

Strong Beginnings: How Families Bolster Early Educational Outcomes

Summary

Children from intact families tend to score higher in math and reading. This is true for students from elementary to high school.

- **Reading Scores.** Kindergartners in intact families have higher average reading scores than peers in stepfamilies or cohabiting families. Children in families with their married, biological parents had, on average, higher reading achievement scores than peers living with cohabiting parents or in stepfamilies, even when parents' education, family income and poverty status are taken into account. When the duration of parents' relationship, residential mobility, maternal characteristics, and parenting practices were taken into account, the gap in average reading scores remained between children who lived with their biological parents and those who lived with cohabiting parents.¹
- **Behavior at School.** First-graders whose mothers were married when they were born are less likely to be disruptive at school. Compared to first-graders who were born to married mothers, those born to single or cohabiting mothers were more likely to engage in disruptive behaviors with peers and teachers—such as, not obeying the teacher's requests or being physically aggressive towards other children—according to teacher reports.²
- **Math Scores.** Children age 3-12 who live in intact families have higher average math scores than peers whose mothers are in cohabiting relationships. Children age 3-12 in families with married, biological parents performed, on average, better on a mathematical calculation test (the Woodcock-Johnson Revised Test of Basic Achievement) than peers in families with a biological mother and a stepfather, families with an unmarried biological mother and a cohabiting partner, or families with a biological father only (children in married, biological parent families had similar performance compared to peers in families with two unmarried biological parents or those in families with as biological father and a stepmother). The differences in the calculation test scores of children in families with married, biological parents and those in families with a biological mother and a stepfather appeared to be explained by the variations in the children's demographic characteristics. The differences in the test scores between children in families with married, biological parents and those in families with a single father only appeared to be explained by the variations in the children's demographic characteristics plus the variations in the families' economic resources. Variations in the children's demographic characteristics and the families' economic resources only partially explained the differences in the test scores between children in families with married, biological parents and those in families with a biological mother and a cohabiting partner.³

- **Reading Tests.** Children age 7-10 who live in continuously intact families tend to score higher on reading achievement tests. Compared to children who lived in two-parent families from birth to age 7-10, those who lived in single-parent families during those years, those who transitioned from single-parent families to two-parent families, and vice versa, as well as those who experienced multiple family transitions, tended to score lower on the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT) Reading Recognition—an indicator of children’s cognitive ability—controlling for children’s characteristics. Controlling for mothers’ characteristics – age at first birth, years of education and AFQT score – only the differences between children in continuously two-parent families and continuously single-parent families as well as multiple-transition families remained. Further controlling for mother’s psychological well-being, the effect of living in single-parent families on the PIAT Reading Recognition test scores remained. When family income was included, in addition to the above factors, family structure influences on PIAT Reading Recognition test scores were no longer significant.⁴
- **Engagement in Schoolwork.** Children age 6-11 who live in intact families tend to be more engaged in their schoolwork than peers in other family structures. Compared to children age 6- 11 living in married biological-parent families, peers in cohabiting biological-parent families, married stepfamilies, cohabiting stepfamilies, single-mother families (but not single-father families), and families without the presence of parents, tended to be less engaged in their schoolwork, controlling for children’s individual characteristics. Adding controls for families’ economic resources, the differences between school engagement of children in intact families and those in cohabiting stepfamilies were no longer significant. Including parents’ psychological well-being and how aggravated parents were in their parenting, the only differences in school engagement that remained significant were between children in intact families and those in cohabiting biological families or married stepfamilies.⁵
- **Middle School Math Scores.** Eighth-graders in two-parent families perform, on average, better on math and science achievement tests. Compared to eighth-graders in two-parent families, peers in single-parent or step-parent families tended to score lower on math and science achievement tests, even when taking into account parental education, family income, number of siblings, parent-child discussion regarding school matters, parents’ participation in school activities, number of children’s friends’ parents known to parents, gender, and race/ethnicity.⁶
- **Math Achievement.** Ninth-graders whose mothers were married when they were born are more likely to complete an algebra course than peers. Compared to children born to married mothers, those born to single mothers were significantly less likely to have completed Algebra I in the ninth grade. Family stability from birth to seventh through ninth grade appeared to impact academic status in the ninth grade as well. Adolescents who experienced more family transitions – that is, more changes in their mothers’ relationship status – from birth to middle school were moderately less likely to have completed Algebra I in the ninth grade compared to peers who experienced more stable in their family situation.⁷
- **Math Scores.** Children of mothers raised in married families show, on average, greater gains in math achievement. Among primary-school aged children, those whose mothers lived in two-parent families when they were 14 showed, on average, greater improvement in math achievement over the course of two years than peers whose mothers had not lived in two-parent families at age 14, even when taking into account various individual, family, and school influences.⁸

- **Science and Math Achievement (elementary school).** The association between family structure and science and math achievement appears to be cross-national. Compared with peers in intact families, children age nine in single-parent families, stepparent families, or non-parent guardian families scored, on average, lower on math and science achievement tests, according to a large international survey. Family resources (e.g. number of books in the home, number of possessions, immigrant status, and household size) only partially explained the relationship between family structure and math and science achievement.⁹
- **Science and Math Scores (middle school).** The predominant family structure of a school's student population appears to be linked to the individual science and math achievement scores of eighth-graders. Compared to eighth grade students attending schools in which less than 50 percent of the students lived in single-parent or step-parent families, peers in schools in which more than 50 percent of the students lived in single-parent or step-parent families tended to score lower on eighth grade math and science achievement tests, controlling for the mean family socio-economic status of the student body, mean number of parent-to-parent acquaintances in the

school, school's eighth grade enrollment size, and the urban/rural locale of the school.¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Julie Artis, "Maternal Cohabitation and Child Well-Being Among Kindergarten Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69, No. 1 (February 2007): 222-236.
- 2 Shannon E. Cavanagh and Aletha C. Houston, "Family Instability and Children's Early Problem Behavior," *Social Forces* 85, No. 1 (September 2006): 551-581.
- 3 Sandra L. Hofferth, "Residential Father Family Type and Child Well-Being," *Demography* 43, No. 1 (February 2006): 53-77.
- 4 Marcia J. Carlson and Mary E. Corcoran, "Family Structure and Children's Behavioral and Cognitive Outcomes," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, No. 3 (August 2001): 779-792.
- 5 Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, No. 2 (May 2004): 351-367.
- 6 Suet-Ling Pong, "Family Structure, School Context, and Eighth-Grade Math and Reading Achievement," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 59, No. 3 (August 1997): 734-746.
- 7 Shannon E. Cavanagh and Kathryn S. Schiller, "Marital Transitions, Parenting, and Schooling: Exploring the Link Between Family-Structure History and Adolescents' Academic Status," *Sociology of Education* 79, No. 4 (October 2006): 329-354.
- 8 Toby Parcel and Mikaela Dufur, "Capital at Home and at School: Effects on Student Achievement," *Social Forces* 79, No. 3 (March 2001): 881-911.
- 9 Suet-Ling Pong and Gillian Hampden-Thompson, "Family Policies and Children's School Achievement in Single- Versus Two-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, No. 3 (August 2003): 681-699.
- 10 Pong, "Family Structure, ": 734-746.



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