

Effects of Divorce on Children's Behavior

Children of divorced or separated parents exhibit increased behavioral problems,¹⁾ and the marital conflict that accompanies parents' divorce places the child's [social competence](#) at risk. Even in intact families that have low to medium levels of conflict, children still have "fewer behavior problems than those in the high-conflict, disrupted families."²⁾ Another study suggests that parental conflict affects the outcomes of children's behavior problems, regardless of parents' marital status, and sometimes "there is no statistical difference in the level of behavior problems observed for children whose parents separated or divorced and for children whose parents remained together."³⁾ Overall, young adults are best off when raised by two continuously married parents with a low-conflict relationship.⁴⁾

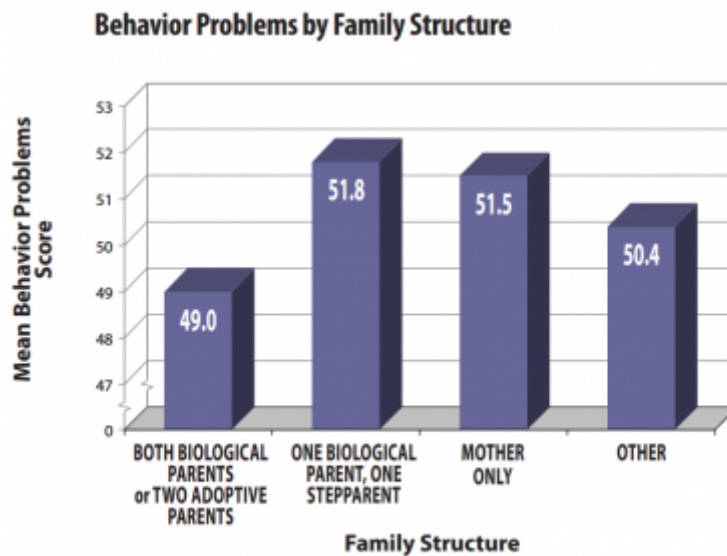
During a divorce, conflict between parents is often accompanied by less affection, less responsiveness, and more inclination to punish their children, which leaves their children feeling emotionally insecure.⁵⁾ These children are more likely to perceive their social milieu as unpredictable and uncontrollable.⁶⁾ Children who engage in [fighting and stealing](#) at school are far more likely to come from broken homes than are well-behaved children.⁷⁾ Children of divorced families are more than twice as likely to [drop out of high school](#) than children from intact families.⁸⁾ Other studies have confirmed that children of divorced parents exhibit more behavioral problems than do children from intact families.⁹⁾ Boys whose parents divorced while they were in elementary school tend to develop problems in the years following their parents' separation. While problem behavior increases immediately following the divorce among boys whose parents divorced while they were in middle school, their problem behavior steadily decreases in the year after the divorce.¹⁰⁾

1. Behavior at School

Divorce and separation correlate positively with [diminished school achievement and performance](#).¹¹⁾ Children from intact families have fewer behavioral [problems in school](#).¹²⁾ For example, 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.¹³⁾

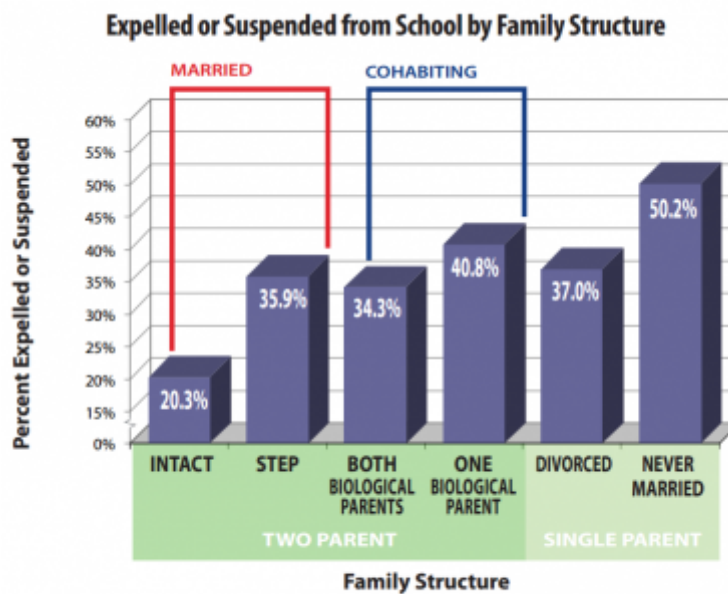
1.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Survey of Children's Health, children who live with both biological parents are less likely to exhibit behavior problems than those who do not.¹⁴⁾ (See [Chart](#))



Source: National Survey of Children's Health

Similarly, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health shows that adolescents from intact married families are less frequently suspended, expelled, or delinquent, and less frequently experience [school problems](#) than children from other family structures.¹⁵⁾ (See [Chart](#))



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

2. Ability to Handle Conflict

Divorce diminishes children's capacity to handle conflict. The difference between marriages that remain intact and those that end in divorce lies primarily in the couple's ability to handle marital conflict and move towards agreement. Parental modeling in divorce diminishes many children's capacity for [stable marriage later in life](#), though some children may react by doubling their efforts to ensure stability.

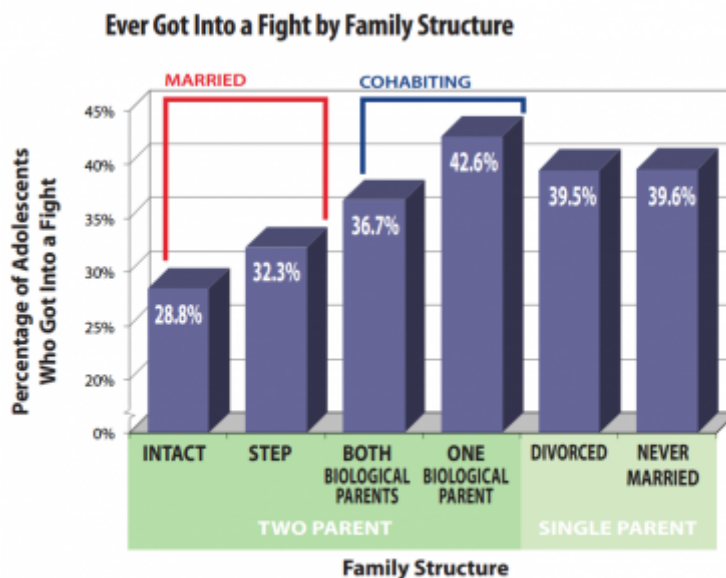
For instance, compared to students from intact families, college students from divorced families use

violence more frequently to resolve conflict and are more likely to be aggressive and physically violent with their friends, male or female.¹⁶⁾ Parental divorce during adolescence frequently leads to more violent partnerships in adolescence and adulthood.¹⁷⁾

In their own marriages, [children of divorced parents](#) are more likely to be unhappy, to escalate conflict, to communicate less, to argue frequently, and to shout or to physically assault their spouse when arguing.¹⁸⁾ Thus, the likelihood of divorce is transmitted [across generations](#).¹⁹⁾

2.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Waves I and II), 42.6 percent of adolescents living with one biological, cohabiting parent have been in a fight, whereas only 28.8 percent of those with two married parents have ever been in one. Among other family structures, 32.3 percent of adolescents living in stepfamilies, 36.7 percent of those living with two cohabiting biological parents, 39.5 percent of those whose parents are divorced, and 39.6 percent of those whose parents have never married have ever been in a fight.²⁰⁾ (See [Chart](#))



3. Sexual Practice

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

When parents divorce, their children's approval of premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce tends to rise dramatically, while their endorsement of marriage and childbearing falls.²¹⁾ They are also more likely to believe that marriage is not important prior to having children and to have a [child out of wedlock](#). This holds true even after controlling for socioeconomic status.²²⁾

4. Crime

(See [Effects of Family Structure on Crime](#))

Children in intact families have lower rates of delinquency than children in non-intact families.²³⁾ Robert Sampson (then professor of sociology at the University of Chicago) reported, after studying 171 cities in the United States with populations over 100,000, that the divorce rate predicted the robbery rate of any given area, regardless of its economic and racial composition. In these [communities](#), he found that lower divorce rates indicated higher formal and informal social controls (such as the supervision of children) and lower crime rates.²⁴⁾

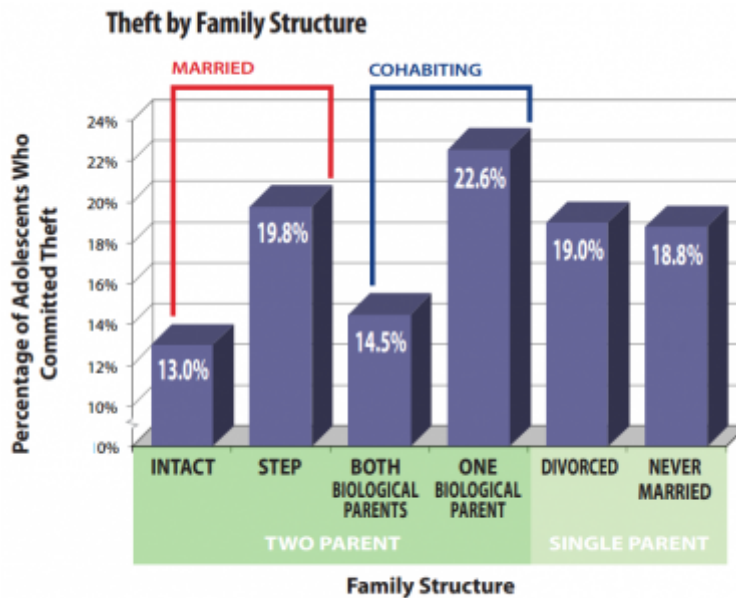
In 1994, it was reported in Wisconsin that the incarceration rate of juvenile delinquents was 12 times higher among children of divorced parents than among children of [married parents](#).²⁵⁾ A 2004 study showed that children from stepparent and single mother families also have significantly higher incarceration rates than children in intact families.²⁶⁾ In a British longitudinal study of males aged eight to 32, David P. Farrington, professor of criminology at Cambridge University, found experiencing parental divorce before age 10 to be a major predictor of adolescent delinquency and adult criminality.²⁷⁾ Another study found that boys who go through family transitions at the age of 14 or 15 are more likely to be delinquent when they are 16 or 17.²⁸⁾ Adolescents from divorced families (particularly those in divorced single-father families) display more antisocial and violent behavior than adolescents in biologically intact families.²⁹⁾ An Australian parliamentary review of the literature found that divorce increases the likelihood that children will [feel hostility and rejection](#).³⁰⁾

Children of divorced parents are significantly more likely than children of intact married families to be delinquent by age 15, regardless of when the divorce took place.³¹⁾ A 1985 study that tracked one thousand families with children ages six to 18 for six years found that children living in intact married families exhibited the least delinquency, while children with stepfathers were more likely to exhibit the most disruptive behavior. In this study, the behavior of single-parent children fell between that of children of intact and stepfather families.³²⁾

Parental divorce contributes to what some studies term “externalizing behaviors,” which include weapon carrying, fighting, substance abuse, and binge drinking.³³⁾ Another study found that the sons of divorced parents are at no greater risk of involvement in delinquent behavior than boys living in intact families if the mother and father “engage in competent parenting.”³⁴⁾ Good parenting on the part of divorced fathers achieved no such effects for the daughters of divorce, according to this same study. Among adolescent girls, there is a strong correlation between family structure and delinquency,³⁵⁾ hostile behavior,³⁶⁾ drug use, larceny, skipping school,³⁷⁾ and alcohol abuse.³⁸⁾

4.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 13 percent of children who live in an intact married family admit to having stolen at least \$50 worth of goods. By comparison, 19 percent of children whose parents never married or are divorced, 20 percent of children living with a stepparent, 15 percent of those living with cohabiting biological parents, and 23 percent of those living with one cohabiting biological parent have stolen at least \$50 worth of goods.³⁹⁾ (See [Chart Below](#))



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

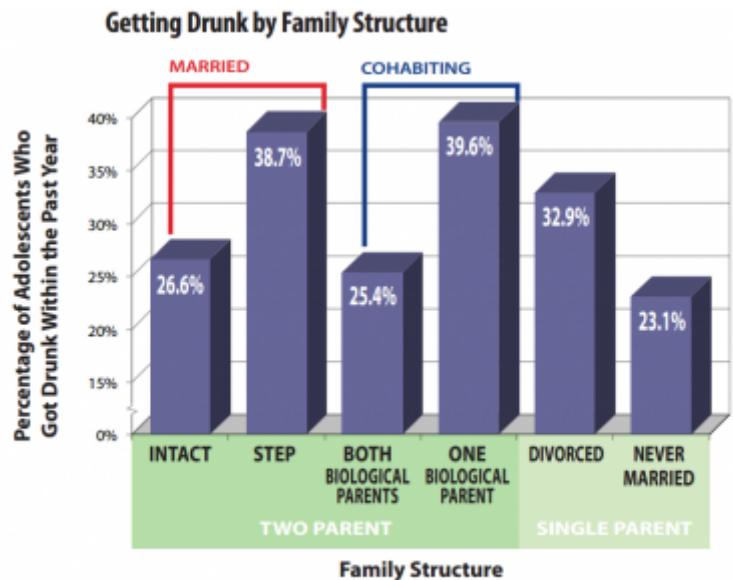
5. Drugs and Alcohol

Parental divorce (as previously stated) predicts externalizing behavior, such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption and binge drinking,⁴⁰⁾ and marijuana use.⁴¹⁾ Parental divorce or separation also predicts increased adolescent use of other illegal drugs.⁴²⁾ The negative effects of divorce on adolescent substance use are not temporary, and tend to persist over time.⁴³⁾

Men who experienced their parents' divorce as children (between ages seven and 16) are more likely to smoke as adults.⁴⁴⁾ Males who have experienced parental divorce are also more likely to use alcohol and drugs.⁴⁵⁾ Women who experienced parental divorce between ages seven and 16 (but not those whose parents divorced later) are more likely to smoke and to drink heavily as adults than women whose parents remained married.⁴⁶⁾ One study found that, in families where the mother-daughter relationship was satisfying, parental divorce and maternal nonresidence led to delinquent behavior in girls.⁴⁷⁾

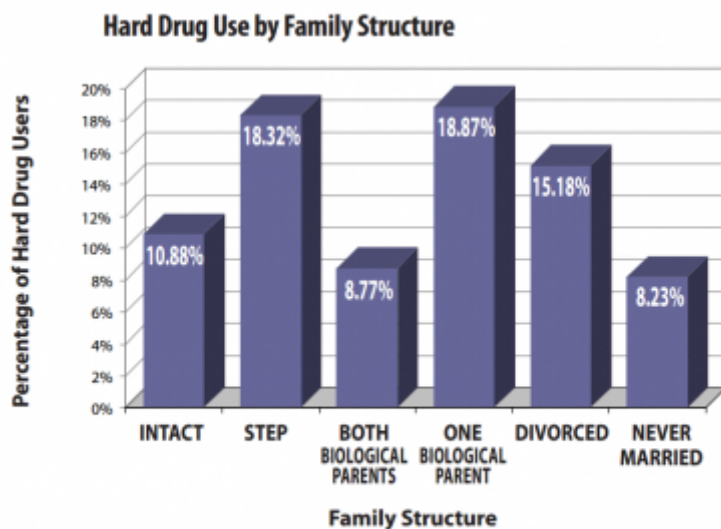
5.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Waves I and II), children who live with both biological parents are less likely to get drunk than adolescents with stepparents, one biological cohabiting parent, or divorced parents.⁴⁸⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



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

According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, more than 15 percent of adolescents whose parents are divorced have used hard drugs; this figure rises to roughly 18 percent for children living with a stepparent or one biological cohabiting parent.⁴⁹⁾ (See [Chart](#))



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

6. Suicide

Child suicide is often triggered by thoughts that his divorced parents reject him⁵⁰⁾ or have lost interest in him.⁵¹⁾ The fact that the suicide rate has risen along with the divorce rate is no coincidence.⁵²⁾ One study reported that risk of a suicide attempt was higher in divorced families, though the association was eliminated after controlling for adverse experiences.⁵³⁾ As the work of Patricia McCall, a sociology professor at North Carolina State University, shows, the strongest demographic indicator of suicide is the family structure within which a person resides: the divorced family structure has the highest suicide rate.⁵⁴⁾ For adults, having children decreases the parents' risk of suicide.⁵⁵⁾

Women from divorced families are 1.46 times as likely to attempt suicide as women from intact families.⁵⁶⁾ An earlier study by the same author found that women raised in divorced families are 1.33 times as likely to attempt suicide; this finding holds true even after adjusting for various confounding factors, such as age, race, and income.⁵⁷⁾ This link between parental divorce and the rise in adolescent suicide has been found again and again in the literature.⁵⁸⁾ Cross-cultural studies of Japan and the United States have clearly demonstrated the link between divorce and suicidal thought.⁵⁹⁾

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Patrick F. Fagan, "Behavior Problems and Family Structure," Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF08K10.pdf>

¹⁵⁾ 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

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²⁰⁾ 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

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³⁹⁾ 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.

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Patrick F. Fagan, "Family Structure and Drinking," Mapping America Projects available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF08H82.pdf>

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