relationships](#) and [Family Well Being: A Study of the Families of 9 Year Olds in Ireland](#), conducted by a team of researchers from University College Dublin on behalf of the Family Support Agency, is officially launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Ms Frances Fitzgerald, TD (today). It shows that family type is not the overriding influence on the well-being of a child.

"Once we control for [parents'](#) education and household living standards, our findings show only a slight or, in many cases, a complete absence of differences in the indicators of child well-being between children of two-parent married families, co-habiting families, step-families, and one parent families," says Professor Tony Fahey, UCD School of Applied Social Science, University College Dublin, the lead author of the study.

"All other things being equal, this research reveals that it is more important for children's well-being that they have well-educated parents (particularly in the case of the mother) than that they have parents who stay together."

For the study, the researchers measured the well-being of children in

terms of [cognitive development](#) (assessed using reading and mathematics tests), social-emotional adjustment (assessed using strengths and difficulties tests), and physical health (based on mother's reports on whether the child had a chronic illness or not).

According to the findings, 79% of nine year old children in Ireland live with both their natural parents, 17.5% live in lone parent families, and 3% live in step-families (which in nearly all cases is when the natural mother has formed a second union).

About one in five (20%) of never-married lone parents live with at least one grandparent, a feature of their living arrangements that the researchers found to be positive for their well-being (though not necessarily for the well-being of their children).

Better educated parents were shown to be more likely to delay the start of child-bearing until their late 20s, while the least educated [mothers](#) were more likely to have a first child before age 25. Among these 'early start' mothers, the likelihood of being unmarried lone parents was high.

The study finds that stable married families are more likely to have more children. Married couples were shown to have three children on average, while unmarried lone parents were shown to have 1.8 children on average.

"With stability in couple relationships weakest among the least educated parents and this weakness tending to reduce family size, many families of the least educated parents are now smaller than the overall average," adds Professor Fahey.

According to Professor Fahey, this is a significant reversal on the past historical situation in Ireland.

Mothers with lower secondary education or less were shown to be five to six times more likely to smoke, and more than three times more likely to show depressive symptoms than those mothers with postgraduate education.

All other things being equal, mothers who live with their parents (the child's grandparents) were half as likely as other mothers to suffer from depression or to smoke daily. This finding is mainly relevant for never-married lone mothers among whom 20% live with their own parents.

"The single most important mechanism that public policy can use to combat family problems is to tackle educational disadvantage," concludes Professor Fahey.

"Recent developments in early childhood care and education, as represented especially by the introduction of a universal free pre-school year in place of a more expensive cash payment to families could be particularly beneficial and offer a model which could be extended into the future even in the context of overall reductions in public expenditure."

The study is based on a national representative sample of 8,568 children who were aged 9 in 2007-08. The sample is from the Growing Up in Ireland survey (Ireland's government-funded national study of [children](#) which commenced in 2007).

Provided by University College Dublin

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