

Healthy Mothers, Healthy Families: How Mothers Are Crucial to the Success of the Family

Social science research consistently demonstrates the crucial role that the mother plays in the well-being of her children and family. Recent studies highlight how mothers' parenting, relationship status and stability, and own well-being are correlated with the welfare of their families.

■ **Quality time with young children.** In general, it appears that mothers are spending more time with their children. According to one study, between 1981 and 1997, the proportion of weekly time that mothers spent with their children increased from 25.4 percent to 31.5 percent as mothers allocated less time to household work and leisure even as they increased work time. The main increase in time was experienced among mothers with young children (younger than age six), particularly in their quality time together, caring for and engaging in activities with them. The study also found that married mothers, particularly mothers with young children, tended to spend more quality time with their children than did unwed mothers.¹

■ **Parent-child relationship and reading and math achievement scores.** A 2011 study that examined children's achievement data from ages five to 14 found that several home and mother-child relationship factors were linked to their reading and math achievement.

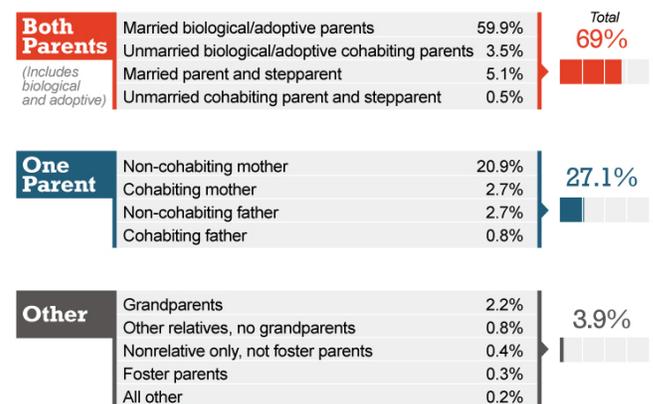
Mother's involvement was linked to children's academic success. For example, children who tended to score higher on reading and math achievement tests did not perceive that their mothers missed a lot of important events in their lives; reported that their mothers knew their whereabouts when they were not home; and lived in higher-quality home environments as measured by the number of books in the house, availability of newspapers to the family, trips to museums and theaters, positive and nurturing communication between mother and child, and the home's physical condition.²

FACT:

Despite recent decline, two-thirds of children live with married parents

About 60 percent of all children live with two married biological or adoptive parents. More than a quarter live with only one parent.

CHILDREN'S LIVING ARRANGEMENTS IN 2011



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey; and America's Children: Key Indicators of National Wellbeing, 2011.

Recent studies also confirm earlier research that shows how mother–father relationship quality and, in particular, marital status and stability as well as mother’s religious involvement may significantly affect children’s well-being through childhood.

- **Parental relationship quality and parental engagement with young children.** Using data representative of parents and children born in the late 1990s in large U.S. cities, a 2011 study analyzed the relationship between parents’ relationship quality and their engagement with their young children. It found that, for mothers, the quality of their relationships with the fathers was correlated with their parenting in the first three years of their children’s lives, particularly how they engaged with their children: for example, how often they read and told stories, played games, played with toys, and sang songs or rhymes with them. Specifically, the research showed that it was the parents’ relationship quality that tended to affect how mothers engage with their young children, rather than the mother–child interaction affecting the parents’ relationship. This association diminished over time when the children were preschoolers.³
- **Mother’s religious attendance and low birth weight.** Among a nationally representative sample of mothers and children born in large U.S. cities, mothers who attended religious services more frequently were less likely to give birth to babies with low birth weight. Each unit increase in religious service attendance was associated with a 15-percent reduction in the likelihood of low birth weight.

In contrast, the study found that mothers with mental health problems and those who smoked cigarettes were more likely to give birth to low-birth-weight babies. In particular, it appeared that the link between religious attendance and reduced likelihood of low birth weight was partially explained by the negative correlation between religious service attendance and maternal smoking.⁴

- **Marriage and early literacy skills.** Among children born to never-married mothers, by age four, those whose mothers later married tended to show higher levels of literacy skills than peers whose mothers lived unmarried with their biological fathers. This correlation between marriage and higher literacy skills was associated in part with household income. Married families tended to have higher incomes compared to cohabiting families, even biological ones.

The study found that mothers’ psychological well-being and engagement with their children were also correlated with early literacy skills. Children of mothers who indicated fewer depressive symptoms tended to show higher levels of literacy, as did children of mothers who frequently engaged them in cognitively stimulating activities such as reading stories and singing songs. Among never-married mothers, those who married after giving birth tended to provide more cognitive stimulation to their young children.⁵

- **Early mother transitions and adolescent schooling.** The stability of mother’s presence in the home during the early years (before age six) was

1 Ana I. Moro-Eglio, “Changing Trends of Mothers’ Active and Passive Childcare Times,” *Journal of Family Economic Issues*, Vol. 33, Issue 1 (March 2012), pp. 11–23.

2 Wen-Jui Han and Liana E. Fox, “Parental Work Schedules, and Children’s Cognitive Trajectories,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 962–980.

3 Marcia Carlson, Natasha V. Pilkauskas, Sara S. McLanahan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “Couples as Partners and Parents Over Children’s Early Years,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 317–334.

4 Amy M. Burdette, Janet Weeks, Terrence D. Hill, and Isaac W. Eberstein, “Maternal Religious Attendance and Low Birth Weight,” *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 74, No. 12 (June 2012), pp. 1961–1967.

5 Jay Fagan, “Effects on Preschoolers’ Literacy When Never-Married Mothers Get Married,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (October 2012), pp. 1001–1014.

significantly related to children's later schooling outcomes. Early transitions in mother's presence were associated with teens' lower GPAs, lower expectations of going to college, and greater likelihood of being suspended or expelled from school.⁶

■ **Family structure, mothers' parenting and characteristics, and teen substance use.**

Compared to teens in intact (married, biological) families, peers in married stepfamilies or in single-mother families had 34 percent greater likelihood of smoking, and those in cohabiting stepfamilies had 97 percent greater likelihood of smoking. The increased likelihood of drinking or doing both were similar, comparing teens in non-intact families to those in intact families.

Differences in mothers' parenting and own smoking and drinking behavior varied by mothers' marital status, which appeared to account for some of the association between family structure and teen smoking and drinking. Moreover, the study found that teens who reported feeling closer to their mothers or teen children of mothers who exercised greater control were less likely to smoke or drink or do both. Not surprisingly, when mothers smoked or drank or did both, their teens were more likely to smoke, drink, or do both as well.⁷

■ **Mothers' relationship stability, parenting, and adolescent behavioral issues.** A recent study examined the stability of mothers' union status and parenting quality and their impact on adolescent behavior among urban, low-income families.

It found that the stability of mothers' marriages mattered. Compared to adolescents in intact married families since birth, adolescent children of initially unmarried biological parents who later married and had been married for at least two years, as well as those with mothers who recently married, tended to exhibit more delinquent behavior and tended to act out more.

The study also found that maternal psychological distress was correlated with adolescents' psychological distress levels, poorer emotional well-being, and behavioral problems. Additionally, adolescent children of mothers who reported feeling more stressed about being parents were more likely to exhibit delinquent behavior, poorer emotional well-being, and behavior problems. Regularly engaging in family-strengthening activities, however, was linked to lower levels of adolescent delinquency and behavioral problems.

Importantly, family structure and stability were associated with mothers' parenting qualities that correlate with adolescents' behavior outcomes. Always-married mothers were, on average, less financially strained, more regular in engaging in positive family activities, less stressed about parenting, less distressed psychologically, and less harsh in their punishment toward children, compared with mothers who remained in cohabiting relationships.⁸

■ **Adolescent family environment and non-marital teen birth.** The intact family appears to protect teens from becoming unwed parents. In one study

6 Holly Heard, "Fathers, Mothers, and Family Structure: Family Trajectories, Parent Gender, and Adolescent Schooling," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (May 2007), pp. 435-450.

7 Susan L. Brown and Lauren N. Rinelli, "Family Structure, Family Processes, and Adolescent Smoking and Drinking," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 259-273.

8 Heather Bachman, Rebekah Levine Coley, and Jennifer Carrano, "Low-Income Mothers' Patterns of Partnership Instability and Adolescents' Socioemotional Well-Being," *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April 2012), pp. 263-273.

of adolescents born to teen mothers, those who lived with their mothers and biological fathers at age 14 had reduced likelihood of themselves becoming teenage parents, compared to those who just lived with their mothers.⁹

Though decades of social science research indicates that children tend to do best when raised in intact married families, children increasingly are growing up without the presence of their own married mother and father. As one leading national family scholar notes, “perhaps the most profound change in the American family over the past four decades has been the decline in the share of children growing up in households with both biological parents.”¹⁰ Rising unwed childbearing and cohabiting have contributed significantly to this growing trend. Today, more than four in 10 children

born are born to unwed mothers, and nearly one in two children will spend some time with mothers in cohabitating relationships.¹¹

As the research demonstrates, mothers are crucial to the well-being of their children. Their own well-being, behavior, and parenting can have a significant impact throughout their children’s childhood on a host of outcomes. Importantly, the research suggests that both mothers and children are affected by the presence and engagement of fathers in the home. Moreover, parents’ marital status and the duration of their relationship seem to matter for the entire family. Parents and children are most likely to thrive in always-married intact families.

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- 9 Elizabeth Wildsmith, Jennifer Manlove, Susan Jekielek, Kristin Anderson Moore, and Lisa Mincieli, “Teenage Childbearing Among Youth Born to Teenage Mothers,” *Youth & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (June 2012), pp. 258–283.
- 10 Paul Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” *The Future of Children*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 75–96.
- 11 Sheela Kennedy and Larry L. Bumpass, “Cohabitation and Children’s Living Arrangements: New Estimates from the United States,” *Demographic Research*, Vol. 19 (July–December 2008), pp. 1663–1692.



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