

Effects of Marriage on Children's Education

Marriage is the [foundational relationship](#) for all of society. In marriage are contained the five basic institutions of society: family, church, school, marketplace and government. Social science shows the significant contributions marriage has for children's education.

1. Achievement

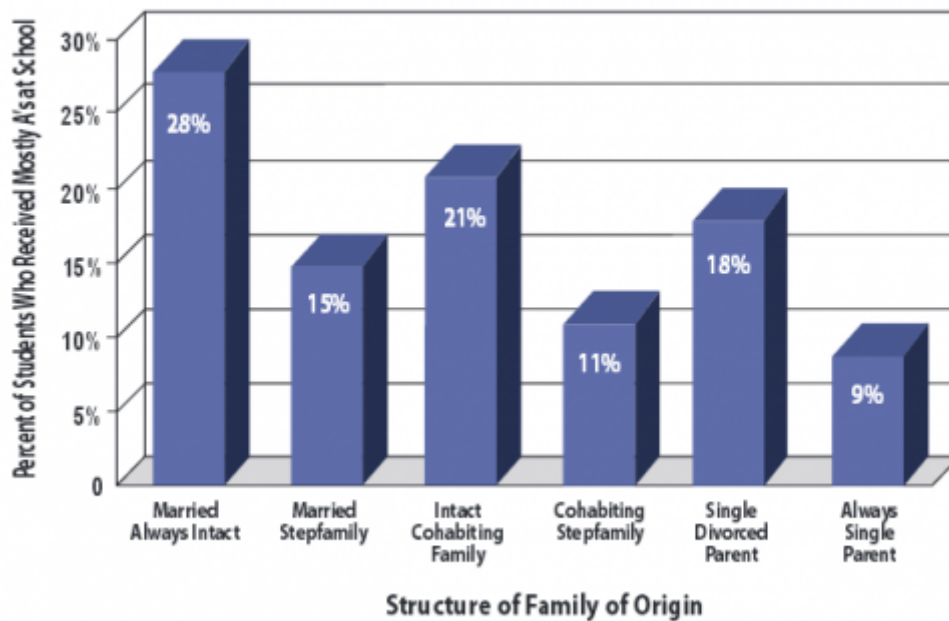
(See [Effects of Divorce on Children's Education](#) and [Effects of Family Structure on Children's Education](#))

Children raised in intact married families tend to earn higher grades than those in non-intact families.¹⁾ For example, kindergarten children from married families have higher reading scores than those from cohabiting families.²⁾ This makes sense given that parents in always-intact married families are more likely to help their children do their homework than are parents in stepfamilies or single-parent families,³⁾ and that fathers in always-intact married families are more involved in their children's homework than are stepfathers.⁴⁾ Compared with children in stable married families, students experiencing parental divorce have lower academic expectations and test scores.⁵⁾

1.1 Related American Demographics

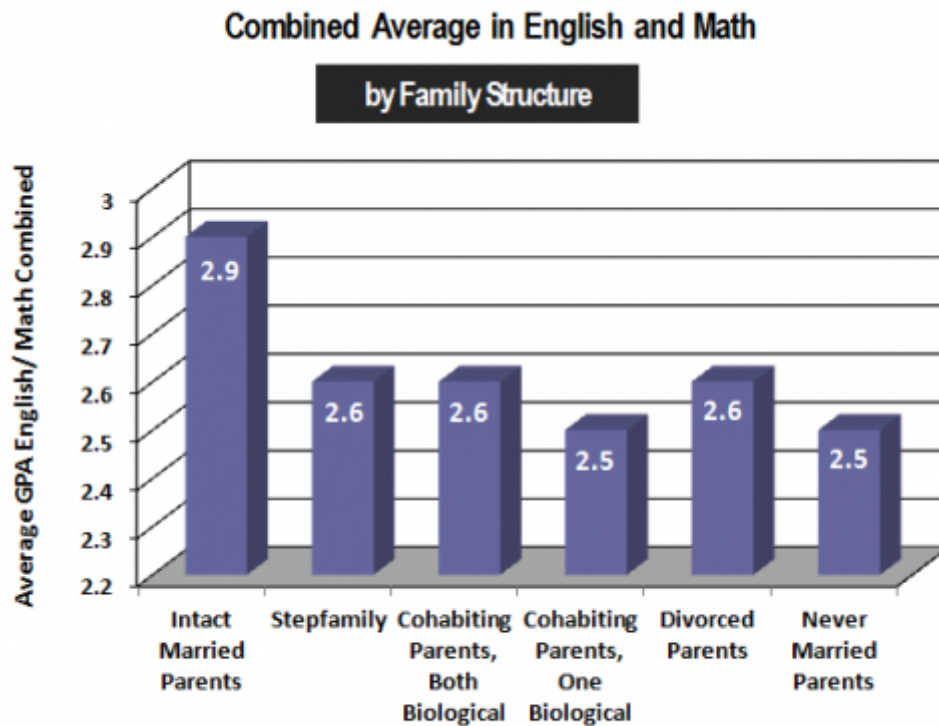
The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth shows that students most likely to receive A's in school are those who grew up in an intact married family. About 28 percent of students who grew up in an intact married family received mostly A's, followed by students from intact cohabiting families (21 percent), single divorced parent families (18 percent), married stepfamilies (15 percent), cohabiting stepfamilies (11 percent), and always single parent families (9 percent).⁶⁾ (See [Chart](#))

“Students Who Received Mostly A’s at School” by Structure of Family of Origin



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, students who live with their married biological parents carry the highest average combined GPA, or grade point average, for English and math (2.9). Those whose parents never married or who live with cohabiting adults, only one of whom is a natural parent, have the lowest (2.5). Slightly above that group are students living with stepparents, divorced parents, or both unmarried biological parents (2.6). ⁷⁾ (See [Chart](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Waves I and II)

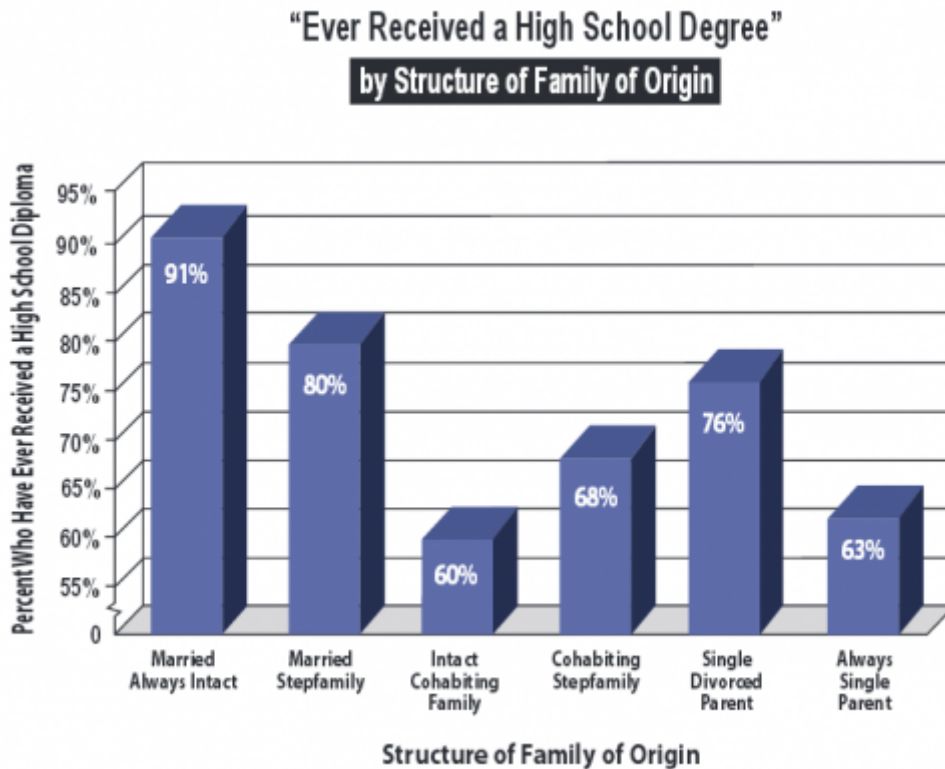
2. Level of Attainment

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

The benefits of marriage for education are also seen in parents' and children's level of education. Having obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher is most common among mothers in intact marriages.⁸⁾ Children from intact families exceed their parents' educational attainment—sons by 2.8 years, daughters by 2.5 years—after controlling for mother's level of education.⁹⁾ Children from intact married families have the highest high school graduation rate and are more likely to gain more education after graduating from high school than those from other family structures.¹⁰⁾ Children from divorced families, on the other hand, get an average of seven-tenths of a year less education than children from married families.¹¹⁾

2.1 Related American Demographics

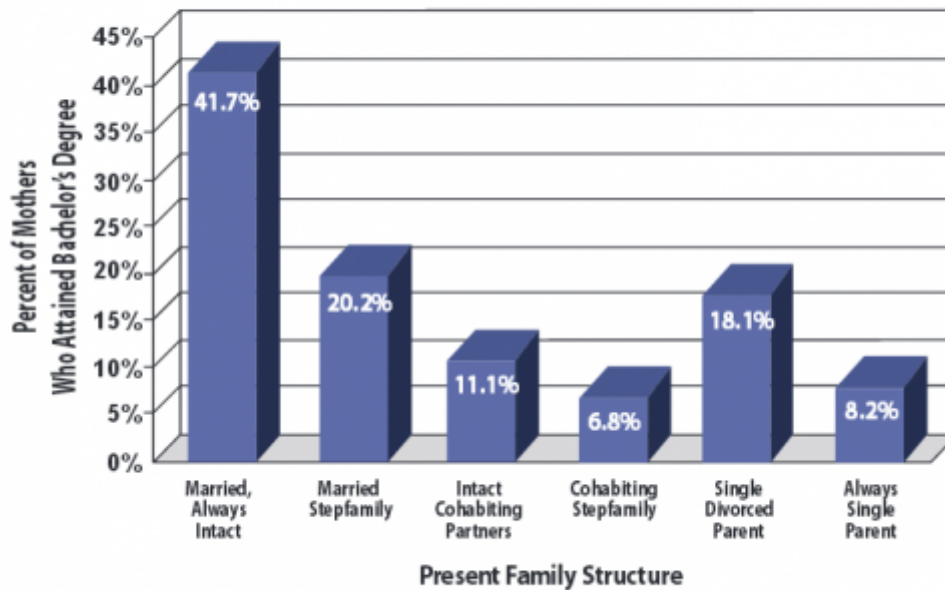
According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 91 percent of youth raised by their married biological parents received a high school diploma. They are followed by those in married stepfamilies (80 percent), single divorced parent families (76 percent), cohabiting stepfamilies (68 percent), always single parent families (63 percent), and biological cohabiting parent families (60 percent).¹²⁾ (See [Chart](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997)

Always-married mothers are significantly more likely to have received a bachelor's degree than their counterparts. The National Survey of Family Growth shows that 41.7 percent of mothers aged 35-44 in always-intact marriages have earned a bachelor's degree, followed by mothers in married stepfamilies (20.2 percent), those who are divorced (18.1 percent), those in intact cohabiting relationships (11.1 percent), those who have always been single (8.2 percent), and those in cohabiting stepfamilies (6.8 percent).¹³⁾ (See [Chart](#))

"Mothers Who Have Attained a Bachelor's Degree" by Present Family Structure



Source: National Survey of Family Growth (2002)

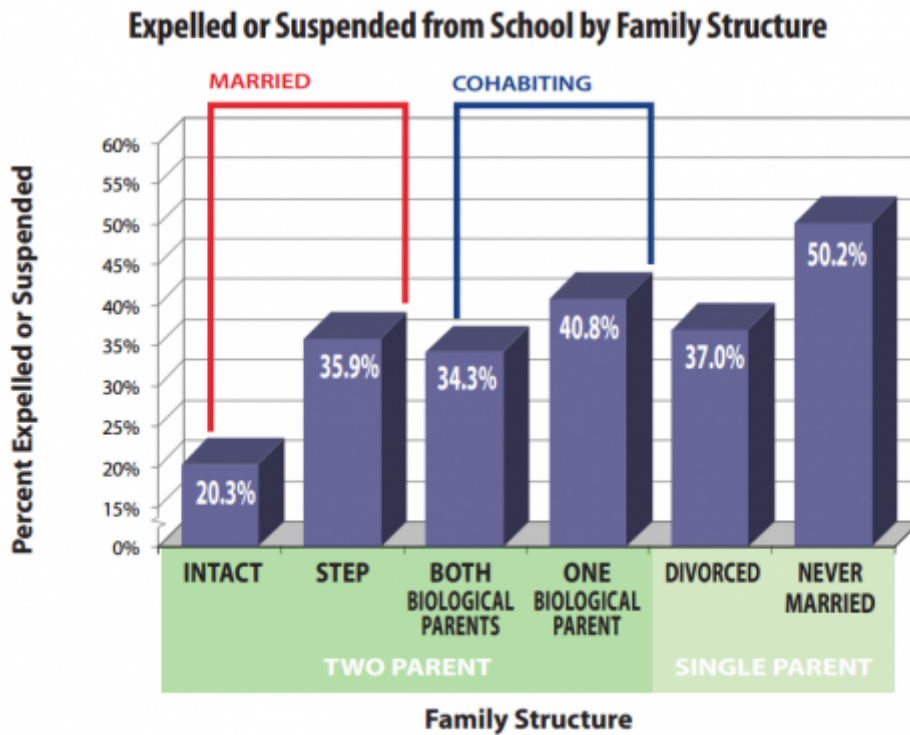
3. Engagement

(See [Effects of Divorce on Children's Education](#) and [Effects of Family Structure on Children's Education](#))

Children of married parents are more engaged in school than children from all other family structures.¹⁴⁾ Children from intact families have fewer [behavioral problems](#) in school.¹⁵⁾ First-grade children born to married mothers are less likely to exhibit disruptive behavior, such as disobeying a teacher or behaving aggressively towards peers, than children born to cohabiting or single mothers.¹⁶⁾ Adolescents from intact married families are less frequently suspended, expelled, or delinquent, and less frequently experience school problems than children from other family structures.¹⁷⁾

3.1 Related American Demographics

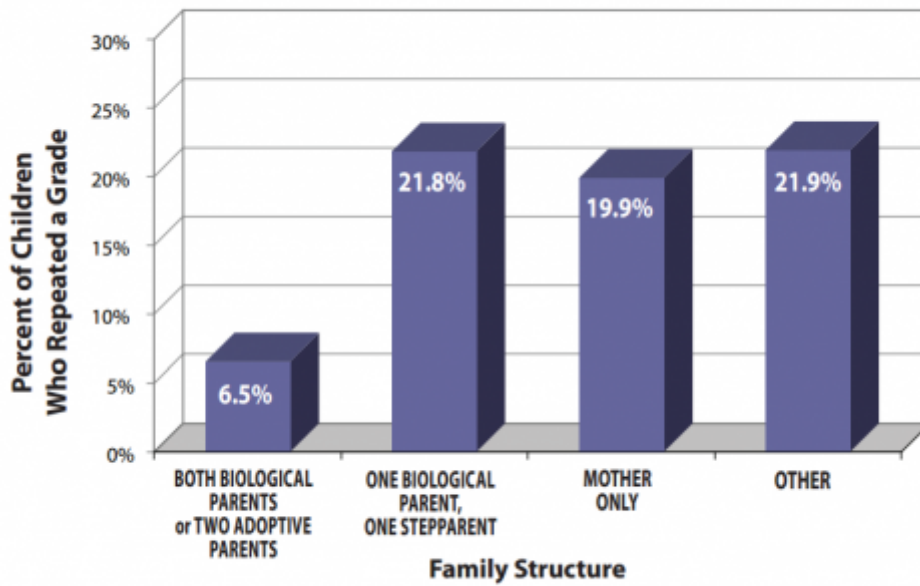
According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Waves I and II, 20 percent of students in Grades 7-12 who live with their married, biological parents have ever been suspended or expelled from school. By contrast, more than 50 percent of adolescents who live with a single, never-married parent have ever been suspended or expelled. In between are those who live with two biological cohabiting parents (34.3 percent), those living with a step-parent (35.9 percent), those whose parents are divorced (37 percent), and those who live with one biological cohabiting parent (40.8 percent).¹⁸⁾



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

Based on the National Survey of Children’s Health, children who live with both biological parents or two adoptive parents are only one third as likely to have ever repeated a grade in school as those who living with their mother only, with one biological parent and a stepparent, or in other family configurations, such as with their father only or with foster parents. The respective rates of grade repetition found in the survey were 6.5 percent for those living with both parents, 19.9 percent for those living with mother only, 21.8 percent for those living with a parent and stepparent, and 21.9 percent for those living in other family configurations.¹⁹⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)

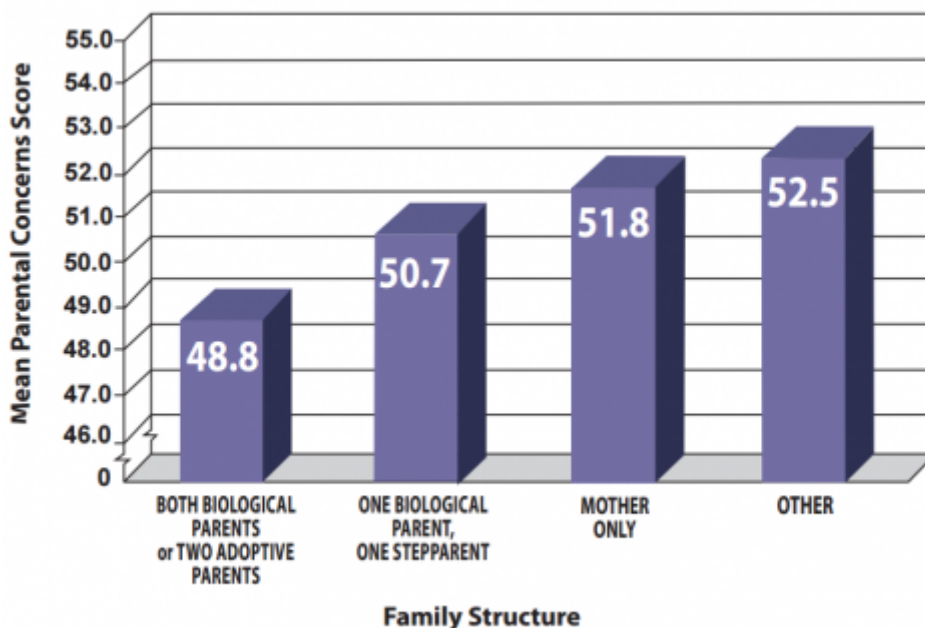
Repeating a Grade by Family Structure



Source: National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)

Children who live with both biological parents or with two adoptive parents are less likely to have parents who have concerns about their children's achievement.²⁰⁾ (See [Chart Below](#))

Parental Concerns About Children's Achievement by Family Structure



Source: National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)

4. Long-term Impact

The more success a child experiences in school, the more success the child will enjoy in the workplace as an adult. Educational attainment largely predicts lifetime earnings. According to estimates calculated in 2011, Americans with doctorate degrees will earn, on average, \$3.5 million in a lifetime; professional degrees, \$4.1 million; master's degrees, \$2.8 million; bachelor's degrees, \$2.4 million;

associate's degrees, \$1.8 million; some college, \$1.6 million; high school degrees, \$1.3 million.²¹⁾ Another study from 2011 shows the median annual incomes of various education levels for workers 25 to 64 years old. People with doctorate degrees earn \$73,575 annually, those with professional degrees \$79,977, those with master's degrees \$53,716, and those with bachelor's degrees \$42,783.²²⁾ Thus, a college graduate earns almost double over his lifetime compared to a high school graduate. A college degree, therefore, is a good investment over a lifetime. Those with a professional degree (i.e., law degree) earn nearly double than those with a college degree, despite the high cost of graduate school.

¹⁾ Patrick Fagan, Anne Dougherty, and Miriam McElvain, "164 Reasons to Marry," Marriage and Religion Research Institute, available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF12A85.pdf>

²⁾ Julie Artis, "Maternal Cohabitation and Child Well-Being Among Kindergarten Children," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 69, no. 1 (2007): 227-232.

³⁾ Frank F. Furstenberg and Christine Winquist Nord, "Parenting apart: Patterns of child rearing after marital disruption," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (1985): 893-904. As cited in Sandra J. Balli, David H. Demo, John F. Wedman, "Family Involvement with Children's Homework: An Intervention in the Middle Grades," *Family Relations* 47, no. 2 (April 1998): 150.

⁴⁾ Alan C. Acock and David H. Demo, *Family diversity and well-being* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994). As cited in Sandra J. Balli, David H. Demo, John F. Wedman, "Family Involvement with Children's Homework: An Intervention in the Middle Grades," *Family Relations* 47, no. 2 (April 1998): 150.

⁵⁾ Youngmin Sun and Yuanzhang Li, "Children's Well-Being During Parents' Marital Disruption Process: A Pooled Time-Series Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (May 2002): 472-488. As cited by The Heritage Foundation: Family Facts. Available at <http://www.familyfacts.org/briefs/35/family-structure-and-childrens-education>. Accessed 20 July 2011.

⁶⁾ Patrick F. Fagan and Scott Talkington, "'Likely to Receive Mostly A's' by Structure of Family of Origin and by Current Religious Attendance." Available at <http://www.frc.org/mappingamerica/mapping-america-100-students-who-receive-mostly-as>. Accessed 13 September 2011.

⁷⁾ Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America: Key Outcomes for the Common Good*, The Heritage Foundation, 2006, chart 10, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Patrick F. Fagan, "Family Structure and School Performance of U.S. High School Students," Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF08C37.pdf>

⁸⁾ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, "America's Children: Key Indicators of National Wellbeing," 2010. As cited by The Heritage Foundation: Family Facts. Available at <http://www.familyfacts.org/charts/marriage-and-family>. Accessed 20 July 2011.

⁹⁾ Verna M. Keith and Barbara Finlay, "The impact of parental divorce on children's educational attainment, marital timing, and likelihood of divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50 (1988): 800.

¹⁰⁾ Jan O. Jonsson and Michael Gahler, "Family Dissolution, Family Reconstitution, and Children's Educational Careers: Recent Evidence for Sweden," *Demography* 34, no. 2 (1997): 285.

Evans, M.D.R., Jonathan Kelley, and Richard A. Wanner. "Consequences of Divorce for Childhood Education: Australia, Canada, and the USA, 1940-1990." *Comparative Sociology* 8, no. 1 (February 2009): 134-135.

¹¹⁾ Evans, M.D.R., Jonathan Kelley, and Richard A. Wanner, "Consequences of Divorce for Childhood Education: Australia, Canada, and the USA, 1940-1990," *Comparative Sociology* 8, no. 1 (February 2009): 129.

¹²⁾ Patrick F. Fagan and Scott Talkington, "'Ever Received a High School Degree' by Structure of Family of Origin and by Current Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project available at

<http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF10K10.pdf>

¹³⁾ These charts draw on data collected by the National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 (2002). The sample consists of women between the ages of 35 and 44 and numbers 2,479.

Patrick F. Fagan and D. Paul Sullins, "Mothers (aged 35-44) Who Have Attained a Bachelor's Degree' by Religious Attendance and Present Family Structure." Available at <http://www.frc.org/mappingamerica/mapping-america-92-women-attaining-a-bachelors-degree-by-religious-attendance-and-present-family-structure>. Accessed 22 September 2011.

¹⁴⁾ Susan L. Brown, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66, no. 2 (2004): 362.

Jay D. Teachman, "The Living Arrangements of Children and their Educational Well-Being," *Journal of Family Issues* 29, no. 6 (2008): 747.

Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Laura Tach, "Heterogeneity in Two-Parent Families and Adolescent Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 70, no. 2 (2008): 445.

¹⁵⁾ 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. As cited by The Heritage Foundation: Family Facts. Available at <http://www.familyfacts.org/briefs/35/family-structure-and-childrens-education>. Accessed 20 July 2011.

Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, "Consequences of parental divorce and marital unhappiness for adult well-being," *Social Forces* 69 (1991): 895-914.

James S. Coleman, et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Washington, D.C., 1966.

Ruth B. Ekstrom, et al., "Who drops out of school and why: Findings from a national study," *Teachers College Record* 87 (1986): 356-73.

D.R. Featherstone, B.P. Cundick, and L.C. Jensen, "Differences in School Behavior and Achievement between Children from Intact, Reconstituted, and Single-Parent Families," *Adolescence* 27, no. 105 (1992): 1-12.

Debra J. Mulholland, et al., "Academic performance in children of divorce: Psychological resilience and vulnerability," *Psychiatry* 54 (1991): 268-280.

¹⁶⁾ Shannon E. Cavanagh and Aletha C. Houston, "Family Instability and Children's Early Problem Behavior," *Social Forces* 85, no. 1 (September 2006): 551-581.

¹⁷⁾ Paul R. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Wellbeing of the Next Generation," *Future of Children*, 15 (2005): 86.

Wendy D. Manning and Kathleen A. Lamb, "Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65, no. 4 (2003): 885-893.

A.U. Rickel and T.S. Langer, "Short-term and long-term effects of marital disruption on children," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 13 (1985): 599-661.

¹⁸⁾ This chart draws on a large national sample (16,000) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. 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 Expulsion or Suspension from School." Available at <http://www.frc.org/mappingamerica/mapping-america-20-family-structure-and-expulsion-or-suspension-from-school>. Accessed 22 September 2011.

¹⁹⁾ This chart draws on data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics in the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) in 2003. The data sample consisted of parents of 102,353 children and teens in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. 68,996 of these children and teens were between six and 17 years old, the age group that was the focus of the study. The survey sample in this age range represented a population of nearly 49 million young people nationwide

Nicholas Zill, "Repeating a Grade and Family Structure," Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF09C07.pdf>

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Nicholas Zill, "Parental Concerns about Children's Achievement by Family Structure," Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF09I09.pdf>

²¹⁾ "Work-Life Earnings by Field of Degree and Occupation for People With a Bachelor's Degree: 2011," U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Briefs, October 2012, pg. 4.

²²⁾ "Education and Synthetic Work-Life Earnings Estimates," U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Reports, Issued September 2011, pg. 3.

This entry draws heavily from [164 Reasons to Marry](#).

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