

Cohabitation

Part 2 of 2

Part 2 - Effects of parental cohabitation and other non-marital sex on children

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Effects of non-marital sexual activity involve not just the children who may be conceived through it, but also involve children who were born in prior relationships (marital or non-marital) and future children born after the current relationship either dissolves or progresses to marriage, as well as the children of those children and continuing future generations. The divorce or separation of a couple (and divorce or separation is more common when the couple has a history of non-marital sex including cohabitation) may even affect their nieces and nephews or their children's friends who then worry that their own parents will separate. Compared to couples married at the birth of a child, those cohabiting at the child's birth were more than four times as likely to separate in the following three years (Table 1). The increased risk varied from double among African-Americans, to triple among Mexican-Americans to nearly 8-fold among European-Americans.

Table 1. Cumulative Percent of Unions Ending in Separation or Divorce by 36 months after Child's Birth by Union Status at Child's Birth and Race or Ethnicity¹

Married vs Cohabiting	All Races Combined	White	Black	Mexican American
Married at birth (n = 886)	11.1%	5.8%	27.2%	9.3%
Cohabiting at birth (n = 1,363)	48.7%	45.4%	57.4%	28.8%
Total (n = 2,249)	23.1%	10.9%	43.9%	15.6%

Note: Results based on life-table estimates. Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

The literature often does not differentiate between children living with a divorced or unmarried parent or whether or not the unmarried parents/parent-stepparent are cohabiting or living separately. Looking at it from a child's perspective, the proportion of children born to married parents is steadily decreasing and the rate of parental separation (combining separation of cohabiting parents and divorce of married parents) is steadily increasing. There is no evidence that separation of cohabiting parents is less traumatic to a child than is divorce. Because children whose parents cohabited before, during, or after their birth are at increased risk to experience parental separation and also a stepparent (married or cohabiting) situation, information on the risks to children in all of these situations will be included.² The effects of non-marital sex on children can roughly be grouped into the following areas: Mortality and physical morbidity; psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems; educational; poverty; and repeating the cycle.

Incidence

One-third of men and women entering into cohabitation have children from a previous relationship³ and many have children while cohabiting. The number of cohabiting women who become pregnant is rising. By 2006, 19% of all cohabitations led to pregnancy within the first year, as did 25% of those involving teenagers. Only 19% of those who became pregnant while cohabiting married within six months of becoming pregnant, and even among college graduates, less than half did.^{4,5} According to a study of U.S. women who had a stillbirth from 2006-2008, less than half of the mothers were married, more than a quarter were cohabiting, and a quarter were neither,⁶ up from 11% of women between 1990 and 1994 who were cohabiting at the time of giving birth.⁷

Numbers

The percent of children living in nuclear families dropped to 47.3% in 2007. This is an underestimate because married parents who had both a child over 18 and younger children living at home were not included in “nuclear families”; children living with their married grandparents were also not included.⁸

Table 2. Incidence of cohabitation and marriage according to age and gender.

Women	Teens 15-17	Teens 18-19	Teens 15-19	20-24	25-29	30-35	35-39	40-44
Currently Cohabiting	0.8%	9.8%		18.7%	16.8%	12.1%	7.8%	7.2%
In first marriage	0.3%	2.1%		17.3%	42.3%	53.7%	55.9%	49.6%
Marriage only			1.5%	12.4%	24.2%	28%	32.4%	37.7%
Cohabitate only			10.9%	28.2%	25%	13.6%	10.4%	5.2%
Premarital cohabit			0.8%	14.6%	33.6%	44.2%	39.8%	33%
Post marital cohabit				0.3%	2.4%	5.4%	11.1%	19.3%
Ever cohabitated			11.7%	43.1%	60.9%	63.2%	61.3%	57.4%
Men								
Currently cohabitating	0.3%	5.5%		15%	19.5%	15%	12.3%	9.4%
In first marriage		0.7%		11.3%	32.8%	50.9%	54.1%	50.2%
Marriage only			QNS	10.4%	21.1%	25.3%	26.4%	25.9%
Cohabit only			5.1%	27.5%	29.8%	17.5%	12.8%	8.9%
Premarital cohabit			0.4%	6.3%	27.6%	42.4%	46.2%	44.3%
Post marital cohabit				QNS	1.1%	2.4%	5.8%	13.3%
Ever cohabitated			5.5%	33.9%	58.5%	62.3%	64.7%	66.5%

In the above table, the rows dividing teens into two age groups came from 2006-2010 data,⁹ whereas those combining the groups came from 2002 data.¹⁰ In all age groups, cohabitation is more common than marriage that does not involve either preceding or subsequent cohabitation, and it is likely that half of the children in the U.S. today are affected by parental cohabitation.

As noted in Part I, children born within a cohabiting relationship are much more likely to experience the separation of their parents. Of children born to cohabiting couples, 48.7% experienced separation of their parents by their third birthday compared to 11.1% of those born to married couples,¹¹ with a third again as many marriages which were preceded by cohabitation and twice as many first cohabitations ending within 10 years compared to marriages not preceded by cohabitation.¹² Mothers who married prior to conception were half as likely to have children by a different father as those who married during pregnancy, and three to four times less likely than those who married several years after that child’s birth or did not marry.¹³ Half of those cohabitating for more than six years had children from a previous relationship. (Children from the current relationship were not included in the report.) Since the average age of those in the study was under 30, presumably most of these children were young.¹⁴

Table 3. Estimated annual number of children born and aborted of unwed and cohabiting parents.

	Unwed pregnancies	Cohabiting
% of all births	40.7% ¹⁵	24.7% ¹⁶
Annual births 2012 (n=3,952,841) ¹⁷	1,608,806 (calculated)	976,350 (calculated)
% of all abortions	85.3% ¹⁸	29.2% ¹⁹
No. of annual abortions 2011 (n=1,058,500) ²⁰	902,900 (calculated)	309,082 (calculated)
Total births + induced abortions per year (N=5,011,041)	2,511,706 (calculated)	1,285,432 (calculated)

*Numbers and percentages used in this table are from the most recent years available (births from 2012, abortions from 2011, and percentages from 2006-2008), so the calculated totals are rough estimates. Since cohabitation is increasing annually, the totals calculated for cohabitation are probably underestimates.

It is estimated that over 2.5 million babies a year are conceived by unwed parents, among whom nearly a million and a half had parents who were cohabiting at the time of abortion or birth. The numbers above do not include spontaneous abortions or ectopic pregnancies or stillbirths; nor do these figures reflect children whose parents married during pregnancy, siblings born prior to cohabitation, or younger siblings born to married couples who had previously cohabited and are also at increased risk of parental separation.

Mortality and Morbidity

As noted above, when a child is conceived outside of marriage, the child can be born or it can be denied further life through abortion. Since nearly 85% of abortions are performed on unmarried women, 29% on cohabiting women, and 14% on married women, abortion is more likely when non-marital sex is involved. The abortion index is the relative risk of abortion for a group of women compared to all women ages 15-44 (control value set at 1.0). A child conceived by a cohabiting woman is at 10 times higher risk of abortion compared to one conceived in marriage (3.46 relative rate/abortion index for cohabiting women compared to 0.34 for married women) Cohabitation is a higher risk factor for abortion (abortion index 3.46) than age (abortion index 2.03 for women aged 20-24, the most prevalent age group) or race (abortion index 2.06 for non-Hispanic African-Americans, the highest risk racial group).²¹ Among women who have ever been pregnant, and who have ever had an abortion, 89% have at some time been in a cohabiting relationship, and 41% have been in three or more cohabiting relationships.²² Direct effects of abortion on children involve death the vast majority of the time. Evidence is overwhelming that abortions are painful to the fetus after 20 weeks, and there is some evidence that abortions may be painful to the younger fetus.²³ Since 1.3% of abortions are done after 20 weeks gestation and 7% are done between 14-20 weeks²⁴, fetal pain is another consequence of abortion. A few babies will survive abortion attempts, and those infants are often left with disabilities. Indirect effects of a previous history of maternal abortion on children conceived later include higher risk of death and disability through early prematurity²⁵ and an increased incidence of the effects of living with a depressed mother^{26,27,28,29} or one who abuses drugs or alcohol.³⁰ There is also a higher incidence of being orphaned at a young age.^{31,32,33,34}

Low birth weight babies were also 1.4 to three times less frequent among mothers who married prior to conception³⁵, mothers under age 16 (Teen moms <16 may not be cohabiting, but their parents are more likely to have been. See the section on “Repeating the cycle” which discusses the increased incidence of adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy among girls raised in families without both biological/adoptive parents) are more likely to give birth to a baby born prematurely with low birth weight³⁶ which can lead to infant death, blindness, deafness, respiratory problems, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, and hyperactivity.³⁷

Children in nuclear families rate about twice as well as children in single households or cohabiting families on many measures: more have dental care and a local physician, and they have less ER visits and have missed less school.³⁸ Married women are twice as likely to breastfeed (60% vs. 30%) and for longer.³⁹

Compared to children living with married biological parents, those whose single parent had a live-in partner had more than eight times the rate of maltreatment overall.⁴⁰

Table 4. Harm Standard According to Family Structure⁴¹

Child lived with (estimated numbers from census 2005-7)	Harm Standard per 1000 children Abuse	Harm Standard per 1000 children Sexual Abuse	Harm Standard per 1000 children Neglect	Harm Standard per 1000 children All maltreatment
Married biological parents	2.9	0.5	4.2	6.8
Cohabiting parents	12.1	2.4	12.6	23.5
Single parent only	10.2	2.4	19.6	28.4
Parent + unmarried partner	33.6	9.9	27	57.2
Other married parents (includes parent and married stepparent)	17.4	4.3	9.3	24.4

Controlling for socioeconomic and other demographic factors, mothers under age 16 at the time of their first birth are more than twice as likely as 20- to 21-year-old mothers to be reported for child neglect or abuse and four times as likely as mothers 22 and older. Children of mothers who were 15 or younger at their first birth were 50% more likely to have a child placed in foster care than women who were 20 to 21 years old; children of women 22 or older at first birth were the least likely to be placed in foster care.⁴²

Single-mother, cohabiting two-parent, and married two-parent families with infants were compared on maternal and infant behavior, Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) scores, and infant's security of attachment. Married mothers and their infants demonstrated more positive behavior and received higher HOME scores when the infant was six and 15 months old than did their cohabiting and single counterparts. Married families were also better off than single and cohabiting families on several demographic, parent personality, financial, and social context measures. Single and cohabiting families were similar across most measures. Selection variables (maternal age, ethnic group, and education) explained much, but not all, of the family structure differences in the mother-infant relationship and the HOME scores.⁴³ The lack of stability in a home with parental separation or divorce can interfere with the development of a secure attachment to a dependable caretaker in infants; this is thought to form the basis for future relationships. Preschool-aged children may regress in development after parental divorce.⁴⁴ Children whose mothers had previous abortions had less supportive home environments (among one- to four-year-olds) and more behavioral problems (among five- to nine-year-olds) than children of women without a history of abortion.⁴⁵

Women in cohabiting relationships are more often depressed than married women. The addition of children increases depression initially (but not long-term) for those cohabiting, but did not affect married women.⁴⁶ After controlling for education, race, and income differences, limiting the evaluation to women who had been in stable relationships for two years still showed more depression among those cohabiting, as well poorer responsiveness ("less sensitivity") to their children's emotional needs.⁴⁷ Children whose mothers are consistently depressed have larger amygdalas (as do children raised in orphanages),⁴⁸ and have increased cortisol responses to stress.⁴⁹ Parental depression has been linked to increased risk of behavior problems, anxiety, depression, academic decline, and social relationship problems.⁵⁰ Compared to children of cohabiting parents, children of married parents are four times less likely to experience separation of their parents in their first three years (49% vs. 11%) and three times less likely to have older half siblings, a situation that leads to increased tension in the home and higher chance of separation.⁵¹ Children whose parents divorce have not only increased risks of physical injuries, disease, hospitalization, somatization, early mortality, increased substance, alcohol and tobacco abuse, increased incidence of obesity, respiratory diseases, adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy, but also have higher risk of hypertension and asthma in adulthood. Some of these may be related to decreased parental monitoring, while others, such as hypertension, may be a result of increased cardiac reactivity and cortisol levels in response to stress.⁵²

Longitudinal studies of Cherlin and colleagues found that the gap in psychological well-being between offspring from divorced and non-divorced families grew larger with time.⁵³ Some problems in adulthood experienced by children of divorce include low socioeconomic attainment, poor subjective well-being, and increased marital problems and divorce.⁵⁴ Twin studies that control for genetic predisposition to depression have also shown that parental divorce increases the risk of depression in adulthood.⁵⁵

Both boys and girls raised in single-parent households had significantly increased risks compared with those in two-parent households for psychiatric disease both in childhood and as young adults, for suicide, for alcohol-related disease and death, and for drug addiction and drug-related death.⁵⁶

Table 5. Increased Risk to Children and Adolescents Raised in One vs. Two Parent Homes in Sweden

	Mortality Risk		Morbidity Risk *	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Suicide	2.43	1.83	1.78-2.44	2.05-2.79
Violence	2.54	4.04	1.69-2.63	1.35-2.10
Addiction	3.73	5.31		
Alcohol-related disorder			2.00-2.96	1.88-2.66
Drug-related disorder			2.38-4.53	3.01-5.63
Psychiatric disease			1.77-2.46	2.15-2.97

* Range of relative risk across four models

All the findings in Table 5 reached statistical significance except for intentional violence in girls with lower CIs above 1; ranges are with and without modifications for potential parental confounding and mediating factors.

Children of divorce in kindergarten through fifth grade had more depression and anxiety than those from intact families. Adult women whose parents had divorced are at elevated risk for suicide even without known depression.⁵⁷ These results were confirmed in another study showing that the general mortality risk, as well as the risk of committing suicide for 16- and 28-year-old males with a single-parent family

background, was significantly increased compared with males from a two-parent family background.⁵⁸ Compared with children in single households or cohabiting families, children in nuclear families have about half the learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, less behavior problems, less definite or severe emotional or behavior problems, and fewer parents describe their children as worried.⁵⁹

Problem behavior, delinquency, and crime

Children whose parents married prior to their conception showed less aggression at age three than children whose parents married while they were in utero or just after birth, and they showed less aggression than children whose parents married more than a year after they were born.⁶⁰ A NICHD study of 1,015 first grade school children investigated the effect of early familial structure changes. Children born into cohabiting families had the most familial structure changes (64% had at least one change and 22% had three or more changes by the time they finished kindergarten). Teacher reports of problem behavior in children during the transition to first grade were correlated with instability in family structure and increased from those in two-biological married parent families to single mother families, yet were highest in those born into cohabiting households.⁶¹ Follow-up revealed that early familial structure changes also adversely affected behaviors and peer interactions for boys in fifth grade.⁶² A study investigating associations between family instability (changes in parents' intimate partners, work hours, residence, children's schools) and adolescent adjustment showed that instability was associated with increased caregiver-reported externalizing and internalizing behaviors (including youth-reported cigarette use); reduced teacher-reported frustration tolerance, social skills, and task orientation; and lower academic grades. There was also an increased risk for school suspensions, “Person in Need of Supervision” status, binge drinking, and marijuana use.⁶³

An analysis of 1,335 couples five to 10 years after beginning either cohabitation or marriage revealed a higher incidence of alcohol abuse among men and women who were cohabiting at the start of the study compared to those who were married. Interestingly, these differences were not apparent in the first five years of the relationship.⁶⁴

Table 6. Alcohol Abuse in Cohabiting and Married Families

Initial Family Structure	Cohabiting			Married	
	Separated	Cohabiting	Married	Separated/Div.	Married
Family Structure 5-10 years later					
Alcohol problem (Men)	9.6%	7.8%	4.4%	6.8%	3.7%
Alcohol Problem (Women)	4.3%	3.9%	0.7%	0.9%	0.6%

Thus, the children of cohabiting parents are more likely to be exposed to the negative effects of parental and/or step-parental substance abuse. Adolescents with divorced parents have more alcohol and drug abuse and rule violations than those from intact families.⁶⁵

Children reared in an intact family, by both of their biological parents, are statistically less likely to commit a minor or serious crime compared to all other family living arrangements (single mom, single dad, biological dad married to step-mom, or biological mom married to step-dad.)⁶⁶ Cohabitation was not specifically studied, but since cohabiting unions are much more likely to dissolve than marriages not preceded by cohabitation, children whose parents cohabited are more likely to be raised in one or more of the other family living arrangements and thus more likely to have committed a criminal offense than those raised by married parents.

Educational Achievement

Even after taking into account many socioeconomic factors surrounding the teen mother, children of teen moms tend to have lower academic and cognitive outcomes in kindergarten. Later academic achievement also appears to be affected. A girl is less likely to complete high school if her mom was 18 or 19 years old at her birth compared with a girl whose mom was 20 or 21 years old. This finding is likely to be a small

reflection of a greater trend: academic outcomes are improved for children whose mothers wait even longer – until their mid- or late 20s – to have them.⁶⁷ Children from two-parent households read significantly better in first grade than do those from single-parent households,⁶⁸ while those from non-intact families had more academic problems and lower GPAs.⁶⁹ Those from non-intact families are less likely to graduate from high school and to attend college; only 30-50% of this is accounted for by the increased poverty of non-nuclear families.⁷⁰ Family instability (changes in parents' intimate partners, work hours, residence, and children's schools) was associated with lower task orientation and lower academic grades for adolescents.⁷¹ Compared with control students in intact families, both male and female children experiencing parental divorce fared less well in most well-being measures at the four time points evaluated. The effects of the disruption process on students' test scores linearly declined over time; the effects of divorce on social-psychological measures exhibited a U-shaped time pattern. Over time, differences in family social and economic resources mediated the detrimental effects of the disruption process to varying degrees.⁷²

Poverty and economic well being

The poverty rate among married women is 5.3% vs. 26.5% among single women who head households according to the U.S. Census Bureau.⁷³ Children born to cohabiting parents are more likely to experience poverty and food and housing shortages.⁷⁴ Only 12% of children from married families lived with a biological parent and stepparent, but 54% of those living with a cohabitating home had a biological parent and a non-biological one in the home. Typically stepchildren do not receive the same family benefits (food, clothing, gifts, schooling, and health care) as biological children.

Table 7. Poverty level and Family Structure

Family Structure	Combined incomes below poverty level
Parent + married step-parent	10%
Parent + cohabiting "step-parent"	19%
Married biological parents	8%
Single dad	13%
Single mom	43%
Cohabiting biological parents	23%

The number living in "social [financial] poverty," which counts the income of both cohabitating parents in calculating the poverty level, rose from 8% of those living with both biological married parents to 10% of those in married stepparent homes, to 13% living with single dads, to 19% of those in cohabitating "stepparent" situations, to 23% of those living with both cohabitating parents, to 43% of those living with single moms. By 1999, an estimated 4.3 million children were living in cohabitating homes.⁷⁵ While six- to 11-year-old children in step/cohabitating households with more resources had less detrimental effect, added resources did not ameliorate the negative effect of non-nuclear families for adolescents.⁷⁶ In another study, roughly one in seven children in unmarried-parent families also live with their parent's unmarried partner. Although these children have two potential caretakers and economic providers, results indicate that parental resources fall short of their counterparts in married-couple families. A cohabiting partner's economic contribution results in a 29% reduction in the proportion of children in cohabiting-couple families living in poverty, but still they fare poorly in comparison with children in married-couple families.⁷⁷

Repeating the cycle

In the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, 62% of those who were married at the birth of their child had lived with married parents at age 15, compared to only 37% of those cohabitating at the birth of their child.⁷⁸ About one-third of women who lived with both parents (biological or adoptive) at age 14 themselves were divorced within 10 years, but over half of those who did not live with both parents at age 14 were divorced within the first 10 years of marriage.⁷⁹ In 1995, a survey of women aged 15-44 showed the following results⁸⁰:

Table 8. Effects of Family Structure in Childhood upon Women: Sex and Marriage

Effect on children	Lived with both parents from birth until leaving home	Both then one parent	Stepparent	Lived with unmarried parent only
Virgins at marriage	15%	8%	6%	6%
Sex before age 15	6%	12%	15%	18%
Had premarital child	12%	21%	19%	42%
Married	67%	53%	58%	41%
Of those who married, later divorced	32%	36%	41%	44%
Raped	17%	20%	27%	27%

In a study comparing those married vs. those cohabitating for more than a year, 25% of those married grew up without both parents living with them at age 16 compared to 38% of those cohabitating.⁸¹

Girls were two to three times as likely to have a first birth under age 20 if their mothers had had a first birth in their teens. Living with biological or adoptive parents at age 14 decreased teen pregnancy rates by two-thirds. Lack of maternal higher education was also strongly correlated with teen pregnancy. About 12% of younger teens and 21% of older teens would be pleased to learn they were expecting a baby (1-2% less among girls and more among boys); those raised by their two parents had less positive attitudes than those in blended or single/non-marital households.⁸²

Summary

In summary, cohabitation puts at risk both those who cohabit and their current and future children and grandchildren. These risks to the children include: parental separation, step-parents, half-siblings, and step-siblings with increased internal family strife; induced death; death and disability due to prematurity and/or low birth weight including blindness, deafness, respiratory problems, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, and hyperactivity; poorer medical and dental care and nutrition, more missed school, and increased risk of behavior problems, anxiety, depression, academic decline, and social relationship problems; increased risk of child abuse; increased risks of physical injuries, disease, hospitalization, somatization, and early mortality; increased substance, alcohol and tobacco abuse; increased incidence of obesity, respiratory diseases, adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy (including increased risks of death and prematurity to the children of these adolescents); a higher risk of hypertension, asthma, and depression in adulthood; more psychiatric disease in childhood, suicide attempts and suicides, alcohol-related disease, and narcotics-related disease; low socioeconomic attainment, poor subjective well-being, and increased marital problems and divorce; lower academic achievement and more involvement in both petty and serious crime; more poverty, a higher risk of being raped; and more teen sex, premarital parenthood, and divorce themselves, thus carrying on the negative consequences to the third and fourth generations.

Pediatricians and others who care for children, adolescents, and young people should include information on the risks of cohabitation in their anticipatory guidance.

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The American College of Pediatricians is a national medical association of licensed physicians and healthcare professionals who specialize in the care of infants, children, and adolescents. The mission of the College is to enable all children to reach their optimal physical and emotional health and well-being.

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