

Effects of Divorce on Children's Sexual Activity

Research Synthesis Paper: [The Effects of Divorce on Children](#)

1. Attitudes About Sexual Behavior

(See [Effects of Divorce on Children's Future Relationships](#))

When parents divorce, their children's attitudes about sexual behavior change. Children's approval of premarital sex, [cohabitation](#), and [divorce](#) rises dramatically, while their endorsement of [marriage and childbearing falls](#).¹⁾ Children from divorced families are also more likely to believe that marriage is not important prior to having children and are more likely to have a child out of wedlock. This holds true even after controlling for socioeconomic status.²⁾ Furthermore, sexual permissiveness on the part of divorced parents significantly increases permissive attitudes and behavior in both their sons and daughters.³⁾

Children from divorced families have an earlier sexual debut than children from intact families.⁴⁾ This also holds true for children raised without a biological father present.⁵⁾

1.1 Girls

American⁶⁾ and British⁷⁾ studies repeatedly show that daughters of divorced parents will be more likely to approve of premarital sexual intercourse⁸⁾ and teen sexual activity⁹⁾ and to engage in early sexual intercourse outside of marriage; similar results are shown among father absent households in general.¹⁰⁾ The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth reports that African-American girls are 42 percent less likely to have sexual intercourse before age 18 if their biological father is present at home.¹¹⁾ By contrast, the presence of a stepfather increases by 72 percent the likelihood of sexual intercourse before age 18 for Latino girls.¹²⁾

In addition to an increased likelihood of being sexually active, girls from divorced families are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, to have more frequent sexual intercourse, and to have more sexual partners.¹³⁾ According to the Adolescent Health Survey, girls in grades 7-12 living in intact married families have the fewest sexual partners (0.71 sexual partners) of all family structure. Girls living in stepfamilies (1.39 partners) and divorced families (1.29 partners) tend to have the highest number of sexual partners.¹⁴⁾ (See [Chart Below](#))



In a study comparing girls from New Zealand and the United States, researchers found that the earlier a father leaves the home, the higher his daughter's risk of early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy. In the United States, girls whose fathers had left before their daughters were five years old were eight times more likely to become pregnant while adolescents than were girls whose fathers remained in the home.¹⁵⁾

1.2 Boys

For sons, parental divorce and father absence is correlated with adolescent sexual intercourse, earlier sexual debut,¹⁶⁾ and the acquisition of a sexually transmitted disease.¹⁷⁾ Other studies have confirmed that male children of divorce have more relationships and more sexual partners than young men from intact families.¹⁸⁾

The influences of divorce on sexual behavior extends into adulthood: Adults raised in divorced families are more likely to engage in short sexual affairs and also have more sexual partners than adults from intact families.¹⁹⁾

2. Sexual Behaviors

Virginity among teenagers of all ages correlates closely with the presence of married parents.²⁰⁾ Each change in family structure during adolescence (from married to divorced, from single to married, or from divorced to stepfamily) increases the risk of initiation of sexual intercourse for many of the teenage children in these unions.²¹⁾

The children of divorce date more and thus have a higher turnover of dating partners and more failed romantic relationships,²²⁾ which may contribute to a larger number of sexual partners,²³⁾ a risk factor for the acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases²⁴⁾ and a host of emotional repercussions. Children with divorced parents tend to have **lower relationship quality**.²⁵⁾ Even without the addition of a working mother, divorce leads to an above-average number of sexual partners for the children of divorce as adults.²⁶⁾

Following a divorce, most mothers have to work full-time. This combination of divorce and a full-time working mother leads to the highest level of teenage sexual activity²⁷⁾ and is significantly correlated with multiple sexual partners in adult life.²⁸⁾

3. Pregnancy

Women whose parents separated during childhood are more likely to have an out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy,²⁹⁾ and men with divorced or separated parents are more likely to father a child with a teenage mother.³⁰⁾ In Britain, the phenomenon of out-of-wedlock pregnancy to children of divorced parents has also been found.³¹⁾

4. Abortion

Daughters of divorced parents have more abortions than the daughters of non-divorced parents, according to a Finnish study.³²⁾

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¹⁰⁾ Arland Thornton and Donald Camburn, "The Influence of the Family on Premarital Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," *Demography* 24 (1987): 329-337; these findings hold regardless of ethnic background. Carolyn A. Smith, "Factors Associated with Early Sexual Activity Among Urban Adolescents," *Social Work* 42 (1997): 334-346.

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