

# Effects of Family Structure on Children's Education

Most parents want their children to succeed in school but are often unaware that family life itself has a significant impact on their child's academic capacity. Below are the effects of the intact family on children's educational achievement and school behavior, as well as its effect on the home environment.

## 1. Influence of Family Structure

Family intactness is one of the [greatest positive influences](#)<sup>1)</sup> on high school graduation rates. Only the fraction of the adult population that has graduated from high school surpasses family intactness in its degree of influence. The former is presumably a strong effect of inter-generational behavior modeling and may as well indicate norms-setting. These influences remain and continue to be precisely determinable when earnings controls are added. This is in contrast to college graduation's influence, which is indeterminate whether or not earnings controls are included. The fractions of blacks or Hispanics in an area has [no determinable influence](#) on high school graduation rates once other controls<sup>2)</sup> have been implemented.

Family intactness should be viewed as one of the principle generative agents of high school graduation levels in an area: Part of the strong, beneficial influence of high school graduation levels on the outcomes studied should be attributed to family intactness' influence on high school graduation rates.

## 2. Achievement and Attainment

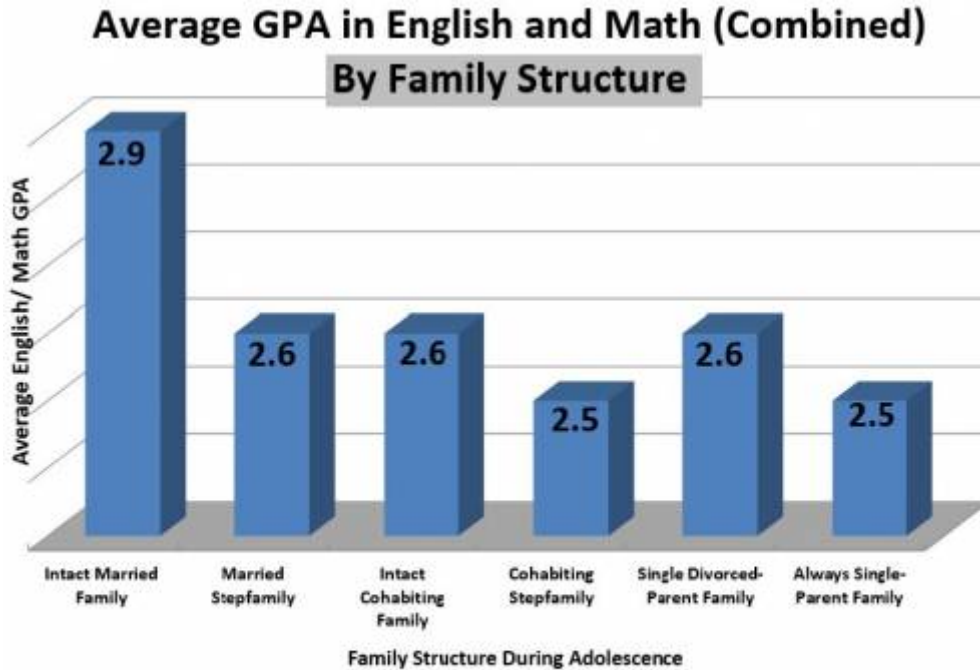
Elementary school children from [intact biological families](#) earn higher reading and math test scores than children in cohabiting, [divorced](#)-single, and always-single parent families.<sup>3)</sup> Adolescents from non-intact families have lower scores than their counterparts in intact married families on math, science, history, and reading tests.<sup>4)</sup> Adolescents living in [intact married families](#) or married stepfamilies (with stepfathers) performed similarly on the Peabody Vocabulary Test, but adolescents living in single-mother families or in cohabiting stepfamilies (with their biological mother) did worse than those in intact families.<sup>5)</sup>

Adolescents from single-parent families and cohabiting families are more likely to have low achievement scores, lower expectations for college, lower grades, and higher dropout rates than children from intact biological families (after controlling for other family socioeconomic factors).<sup>6)</sup>

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 with neither parent present.<sup>7)</sup> Students from disrupted families are less likely to complete four-year college than their peers from intact biological families.<sup>8)</sup>

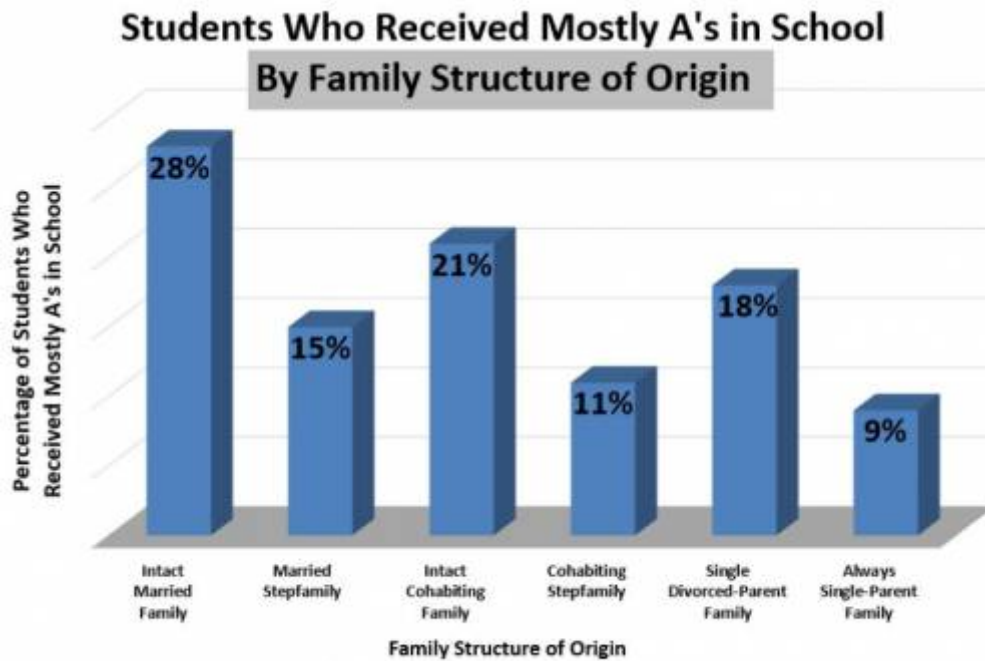
## 2.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Waves I and II), high school students who live in intact married families have a higher average combined GPA in English and Math (2.9) than those in married stepfamilies, divorced families, or intact cohabiting families (2.6) and those in always single parent families or cohabiting stepfamilies (2.5).<sup>9)</sup> (See [Chart](#))



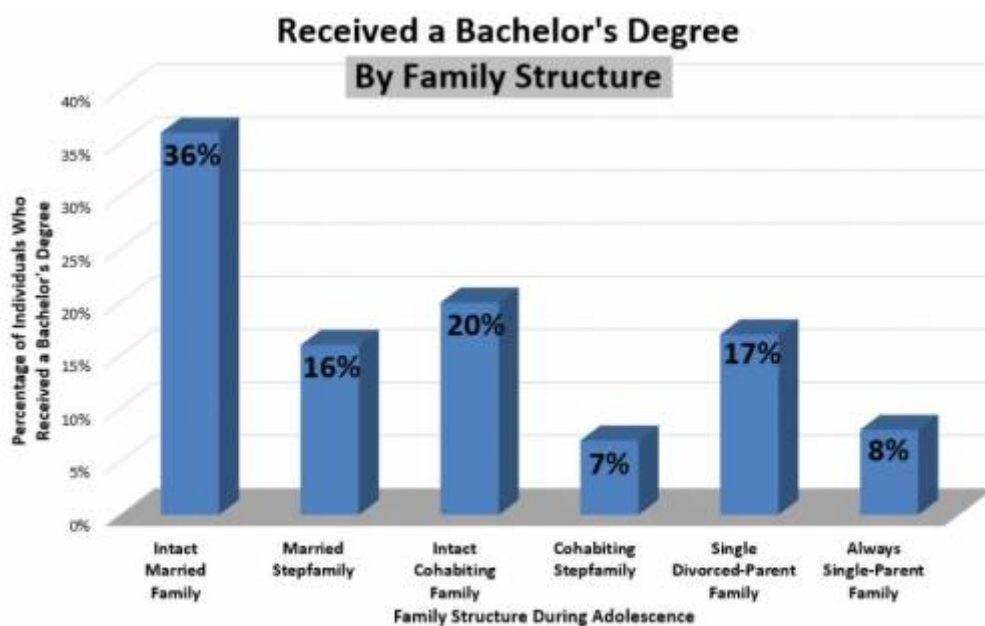
Source: Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson, and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America*, The Heritage Foundation, 2006, chart 10, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Based on the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 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>10)</sup> (See [Chart](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997)

Similarly, 36 percent of individuals who came from intact, married families received a Bachelor's degree, followed by those from intact, cohabiting families (20 percent), single divorced-parent families (17 percent), married stepfamilies (16 percent), always-single parent families (8 percent), and cohabiting stepfamilies (7 percent).<sup>11)</sup> (See [Chart Below](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997)

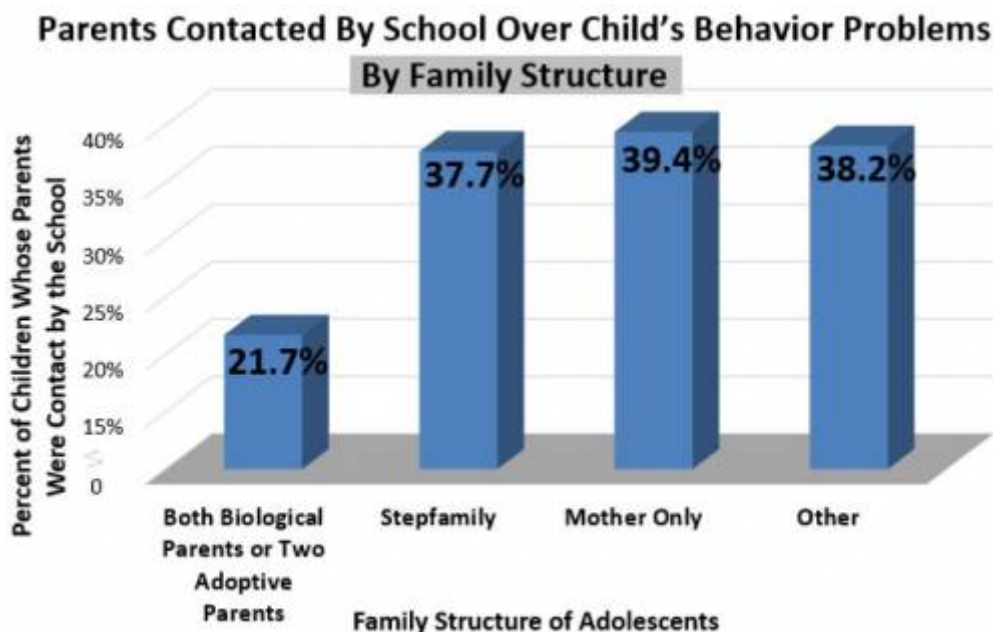
### 3. School Behavior

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>12)</sup> Adolescents in single-parent families, married stepfamilies, or cohabiting stepfamilies are more likely than adolescents in intact married families to have ever been suspended or expelled from school, to have participated in delinquent activities, and to have problems getting along with teachers, doing

homework, and paying attention in school.<sup>13)</sup> 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>14)</sup> Adolescents who live in blended families and stepfamilies are less positively engaged in school than are adolescents from intact biological families.<sup>15)</sup> Compared to adolescents from intact married families, those from **divorced families** and cohabiting families have many more unexcused absences and skip more classes.<sup>16)</sup> Students from stepfamilies and single-parent families are three times as likely to drop out of school as students from intact biological families, even when controlling for socioeconomic status.<sup>17)</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>18)</sup> Sixty-nine 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>19)</sup> One study revealed that children born to married mothers are nearly two times more likely to finish high school than **children born to unmarried mothers**.<sup>20)</sup>

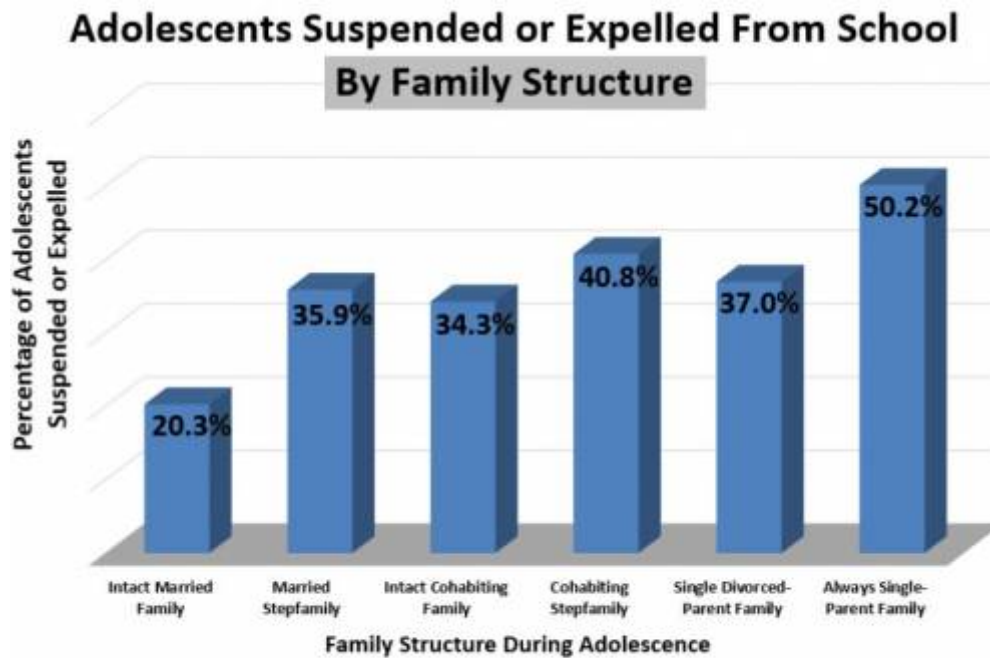
### 3.1 Related American Demographics

The National Survey of Children’s Health shows that children who live with both biological parents or with two **adoptive parents** are less likely to have their school report behavior problems to their parents than are children who live in households that do not include both parents.<sup>21)</sup> (See [Chart](#))



Source: National Survey of Children’s Health (2003)

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).<sup>22)</sup> (See [Chart Below](#))



Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Adolescents Grades 7-12.

## 4. Parental Impact on Education

The adolescent children of single-parent families or stepfamilies reported that their parents had lower educational expectations for them, were less likely to monitor schoolwork, and supervised social activities less than the parents of children in intact biological families.<sup>23)</sup>

**Divorce** and traumatic life-events impact the likelihood that a child will finish high school. One study found that children who experienced marital dissolution before they were 18 years old had a significantly lower chance of finishing high school than children in intact families. Also, the younger the child was at the time of his or her parents' divorce, the less of a chance that they would graduate.<sup>24)</sup>

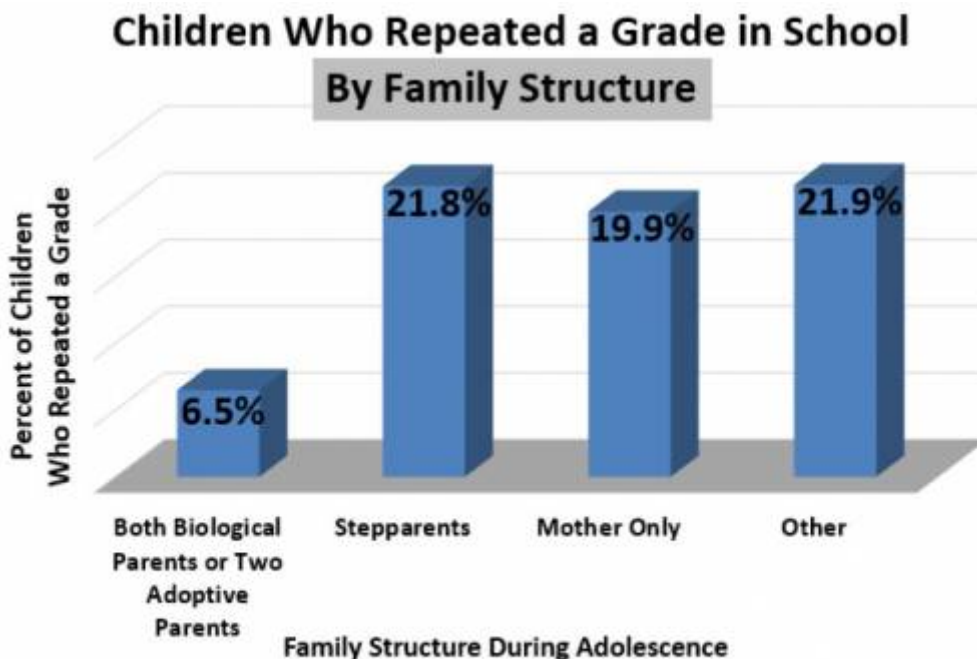
Whereas 31.3 percent of sons and 26.7 percent of daughters from intact biological families plan to get a college degree, 42.4 percent of sons and 35.9 percent of daughters in single-parent families do not plan to get a college degree.<sup>25)</sup> Sixty percent of mothers in intact married families expected their child to graduate college, compared to 40 percent of mothers in cohabiting stepfamilies and 36 percent of always-single mothers.<sup>26)</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>27)</sup>

The intact biological family facilitates parental involvement in adolescent children's education.<sup>28)</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>29)</sup>

### 4.1 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>30)</sup> (See [Chart](#))



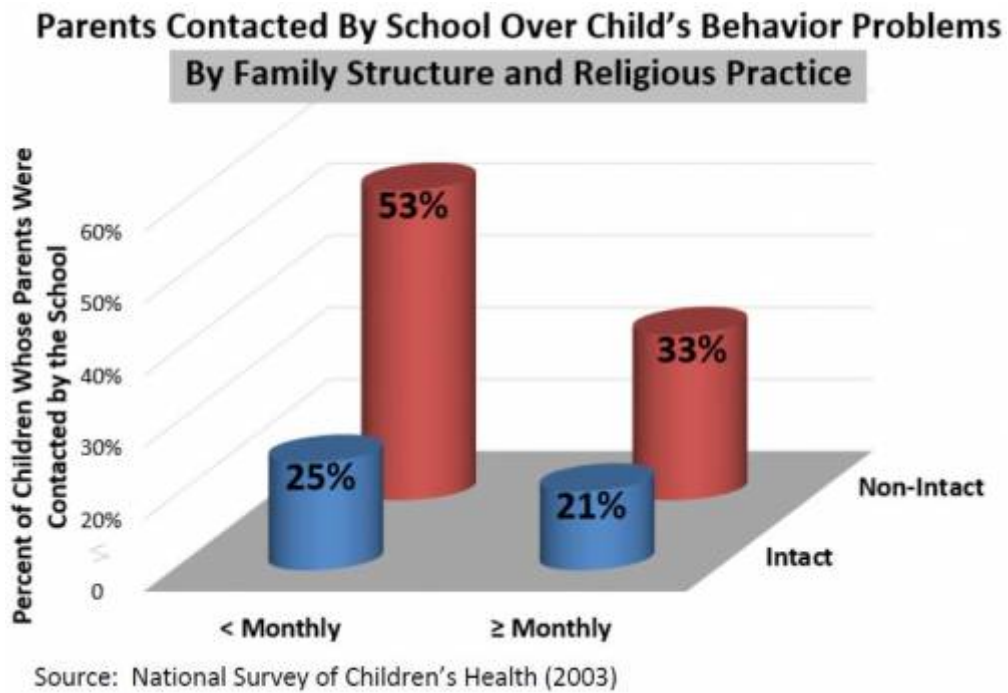
Source: National Center for Health Statistics in the National Survey of Children's Health (2003)

## 5. Family Religious Practice

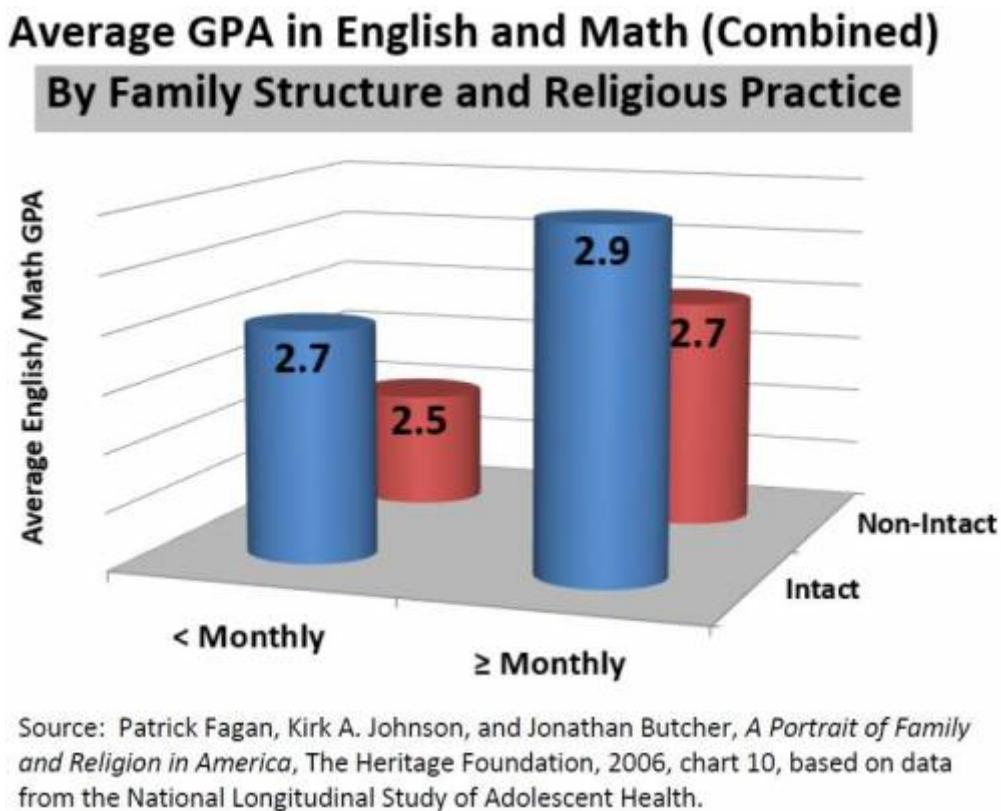
Children in intact married families are more likely to worship regularly.<sup>31)</sup> First-graders and kindergartners whose parents [attend religious services](#) are less likely to experience anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness.<sup>32)</sup> Compared to children whose parents did not attend church at all, children whose parents attended church services exhibited more self-control while under parental supervision in their homes.<sup>33)</sup> For children from families in poverty, regular weekly worship has profound positive effects on their [educational attainment](#).<sup>34)</sup> Adolescents who attend church regularly tend to complete more years of school.<sup>35)</sup>

### 5.1 Related American Demographics

The National Survey of Children's Health showed that only 21 percent of children who worship frequently and live with both biological parents or with two adoptive parents are the object of their school reporting behavior problems to parents, compared to a much larger 53 percent of children who worship less than monthly and live in single-parent or reconstituted families.<sup>36)</sup> (See [Chart](#))

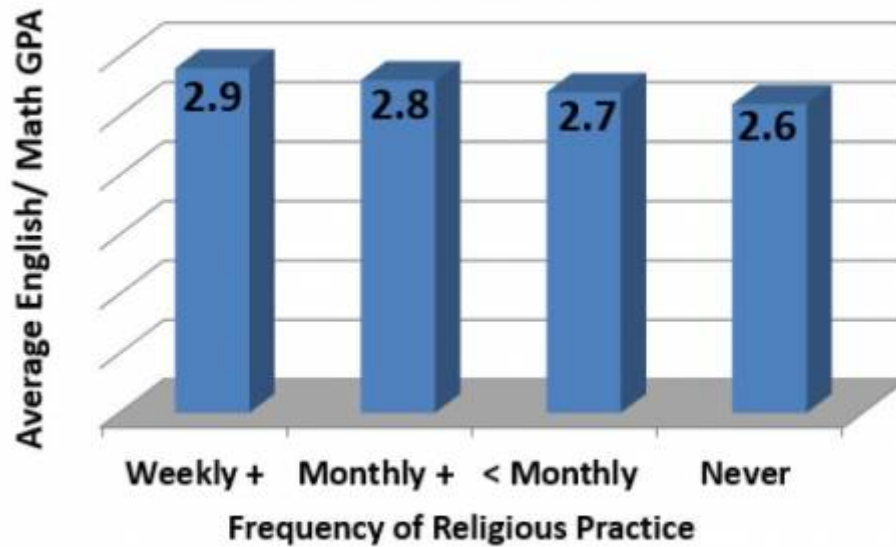


According to National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, teenagers in intact married families who attend religious services weekly or more than monthly have a higher combined English and math GPA (2.9) than those in non-intact families who attend religious services monthly or never (2.5).<sup>37)</sup> (See [Chart](#) Below)



The National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health also showed that teenagers who attend religious activities weekly or more had the highest average combined GPA for English and Math (2.9).<sup>38)</sup> (See [Chart](#) Below)

## Average GPA in English and Math (Combined) By Religious Practice



Source: Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson, and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America*, The Heritage Foundation, 2006, chart 20, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

## 6. Family Socioeconomic Status

Intact married families are **stronger economically**.<sup>39)</sup> Infants and toddlers from higher-income families are more likely to master age-appropriate cognitive and language skills than those from lower-income families.<sup>40)</sup> Intact biological families tend to have **larger incomes**,<sup>41)</sup> which affects the neighborhoods in which families can afford to live<sup>42)</sup> and thereby the quality and resources of the schools their children will attend. Intact biological families save earlier and more for (and expect to spend more to support) their children's first year in college.<sup>43)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> A positive correlation exists when, as one variable decreases, the other variable also decreases, and vice versa.

<sup>2)</sup> See Table 2 in Henry Potrykus and Patrick Fagan, "U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family," (January 2013). Available at <http://marri.us/research/research-papers/u-s-social-policy-dependence-on-the-family/> for a list of the controls and other methodological considerations.

<sup>3)</sup> David J. Armor, *Maximizing Intelligence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 80.

<sup>4)</sup> Youngmin Sun and Yuanzhang Li, "Parents' Marital Disruption and Its Uneven Effect on Children's Academic Performance- A Simulation Model," *Social Science Research* 37, (2008): 456.

<sup>5)</sup> Wendy Manning and Kathleen Lamb, "Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, (2003): 876-893.

<sup>6)</sup>, <sup>42)</sup> Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 79.

<sup>7)</sup>, <sup>18)</sup> Gary D. Sandefur, Sara McLanahan, and Roger A. Wojtkiewicz, "The Effects of Parental Marital Status during Adolescence on High School Graduation," *Social Forces* 71, no. 1 (1992): 112.

<sup>8)</sup> Michele Ver Ploeg, "Children from Disrupted Families as Adults: Family Structure, College Attendance and College Completion," *Economics of Education Review* 21, no. 2 (2002): 174.



- <sup>9)</sup> 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  
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. As cited by Patrick F. Fagan, "Family Structure and School Performance of U.S. High School Students." Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-1-3-149.pdf>. Accessed 12 September 2011.
- <sup>10)</sup> Patrick F. Fagan and Scott Talkington, "Likely to Receive Mostly A's by Structure of Family of Origin and by Current Religious Attendance," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-100.pdf>
- <sup>11)</sup> Patrick F. Fagan and Scott Talkington, "'Ever Received a Bachelor's Degree' by Current Religious Attendance and Structure of Family of Origin," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-105.pdf>
- <sup>12)</sup> Shannon E. Cavanagh and Aletha C. Houston, "Family Instability and Children's Early Problem Behavior," *Social Forces* 85, no. 1 (2006): 551-581.
- <sup>13)</sup> Wendy Manning and Kathleen Lamb, "Adolescent Well-Being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, (2003): 876-893. Thomas L. Hanson, "Does Parental Conflict Explain Why Divorce Is Negatively Associated with Child Welfare?" *Social Forces* 77, no. 4 (1999): 1304-1035.
- <sup>14)</sup> 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.
- <sup>15)</sup> 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.
- <sup>16)</sup> Barry D. Ham, "The Effects of Divorce on the Academic Achievement of High School Seniors," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 38, no. 3 (2003): 180.
- <sup>17)</sup> Herbert Zimiles and Valerie E. Lee, "Adolescent Family Structure and Educational Progress," *Developmental Psychology* 27, no. 2 (1991): 314-320.
- <sup>19)</sup> Dean Lillard and Jennifer Gerner, "Getting to the Ivy League: How Family Composition Affects College Choice," *The Journal of Higher Education* 70, no. 6 (1999): 714-715.
- <sup>20)</sup> Sharon Sassler, Kristi Williams, Fenaba Renae Addo, Adrienne M. Frech, & Elizabeth C. Cooksey, "Family Structure and High School Graduation: How Children Born to Unmarried Mothers Fare," *Genus [Online]* 69, no. 2 (2013).
- <sup>21)</sup> 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, "Parents Contacted by School about Their Children's Behavior Problems and Family Structure," Mapping America Project. Available <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-52-54-166.pdf>
- <sup>22)</sup> 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," Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-19-21-155.pdf>
- <sup>23)</sup> Nan M. Astone and Sara S. McLanahan, "Family Structure, Parental Practices, and High School Completion," *American Sociological Review* 56, (1991): 309-320.
- <sup>24)</sup> Lisa Stroschein, Noralou Roos, and Marni Brownell, "Family Structure Histories and High School Completion: Evidence From A Population Based Registry," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2009): 83-104
- <sup>25)</sup> Rashmi Garg, Stella Melanson, and Elizabeth Levin, "Educational Aspirations of Male and Female Adolescents from Single-Parent and Two Biological Parent Families: A Comparison of Influential

Factors," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, (2007): 1010-1023.

<sup>26)</sup> Kelly R. Raley, Michelle L. Frisco, and Elizabeth Wildsmith, "Maternal Cohabitation and Educational Success," *Sociology of Education* 78, no. 2 (2005): 151.

<sup>27)</sup> Rashmi Garg, Stella Melanson, and Elizabeth Levin, "Educational Aspirations of Male and Female Adolescents from Single-Parent and Two Biological Parent Families: A Comparison of Influential Factors," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, no. 8 (2007): 1017.

<sup>28)</sup> Sabry M. Abd-El-Fattah, "Effects of Family Background and Parental Involvement on Egyptian Adolescents' Academic Achievement and School Disengagement: A Structural Equation Modelling Analysis," *Social Psychology of Education* 9, (2006): 153.

<sup>29)</sup> Suet-Ling Pong, "Family Structure, School Context, and Student Achievement," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59, no. 3 (1997): 741.

<sup>30)</sup> 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://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-40-42-162.pdf>

<sup>31)</sup> Note: Repeated sample data in Mapping America charts from different national surveys, including the General Social Survey, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the National Survey of Family Growth, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, bears this out.

<sup>32)</sup> , <sup>33)</sup> John P. Bartkowski, Xiaohe Xu, and Martin L. Levin, "Religion and Child Development: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study," *Social Science Research* 37, no. 1 (2007): 18-36.

<sup>34)</sup> Mark D. Regnerus, "Staying on track in School: Religious Influences in High- and Low-Risk Settings," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 646.

<sup>35)</sup> Linda D. Loury, "Does Church Attendance Really Increase Schooling?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (2004): 119-127.

<sup>36)</sup> 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, "Parents Contacted by School about Their Children's Behavior Problems, Religious Attendance, and Family Structure," Mapping America Project. Available at

<http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-52-54-166.pdf>

<sup>37)</sup> 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.

National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. As cited by Patrick F. Fagan, "Religious Attendance, Family Structure, and School Performance of U.S. High School Students." Available at

<http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-1-3-149.pdf>. Accessed 12 September 2011.

<sup>38)</sup> Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson and Jonathan Butcher, "A Portrait of Family and Religion in America," The Heritage Foundation, (2006). Chart 20, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Patrick F. Fagan, "Religious Attendance and School Performance of U.S. High School Students," Mapping America Project available at <http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/MA-1-3-149.pdf>

<sup>39)</sup> Patrick F. Fagan, Andrew Kidd, and Henry Potrykus, "Marriage and Economic Well-Being: The Economy of the Family Rises or Falls with Marriage." Available at

<http://marri.us/research/research-papers/marriage-and-economic-well-being-the-economy-of-the-famil>

[y-rises-or-falls-with-marriage/](#). Accessed 16 September 2011.

<sup>40)</sup> Tamara Halle, et al., *Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)* Washington, DC: Child Trends 2009, 4-5. Available at [http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child\\_Trends-2009\\_07\\_10\\_FR\\_DisparitiesEL.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2009_07_10_FR_DisparitiesEL.pdf). Accessed 19 September 2011.

<sup>41)</sup> Adam Thomas, and Isabel Sawhill, "For Love and Money? the Impact of Family Structure on Family Income," *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>43)</sup> Kevin Zvoch, "Family Type and Investment in Education: A Comparison of Genetic and Stepparent Families," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 20, (1999): 459.

This entry draws heavily from [Marriage, Family Structure, and Children's Educational Attainment](#) and [U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family](#).

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