

# Effects of Divorce on Children's Sexual Activity

## 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](#).<sup>1)</sup> 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.<sup>2)</sup> Furthermore, sexual permissiveness on the part of divorced parents significantly increases permissive attitudes and behavior in both their sons and daughters.<sup>3)</sup>

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

### 1.1 Girls

American<sup>6)</sup> and British<sup>7)</sup> studies repeatedly show that daughters of divorced parents will be more likely to approve of premarital sexual intercourse<sup>8)</sup> and teen sexual activity,<sup>9)</sup> and to engage in early sexual intercourse outside of marriage; similar results are shown among fatherless households in general.<sup>10)</sup> 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.<sup>11)</sup> By contrast, the presence of a stepfather increases by 72 percent the likelihood of sexual intercourse before age 18 for Latino girls.<sup>12)</sup>

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.<sup>13)</sup> 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.<sup>14)</sup>

### 1.2 Boys

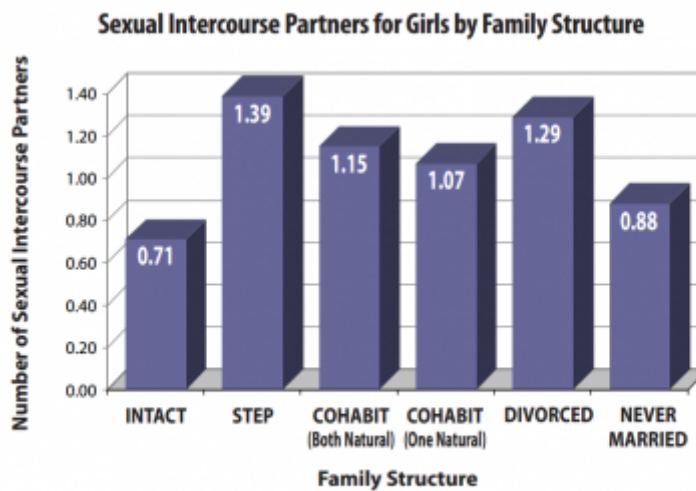
For sons, parental divorce and father absence is correlated with adolescent sexual intercourse, earlier sexual debut,<sup>15)</sup> and the acquisition of a sexually transmitted disease.<sup>16)</sup> Other studies have confirmed that male children of divorce have more relationships and more sexual partners than young men from intact families.<sup>17)</sup>

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.<sup>18)</sup>

### 1.3 Related American Demographics

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.<sup>19)</sup> (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: Adolescent Health Survey, Wave I. Adolescents grade 7-12.

## 2. Sexual Behaviors

Virginity among teenagers of all ages correlates closely with the presence of married parents.<sup>20)</sup> 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.<sup>21)</sup>

The children of divorce date more and thus have a higher turnover of dating partners and more failed romantic relationships,<sup>22)</sup> which may contribute to a larger number of sexual partners,<sup>23)</sup> a risk factor for the acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases<sup>24)</sup> and a host of emotional repercussions. Children with divorced parents tend to have [lower relationship quality](#).<sup>25)</sup> 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.<sup>26)</sup>

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 activity<sup>27)</sup> and is significantly correlated with multiple sexual partners in adult life.<sup>28)</sup>

### 3. Pregnancy

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

### 4. Abortion

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

<sup>1)</sup> William G. Axinn and Arland Thornton, "The Influence of Parents' Marital Dissolutions on Children's Attitudes toward Family Formation," *Demography* 33 (1996): 66-81.

William H. Jaynes, "The Effects of Recent Parental Divorce on Their Children's Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 35 (2001): 125.

<sup>2)</sup> William H. Jaynes, "The Effects of Recent Parental Divorce on Their Children's Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 35 (2001): 125.

<sup>3)</sup> Les B. Whitbeck, Ronald L Simons, and Meei-Ying Kao, "The Effects of Divorced Mother's Dating Behaviors and Sexual Attitudes on the Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of Their Adolescent Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 56 (1994): 615-621. As cited in Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *To Have and To Hold: Strategies to Strengthen Marriage and Relationships* (Canberra, Australia: Parliament of Australia, 1998), 36.

<sup>4)</sup>, <sup>18)</sup> Fridrik H. Jónsson, Urdur Njardvik, Gudlaug Ólafsdóttir, and Sigurdur J. Grétarsson, "Parental Divorce: Long-term Effects on Mental Health, Family Relations, and Adult Sexual Behavior," *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 41 (2000): 103.

<sup>5)</sup> Mendle, Jane, K. Paige Harden, Eric Turkheimer, Carol A. Van Hulle, Brian M. D'Onofrio, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Joseph L. Rodgers, Robert E. Emery, and Benjamin B. Lahey, "Associations Between Father Absence and Age of First Sexual Intercourse," *Child Development* 80, no. 5 (2009): 1463-1464.

<sup>6)</sup> E. Mavis Hetherington, Martha Cox, and Roger Cox, "Long-term Effects of Divorce and Remarriage on the Adjustment of Children," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 24 (1985): 518-530.

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<sup>7)</sup> Kathleen E. Kiernan, "The Impact of Family Disruptions in Childhood on Transitions Made in Young Adult Life," *Population Studies* 46 (1992): 213-234.

<sup>8)</sup> William G. Axinn and Arland Thornton, "The Influence of Parents' Marital Dissolution on Children's Attitudes toward Family Formation," *Demography* 33 (1996): 66-81.

<sup>9)</sup> Arland Thornton, and Donald Camburn, "The Influence of the Family on Premarital Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," *Demography* 24 (1987): 323-340.

<sup>10)</sup> 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.

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- Ryan, Rebecca M, "Nonresident fatherhood and adolescent sexual behavior: A comparison of siblings approach," *Developmental Psychology* 51, no. 2 (February 2015): 211, 219.
- <sup>11)</sup> , <sup>12)</sup> Robert Day, "The Transition to First Intercourse among Racially and Culturally Diverse Youth," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992): 749-762.
- <sup>13)</sup> Anthony Biglan, Carol W. Metzler, Roger Wirt, Dennis Ary, John Noell, Linda Ochs, Christine French and Don Hood, "Social and behavioral factors associated with high-risk sexual behavior among adolescents," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 13 (1990): 245-261; John O. G. Billy, Karin L. Brewster and William R. Grady, "Contextual effects of the sexual behavior of adolescent women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56 (1994): 387-404; Bruce J. Ellis, John E. Bates, Kenneth A. Dodge, David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, Gregory S. Pettit, and Lianne Woodward, "Does father absence place daughters at special risk for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy?" *Child Development* 74 (2003): 801-821; Robert L. Flewelling and Karl E. Bauman, "Family structure as a predictor of initial substance use and sexual intercourse in early adolescence," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990): 171-181; Laurie L. Meschke, Janine M. Zweig, Bonnie L. Barber, and Jacquelynne S. Eccles, "Demographic, biological, social, and psychological correlates of the timing of first intercourse," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 10 (2000): 315-338; Ronald L. Simons and Associates, *Understanding differences between divorced and intact families* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996). As cited in Jenifer K. McGuire and Bonnie L. Barber, "A Person-Centered Approach to the Multifaceted Nature of Young Adult Sexual Behavior," *Journal of Sex Research* 47, no. 4 (2010): 308, 310.
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- <sup>15)</sup> Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. and Julien O. Teitler, "Reconsidering the Effects of Marital Disruption: What Happens to Children of Divorce in Early Adulthood?" *Journal of Family Issues* 15 (1994): 173-190. Mendle, Jane, K. Paige Harden, Eric Turkheimer, Carol A. Van Hulle, Brian M. D'Onofrio, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Joseph L. Rodgers, Robert E. Emery, and Benjamin B. Lahey, "Associations Between Father Absence and Age of First Sexual Intercourse," *Child Development* 80, no. 5 (2009): 1463-1464.
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- <sup>19)</sup> This chart draws on a large national sample (16,000) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Waves I and II. This work was done by the author in cooperation with former colleagues at The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C. Patrick F. Fagan, "Family Structure and Sexual Intercourse Partners—Adolescent Girls," Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF08K28.pdf>
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<sup>24)</sup> Thomas R. Eng and William T. Butler, eds., *The Hidden Epidemic*, The Institute of Medicine (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997), chapters 3 and 4, 69-174.

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<sup>27)</sup> John O. G. Billy (1994). As cited in David Larson, *The Costly Consequences of Divorce* (Rockville, MD: National Institute for Healthcare Research, 1995), 131.

<sup>28)</sup> Seidman, Mosher, and Aral (1994). As cited in David Larson, *The Costly Consequences of Divorce* (Rockville, MD: National Institute for Healthcare Research, 1995), 131.

<sup>29)</sup> Robert J. Quinlan, "Father Absence, Parental Care, and Female Reproductive Development," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24 (2003): 376-390.

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<sup>32)</sup> Hillevi M. Aro and Ulla K. Palosaari, "Parental Divorce, Adolescence, and Transition to Young Adulthood: A Follow-up Study," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 63 (1992): 425.

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