

## Family Structure's Impact on Children's Development

The case for marriage education is being based upon research that draws the conclusion that children have better outcomes when growing up in a family of two married biological parents in a nonconflictual relationship (Parke & Ooms, 2002). Today about two-thirds of children are living with two married, biological parents (Parke, 2003). If the child is living with biological parents in a middle class context in which adequate financial resources are available to support their health and development, that child has the best of all worlds to foster development.

However, frequently comparisons are made between children growing up in the ideal of the biological two parent family with other forms of families. To accurately draw conclusions concerning the influence that family structure has upon children's development, appropriate comparisons of groups of children with the same family structure need to be made, such as two-biological married parents versus two-biological parents cohabitating, stepfamilies married versus stepfamilies cohabitating (Hoselter & Stauffer, 2002). Not only is the family structure of importance, but also the socioeconomic family context. Poor families face stresses that impact their adult relationship decisions and their children's development that middle class families typically do not.

When accurate comparisons are made it appears that biological parentage rather than marital status is more important in determining child well-being (Manning, 2002). When the focus of the discussion of the impact of children's well-being shifts to the impact that growing up with one's biological parents has upon their overall development, clearer comparisons can be made. Overall, children growing up with biological parents whether married or cohabitating, fare the same in terms of school achievement and behavior problems (Hoselter & Stauffer, 2002). Even in families where both biological parents are present children experience poor outcomes in high conflict family environments. High conflict family contexts lower children's emotional well-being and increase behavior problems (Parke, 2003).

Of equal importance is the impact that the parent's race and education make upon the outcomes of their children's development. Low income black women embrace marriage less frequently than Hispanic and Caucasian women (Edin, 2000). Poor women move away from marriage because of affordability, respectability, trust and control (Coley, 2002). Low-income women define a man's marriage acceptability based upon his employment and economic stability, ability to trust his sexual fidelity and level of responsibility with children as precursors to marriage (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2003). For many women cohabitation affords them greater control that they believe they will lose through marriage.

The outcomes for children growing up in single parent families are less positive. Children being raised in single parent families appear to be the most affected by their family structure. Frequently, single parents are poor, have less education than cohabitating and married parents, and less likely to be employed (Parke, 2003). The outcomes for

children raised in a single parent household are: that academic achievement declines, emotional and behavioral problems increase (Manning, 2002). However, caution needs to be taken to not generalize to the total population of single parent families. Most children in single parent families will not experience these negative outcomes (Parke, 2003). Many unmarried parents are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children. Lacking the financial resources and parenting skills increases the likelihood that children will experience some difficulty in development (Osborne, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

More and more children are living in stepfamilies. The transition that children experience in moving from one family context and structure to another creates stress and may lead to poor outcomes. In spite of better economic circumstances on average, children in stepfamilies are more likely to have negative behavior, health and educational outcomes (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). These risk factors increase the poorer a child is and with the increase in the number of transitions to new family situations (Morrison & Ritualo, 2000).

The outcomes for children's development are influenced by the family structure in which they grow up. However, one's family structure does not guarantee negative or positive outcomes. The family's stability may be the most significant determinant. The effect of living with two biological parents in a stable cohabitating family versus a married family seems to indicate that there are many factors beyond those of the parental relationship that come into play to produce positive and negative outcomes for children. However, as cohabitating unions continue to increase more effort needs to be expended to determine ways to support positive development of children no matter what their family structure.

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