

# rural new york minute

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## Are Both Parents Always Better Than One? Parental Conflict and Young Adult Well-Being.\*

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### What is the Issue?

Growing up without both parents is associated with a host of poor child outcomes, such as higher poverty rates and lower levels of educational and occupational attainment. Compared to children living with their married, biological parents, children in single-parent and stepparent families also report greater substance use and risk-taking behavior, such as smoking, drinking, and drug use. They are more likely to have sex at an early age, to be young and unmarried when they form their families, and to experience the dissolution of their own romantic relationships.

Most work on families and the well-being of children treat married, two-parent families as the baseline against which other family types are compared. But this masks differences *within* married-parent families. In particular, studies show that children whose parents often argue fare worse than those whose parents get along. But how do children living with married parents who frequently argue fare compare to children living with single-parents or stepparents?

### How we conducted the study

We compare child outcomes across single-parent, stepparent, and high conflict married-parent families. We examine a range of outcomes covering various dimensions of children's development and well-being in young adulthood. Our work relies on new data from the National Survey of Families and Households (N=1,963), which includes prospective data from multiple members of the same family over time.

We examine indicators of young adult well-being in the areas of schooling (high school dropout, poor grades, no college), substance use (smoking, binge drinking, marijuana use), and family-related transitions (first sex by age 16, cohabitation by age 21, nonmarital childbearing, and relationship dissolution). Changes in these domains mark the transition into adulthood, and their timing and sequencing are important for success later in life. We relate children's adolescent family experiences to these outcomes, which are assessed when children are in their teens to early thirties.

### What we found

Our results clearly illustrate that the advantages of living with two continuously married parents are not shared equally by all children. Children from high conflict families (compared to low conflict families) have an increased likelihood of 8 of 10 of our outcomes: dropping out of school, poor grades, smoking, binge drinking, marijuana use, early sex, non-marital fertility, and union dissolution (see Table 1). Parental conflict appears not to be associated with college attendance or early cohabitation. For half of our outcomes, associations with parental conflict are statistically indistinguishable from those with stepparent and single mother-families. Differences *are* signifi-

cant in five cases: dropping out of school, not attending college, binge drinking, early sex, and early cohabitation. In these cases, except for binge drinking, the risks associated with high conflict are between 25-50% *lower* than those associated with stepparent or single-mother families. The odds of binge drinking are about a third *higher* for children from high conflict families compared to single-mother families.

**Table 1: Averages on key outcomes, by family type.**

| Outcomes             | All  | Continuously Married |                 |               | Stepfather | Single |
|----------------------|------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|--------|
|                      |      | Low conflict         | Medium conflict | High conflict |            |        |
| High school dropout  | 0.12 | 0.06                 | 0.08            | 0.12          | 0.19       | 0.25   |
| Poor grades          | 0.22 | 0.18                 | 0.18            | 0.24          | 0.23       | 0.28   |
| No college           | 0.37 | 0.31                 | 0.32            | 0.34          | 0.46       | 0.52   |
| Smoking              | 0.31 | 0.24                 | 0.27            | 0.33          | 0.38       | 0.38   |
| Binge drinking       | 0.35 | 0.29                 | 0.38            | 0.42          | 0.32       | 0.32   |
| Marijuana use        | 0.24 | 0.20                 | 0.24            | 0.25          | 0.29       | 0.25   |
| Early sex            | 0.20 | 0.15                 | 0.14            | 0.22          | 0.29       | 0.28   |
| Early cohabitation   | 0.20 | 0.14                 | 0.17            | 0.17          | 0.31       | 0.34   |
| Nonmarital fertility | 0.09 | 0.06                 | 0.07            | 0.10          | 0.15       | 0.16   |
| Union disruption     | 0.40 | 0.32                 | 0.38            | 0.41          | 0.43       | 0.57   |

Source: National Survey of Families and Households (N=1,963)\*.

### Conclusions

Should parents stay together for the sake of the children? While children tend to fare better with both married parents, we find that high conflict married, stepparent, and single-mother families are more similar than different in the outcomes examined and, where there are differences, they are not uniformly in one direction. The findings are consistent with recent research that shows that although marriage confers benefits to adults on average, those in poor quality marriages are no better off than the single and, indeed, may fare worse on some measures. But how parents manage disagreement may be a key factor in children's perceptions of conflict and thus how they are affected by conflict. Incorporating, for example, how often disagreements become angry and violent, or how often parents reach resolutions or offer reassurances to children, may lead to better estimates of the associations between parental conflict and child well-being. We conclude with the perhaps obvious point that marriage is not a blanket prescription for the well-being of children, any more than it is for the well-being of adults. Recent policy initiatives to promote marriage need to take account of how variation within marriage relates to child well-being. ▲

\*Please visit <http://papers.cpr.ucla.edu/papers/PWP-CCPR-2008-022/PWP-CCPR-2008-022.pdf> for the full report including citations and references

