

# Family and Adolescent Well-being

## Summary

Children in intact families tend to exhibit better emotional and psychological well-being and are less likely to exhibit behavioral problems such as school violence, juvenile delinquency and substance abuse. In addition, they tend to have higher grades and are less likely to be sexually active.

- **Emotional Health.** Compared with peers from intact families, children who experienced parental divorce tend to experience more psychological and socio-emotional challenges. Children of divorce scored lower than children of intact families in a variety of areas including: scholastic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social competence, and relationships with parents. The areas of conduct and father-child relationships were the most affected by divorce.<sup>1</sup>
- **Antisocial Behavior.** Adolescents living in intact families are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior. Compared with peers living in traditional intact families (two married-biological parents), youths living in two-biological-parent blended families, two-biological-parent cohabiting families, biological-mother-stepfather families, biological-mother-cohabiting-partner families, biological-mother-only families, biological-father-cohabiting-partner families, biological-father-only families, grandparent-only families, and foster families engaged, on average, in higher levels of anti-social behavior (ranging from running away from home, being suspended from school, and substance abuse to committing minor property crime, engaging in violent behavior, and being arrested). This was true taking into consideration youths' gender, race, age, and their residential and family environment.<sup>2</sup>
- **Paternal Relationship.** Family structure is related to youths' relationships with their fathers. Adolescents living in intact families reported, on average, having closer relationships with their fathers compared to peers living in blended families or in divorced or never-married single-parent families, controlling for adolescents' age, race, gender, and family income. This was true among youth in their early adolescence. Among youth in their middle adolescence, those living in intact families reported, on average, feeling closer to their fathers than peers in never-married or divorced single-parent families, but no more so than peers in blended families.<sup>3</sup>
- **Emotional Distress.** Adolescents who live in intact families are less likely to experience emotional or psychological problems. Controlling for a host of factors including adolescents' age, gender, race/ethnicity, family income, and relationships with their mothers and fathers, adolescents living in intact families tended to report lower levels of psychological distress (e.g., how often they feel sad, tense, lonely, excited, happy) than peers in living blended families (i.e., mothers were in a remarriage or a cohabiting relationship).<sup>4</sup>
- **Juvenile Delinquency.** Family structure is linked to the likelihood of youths' delinquent behavior. Compared to peers in intact families,

adolescents living in single-mother families were more likely to engage in delinquent acts involving serious property crimes. This was true taking into consideration adolescents' and parents' characteristics as well as family processes (such as parental involvement, parental supervision, parental monitoring, and parent-child closeness).<sup>5</sup>

- **Substance Abuse.** Youths whose parents divorced are more likely to use illicit drugs than peers from intact families. Traumatic childhood experiences—including physical or emotional neglect, domestic violence, and parental separation and divorce—increased the likelihood of drug initiation from early adolescence into adulthood, as well as the incidence of drug use, addiction, and intravenous drug use. Compared with peers from intact families, teens whose parents had divorced were almost four times more likely to use illicit drugs by age 14 and almost twice as likely to use illicit drugs during their lives.<sup>6</sup>
- **School Performance.** On average, compared with peers from intact families, adolescents living with a single mother or with mothers who were remarried or cohabiting experience more behavioral problems and lower levels of academic performance. Compared to children living in intact families, peers living in (1) single-mother families, (2) single-mother families with cohabiting partners, and (3) married families with stepfathers were more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school; more likely to have engaged in delinquent activities in the past 12 months; more likely to have problems getting along with their teachers, doing homework, or paying attention in school; and more likely to have lower grade point averages. On the Peabody Vocabulary Test (PPVT), an indicator of cognitive development, children living in married-parent families with stepfathers and those living with married biological parents performed similarly; however, compared to adolescents in married biological-parent families, those living in single-mother families or those living with single mothers

and their cohabiting partners tended to fare worse on the PPVT. Family structure did not appear to impact adolescents' expectations of attending college.<sup>7</sup>

- **High-Risk Behavior.** Parental divorce is associated with a greater likelihood of adolescents engaging in high-risk behavior. Compared with adolescents in intact families, youths who lived with a divorced parent, whether single or remarried, were more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, carrying a weapon, fighting, and sexual activities. This family structure effect remained even after controlling for demographic, parenting style, and community factors.<sup>8</sup>
- **Psychological Disorders.** Family structure is related to the incidence of psychological disorders among adolescents. Compared with peers who lived in intact families, adolescents who did not live with both biological parents were four times more likely to exhibit psychological affective disorders (ranging from hyperactivity and irritability to depression).<sup>9</sup>
- **Depression.** Family structure is associated with the incidence of depression among youths. Adolescents living in single-mother family structures were more likely to report depressive tendencies when compared to those living in non-divorced, two biological parent family structures.<sup>10</sup>

### Endnotes

- 1 Paul R. Amato and Bruce Keith, "Parental Divorce and the Well-Being of Children: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 110, No. 1 (1991): 26-46.
- 2 Robert Apel and Catherine Kaukinen, "On the Relationship between Family Structure and Antisocial Behavior: Parental Cohabitation and Blended Households," *Criminology* 46, No. 1 (2008): 35-70.
- 3 Christina Falci, "Family Structure, Closeness to Residential and Nonresidential Parents, and Psychological Distress in Early and Middle Adolescence," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, (2006): 123-146.
- 4 Falci, "Family Structure," 123-146.

- 5 Stephen Demuth and Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure, Family Processes, and Adolescent Delinquency: The Significance of Parental Absence versus Parental Gender," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 41, No.1 (February 2004): 58-81.
- 6 Shanta R. Dube, "Childhood Abuse, Neglect, and Household Dysfunction and the Risk of Illicit Drug Use: The Adverse Experiences Study," *Pediatrics* 111, (2003): 564-572.
- 7 Wendy Manning and Kathleen Lamb, "Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, (November 2003): 876-893.
- 8 Kathleen B. Rodgers and Hillary A. Rose, "Risk and Resiliency Factors Among Adolescents Who Experience Marital Transitions," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64, No. 4 (2002): 1024-1037.
- 9 Steven P. Cuffe, Robert E. McKeown, Cheryl L. Addy, and Carol Z. Garrison, "Family and Psychosocial Risk Factors in a Longitudinal Epidemiological Study of Adolescents," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 44, No. 2 (February 2005): 121-129.
- 10 K. Breivik and D. Olweus, "Adolescent's Adjustment in Four Post-Divorce Family Structures: Single Mother, Stepfather, Joint Physical Custody and Single Father Families," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 44, No. 3-4 (2006): 99-124.



## Family & Religion

This product is part of the Family and Religion Initiative, one of 10 Transformational Initiatives making up The Heritage Foundation's Leadership for America campaign. Family and religion are foundational to American freedom and the common good.