

# Effects of Divorce on Children's Education

## 1. Diminished Learning Capacity

### 1.1 Outcomes and Achievement

Divorce and separation correlate positively<sup>1)</sup> with diminished school achievement and performance.<sup>2)</sup> Daniel Potter of the University of Virginia found that elementary school children who experience parental divorce immediately begin performing worse academically than their peers from intact families. This gap persists through elementary school.<sup>3)</sup>

Children exposed to unilateral divorce are less educated by adulthood.<sup>4)</sup> Children have lower educational aspirations and test scores during the process of their parents' marital disruption.<sup>5)</sup>

Children of divorced parents are also more likely to be held back a grade and have lower grade point averages (GPAs).<sup>6)</sup> High school students in intact families have GPAs 11 percent higher than those from divorced families,<sup>7)</sup> and children in [intact married families](#) have the highest combined English and math GPAs.<sup>8)</sup> One study (controlling for parental education, parental occupation, family size, etc.), found that children whose parents divorce get about seven-tenths of a year less education than children from intact families.<sup>9)</sup> Kindergarteners with divorced parents have an average math and reading score about three points lower than kindergarteners with nondivorced parents.<sup>10)</sup>

Children whose mothers divorced and remained divorced did worse over time on Peabody Individual Achievement Test reading recognition tests (which gauge children's ability to recognize and pronounce words) than children from [intact married families](#).<sup>11)</sup> By age 13, there is an average difference of half a year in reading ability between children of divorced parents and children from intact families.<sup>12)</sup> On the CAT (Common Admissions Test) Math/Verbal Percentile Scores children from married, always-intact families scored in the 58th percentile, followed by children from married stepfamilies and divorced single-parent families (48th percentile).<sup>13)</sup>

In the Kent State University Impact of Divorce Project, which used a national sample study of 699 elementary students, children from divorced homes performed worse in reading, spelling, and math and repeated a grade more frequently than did children in intact two-parent families. The project's findings led the researchers to conclude that children and young adolescents suffered [long-term negative effects following divorce](#).<sup>14)</sup> Teenagers who experience parental divorce score lower than their counterparts from intact families on math, science, and history tests.<sup>15)</sup>

Some studies show that the correlation between adolescent family disruption and educational attainment is weaker after controlling for the family's socioeconomic status. This finding likely reflects the influence of income on each.<sup>16)</sup> One of divorce's attendant problems is the [financial instability](#) it inflicts on those who experience it.

Lack of family transitions after divorce does not eliminate the effect of the divorce on student academic performance, but it does provide their performance in math and social studies a certain degree of protection, compared to students who live in unstable families with multiple family transitions.<sup>17)</sup>

## 1.2 Age at Divorce

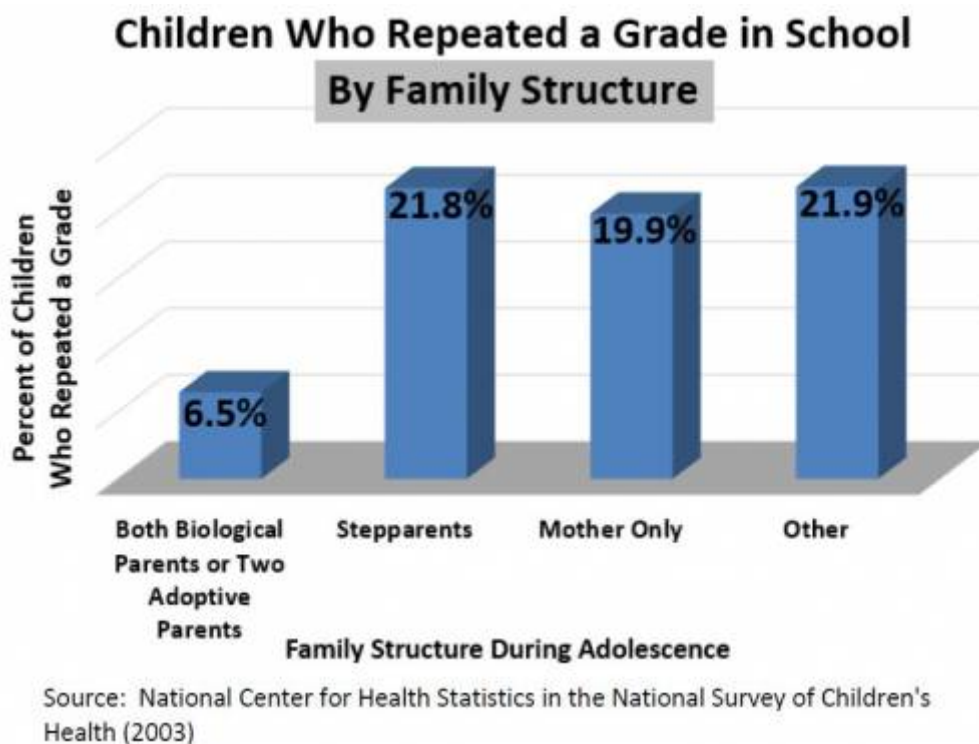
Norwegian research found that children who experience divorce early in life are likely to have lower educational outcomes, finding that the effect of divorce on education is strongest when the child is young.<sup>18)</sup> An American study, by contrast, found that those who had experienced a late divorce (between grades six and 10) were more likely to get low grades than children who experienced an early divorce (between kindergarten and grade five).<sup>19)</sup>

## 1.3 Consequences of Moving

Residential mobility accounts for 29 percent of the academic performance gap between children living in stepfamilies and children living with both biological parents.<sup>20)</sup> Moving tends to increase behavioral, emotional, and academic problems for adolescents.<sup>21)</sup> This happens more often for adolescents with divorced or separated parents, and can contribute to lower GPAs.<sup>22)</sup> Overall, the less instability of any sort in the child's life following divorce, the less the impact on the child.

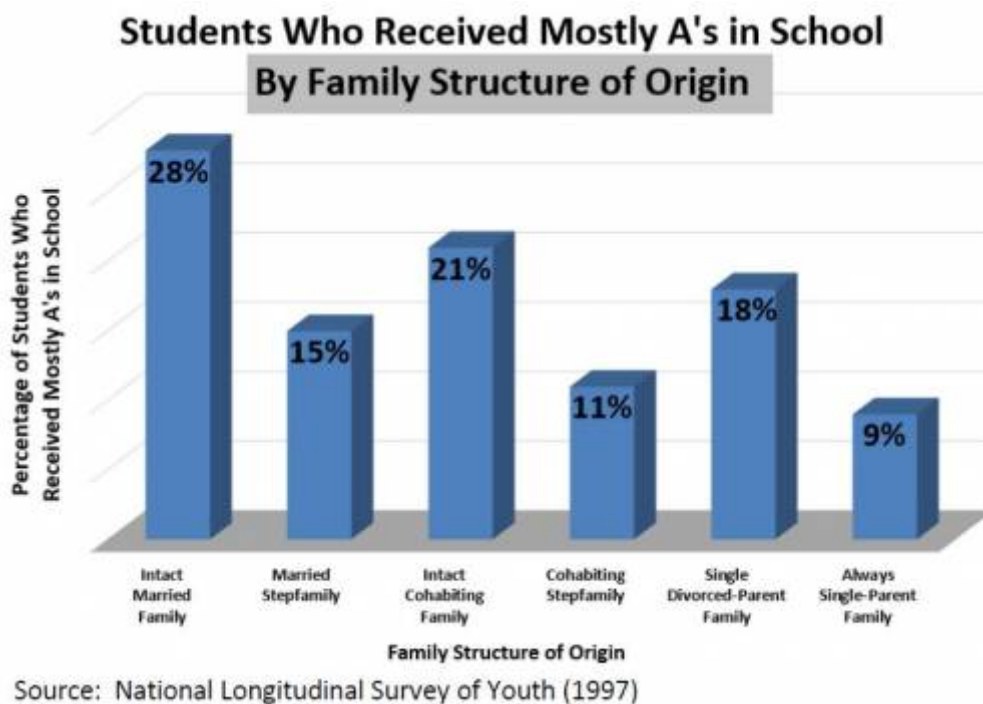
## 1.4 Related American Demographics

According to 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.<sup>23)</sup> (See [Chart](#) Below)



Based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a greater fraction of children from intact married families earn mostly A's in school. 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).<sup>24)</sup> (See [Chart](#) Below)



## 2. Parental Involvement

The [intact biological family](#) facilitates parental involvement in adolescent children's education.<sup>25)</sup> Adolescents in intact biological families reported that their parents participated more in school, that they discussed school more with their parents, and that they knew more of their friends' parents than those in single-parent families and stepfamilies.<sup>26)</sup> In divorced families, parental involvement cannot make up for the detriment to their children's education.<sup>27)</sup> Fathers in always-intact married families are more involved in their children's homework than are stepfathers.<sup>28)</sup>

## 3. Behavior at School

### 3.1 Psychosocial Outcomes

One study found that children in pre-disrupted families (whose parents' relationship would later dissolve) exhibit more academic, psychological, behavioral, and drug-related problems than children whose families remained intact.<sup>29)</sup> First grade students born to married mothers are less likely to behave disruptively (i.e. disobey a teacher, be aggressive with other children) than those born to [single or cohabiting mothers](#).<sup>30)</sup> Daniel Potter also found that the deleterious effect of divorce on children's psychosocial well-being is an important factor in poor math and reading scores.<sup>31)</sup>

### 3.2 Engagement

Children and adolescents in [intact married families](#) are more likely to [care about doing well](#) in school,

to do schoolwork without being forced, to do more than “just enough to get by,” and to do their homework.<sup>32)</sup> Adolescents who live in blended families and stepfamilies are less positively engaged in school than are adolescents from intact biological families.<sup>33)</sup>

### 3.3 Absence

One study found that children whose parents divorced skipped nearly 60 percent more class periods than children from intact families. Girls appeared to be more affected than boys.<sup>34)</sup>

### 3.4 Dropout, Suspension, or Expulsion

Children who experienced their parents’ divorce or separation are less likely to complete high school.<sup>35)</sup> An Australian study found that children of divorced families are 26 percent more likely to drop out of secondary school than children raised in intact families, and found that remarriage did not alleviate the effects of divorce on children’s educational attainment.<sup>36)</sup> Eighty-five percent of adolescents in intact biological families graduate from high school, compared to 67.2 percent in single-parent families, 65.4 percent in stepfamilies, and 51.9 percent who live with no parents.<sup>37)</sup>

## 4. College Attainment

Children whose parents<sup>38)</sup> or grandparents<sup>39)</sup> divorce tend to have fewer years of education.

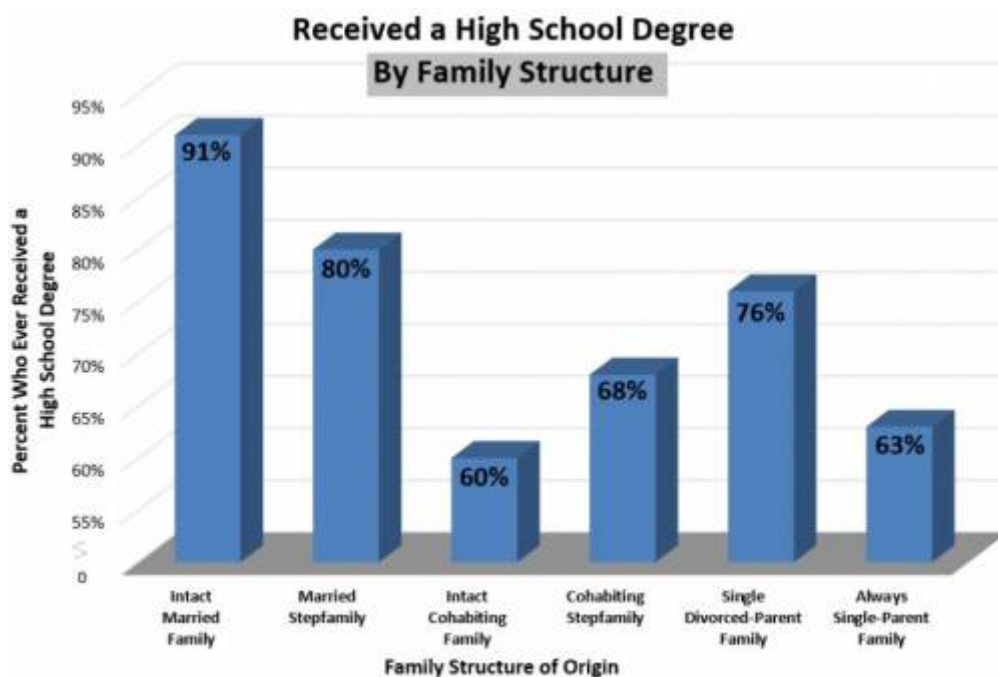
Divorce and separation reduces children’s likelihood of attending college.<sup>40)</sup> Furthermore, 33 percent of students who have already completed secondary school but who have experienced their parents’ divorce graduate from college, compared to 40 percent among their peers from intact families. Over 57 percent of children who live in intact biological families enter college, compared to 32.5 percent of children in stepfamilies, 47.5 percent of children in single-parent families, and 31.8 percent of children who live in families without either parent present.<sup>41)</sup> However, it seems that parental divorce has a greater impact on likelihood to complete secondary school than college.<sup>42)</sup> Children from intact married families have the highest high school graduation rate,<sup>43)</sup> and are more likely to gain more education after graduating from high school than those from other family structures.<sup>44)</sup>

### 4.1 College Expectations

Youth living in married stepfamilies and cohabiting stepfamilies (i.e., with the mother’s live-in boyfriend/partner) and single-parent families after a divorce or separation have lower college expectations than youth who have always lived in intact families.<sup>45)</sup> Sixty percent of mothers in intact married families expected their child to graduate college, compared to 40 percent of mothers in cohabiting stepfamilies and 36 percent of always-single mothers.<sup>46)</sup> Correspondingly, 69 percent of children from intact biological families applied to college, according to one study, compared to only 60 percent of students who were not from intact families.<sup>47)</sup> About 40 percent of sons and 44.7 percent of daughters from intact biological families aim to get more education after obtaining their undergraduate degree, compared to 30.7 percent of sons and 35.3 percent of daughters from single-parent families.<sup>48)</sup>

## 4.2 Related American Demographics

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 91 percent of individuals who grew up with married biological parents received a high school degree. They are followed by those who grew up in a married stepfamily (80 percent), those who grew up with a single, divorced parent (76 percent), those who grew up in a cohabiting stepfamily (68 percent), those who grew up with an always-single parent (63 percent), and those who grew up in an intact cohabiting family (60 percent).<sup>49)</sup> (See [Chart Below](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997)

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A positive correlation exists when, as one variable decreases, the other variable also decreases, and vice versa.

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This entry draws heavily from [The Effects of Divorce on Children](#) and [Marriage, Family Structure, and Children's Educational Attainment](#)

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