

## The Impact of Divorce on Children

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Demo, David H., and Alan C. Acock. (1988) The impact of divorce on children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50, 619-648

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### **Abstract:**

With the acceleration of the divorce rate from the mid- 1960s to the early 1980s, the number of nontraditional families (such as single-parent families and reconstituted families) have increased relative to intact, first-time nuclear families. This article reviews empirical evidence addressing the relationship between divorce, family composition, and children's well-being. Although not entirely consistent, the pattern of empirical findings suggests that children's emotional adjustment, gender-role orientation, and antisocial behavior are affected by family structure, whereas other dimensions of well-being are unaffected. But the review indicates that these findings should be interpreted with caution because of the methodological deficiencies of many of the studies on which these findings are based. Several variables, including the level of family conflict, may be central variables mediating the effect of family structure on children.

### **Article:**

High divorce rates in the United States over the past 20 years have resulted in numerous changes in American family life, with perhaps the most important consequences bearing on children whose families were disrupted. In 1970, 12% of American families with children under age 18 were headed by single parents. By 1984, one-fourth of American families and nearly 60% of black families were headed by single parents (see Table 1). Millions of other children live in two-parent but reconstituted families, separated from at least one biological parent, in fact, Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, and Zill's recent analysis (1983) indicates that less than two-thirds of American children live with both biological parents.

A number of studies use recent social and demographic trends to predict children's future living arrangements, and while these predictions vary, the consensus is that most youth will spend some time prior to age 18 in a single-parent household (Bumpass, 1984, 1985; Furstenberg et al., 1983; Hofferth, 1985, 1986; Norton and Glick, 1986). Hofferth (1985) suggests that the percentage of black youth who will live with one parent for some period of time prior to age 18 may be as high as 94%, while for white children the corresponding figure is 70%, Norton and Glick's (1986) analysis yields a lower estimate but still projects that 60% of American children will live in a single-parent family before reaching age 18.

These trends in family composition have major implications for the life course of children and their well-being. The purpose of this article is to review and assess recent empirical evidence on the impact of divorce on children, concentrating on studies of nonclinical populations published in the last decade. We also direct attention to a number of important theoretical and methodological considerations in the study of family structure and youthful well-being. We begin by briefly describing some of the theoretical propositions and assumptions that guide research in this area.

TABLE 1. NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18, 1970-1984 (IN THOUSANDS)

Families	1970 Total <sup>a</sup>	1980 Total <sup>a</sup>	1984 Total <sup>a</sup>	1984 Whites	1984 Blacks
Total, children under 18	29,631	32,150	33,246	27,508	4,744
Two-parent	25,823	25,231	24,701	21,978	1,934
One-parent	3,808	6,920	8,544	5,529	2,809
Mother-headed	3,415	6,230	7,599	4,766	2,652
Never-married	248	1,063	2,102	729	1,332
Spouse absent	1,377	1,743	1,762	1,120	597
Separated	962	1,483	1,505	929	544
Other	415	260	257	191	53
Divorced	1,109	2,721	3,174	2,516	593
Widowed	682	703	561	401	128
Father-headed	393	692	945	763	157
Never-married	22	63	166	109	52
Spouse absent	247 <sup>a</sup>	181	187	139	39
Divorced	na	340	496	445	44
Widowed	124	107	97	69	23
	1970 Total %	1980 Total %	1984 Total %	1984 White %	1984 Black %
Two-parent	87.1	78.5	74.3	79.9	40.8
One-parent	12.9	21.5	25.7	20.1	59.2
Mother-headed	11.5	19.4	22.9	17.3	55.9
Never-married	0.8	3.3	6.3	2.7	28.1
Spouse absent	4.6	5.4	5.3	4.1	12.6
Separated	3.2	4.6	4.5	3.4	11.5
Other	1.4	0.8	0.8	0.7	1.1
Divorced	3.7	8.5	9.5	9.1	12.5
Widowed	2.3	2.2	1.7	1.5	2.7
Father-headed	1.3	2.2	2.8	2.8	3.3
Never-married	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.4	1.1
Spouse absent	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.8
Divorced	na	1.1	1.5	1.6	0.9
Widowed	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.5

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 138.

<sup>a</sup>Totals include other races not shown separately in the table.

<sup>b</sup>The 1970 figure includes families headed by divorced men.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Consistent with the Freudian assumption that a two-parent group constitutes the minimal unit for appropriate sex-typed identification (Freud, 1925/1961), anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists have long maintained the necessity of such a group for normal child development. Representative of structural-functional theorizing, Parsons and Bales (1955: 16-17) argued that one of the basic functions of the family is to serve as a stable, organically integrated "factory" in which human personalities are formed.

Similarly, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of role models, focusing on parents as the initial and primary reinforcers of child behavior (Bandura and Walters, 1963). Much of the research adopting this perspective centers on parent-child similarities, analyzing the transmission of response patterns and the inhibitory or disinhibitory effect of parental models. The presence of the same-sex parent is assumed to be crucial in order for the child to learn appropriate sex-typed behavior. This assumption is shared by developmental and symbolic interactionist theories, various cognitive approaches to socialization, and confluence theory, as well as anthropological theories (Edwards, 1987).

It logically follows that departures from the nuclear family norm are problematic for the child's development, especially for adolescents, inasmuch as this represents a crucial stage in the developmental process. Accordingly, a large body of research literature deals with father absence, the effects of institutionalization, and a host of "deficiencies" in maturation, such as those having to do with cognitive development, achievement, moral learning, and conformity. This focus has pointed to the crucial importance of both parents' presence but also has suggested that certain causes for parental absence may accentuate any negative effects, Lynn, for example, asserts (1974: 279):

The research on the relationship between father absence and the general level of the child's adjustment reveals that the loss of a father for any reason is associated with poor adjustment, but that absence because of separation, divorce, or desertion may have especially adverse effects.

Some researchers suggest even more dire outcomes whenever parental separation, divorce, or desertion occur. Among these are vulnerability to acute psychiatric disturbances, the child's aversion to marriage, and proneness to divorce once they do marry (Anthony, 1974). In sum, two general propositions are suggested:

1. Children reared in households where the two biological parents are not present will exhibit lower levels of well-being than their counterparts in intact nuclear families,
2. The adverse effects on youthful well-being will be especially acute when the cause of parental absence is marital separation, divorce, or desertion.

### *Divorce and Family Structure*

In examining research that addresses these two propositions, it is important to distinguish between studies investigating the effects of family structure and those investigating the effects of divorce. Most studies compare intact units and single-parent families, guided by the assumption that the latter family structure is precipitated by divorce. Of course, this is not always the case. Single-parent families consist of those with parents who have never married, those formed by the permanent separation of parents, and those precipitated by the death of a parent. Simple comparisons between one- and two-parent families are also suspect in that two-parent families are not monolithic. First-time or nondivorced units differ from divorced, remarried units in which stepparents are involved. In addition, little recognition has been given to the fact that families of different types may exhibit varying levels of instability or conflict, a potentially confounding variable in establishing the effects of family structure. In short, most investigations of the linkage between family structure and youthful well-being have failed to recognize the complexity of present-day families.

While family composition is a critical consideration in assessing the impact of divorce on children, we must also examine the unique events, disruptions, and transitions characterizing the divorce process that are not experienced by children and other members of nondivorced families. In particular, there are significant changes in family composition, parent-child interaction, discipline, and socioeconomic circumstances, as well as the emotional reactions that parents and children have to divorce. These events are accompanied by changes in extrafamilial relations and social networks, often as a result of stigma attached to divorced parents and their children. Although stepfamilies are beyond the scope of this review, researchers must also distinguish the consequences of divorce from those of remarriage and subsequent changes in family composition (see Ganong and Coleman, 1984, for a review of the emerging literature on reconstituted families and their impact on children).

Bearing in mind these conceptual distinctions, we now move to a systematic review of recent evidence on the impact of divorce on children and adolescents.

### **EXISTING RESEARCH**

A substantial amount of research has examined the effects of family structure on children's social and psychological well-being. Many studies document negative consequences for children whose parents divorce and for those living in single-parent families. But most studies have been concerned with limited dimensions of a quite complex problem. Specifically, the research to date has typically (a) examined the effects of divorce or father absence on children, ignoring the effects on adolescents; (b) examined only selected dimensions of children's well-being; (c) compared intact units and single-parent families but not recognized important variations (e.g., levels of marital instability and conflict) within these structures; and (d) relied on cross-sectional designs to assess developmental processes.

Social and psychological well-being includes aspects of personal adjustment, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, antisocial behavior, and cognitive functioning. It should be noted that some of these variables (e.g., personal adjustment) have been the subject of voluminous research, while others (e.g., interpersonal relations) have received relatively little attention. In Tables 2 to 6 we outline selected studies published since 1975 that were designed to compare the wellbeing of children and adolescents living in intact families and families disrupted by divorce.(1)

### *Personal Adjustment*

Personal adjustment is operationalized in various ways by different investigators but includes such variables as self-control, leadership, responsibility, independence, achievement orientation, aggressiveness, and gender-role orientation (see Table 2). As we see when examining the 16 studies outlined in Table 2, there are also wide variations in sample size and composition. But the overall pattern of empirical findings suggests temporary deleterious effects of parental divorce on children's adjustment, with these effects most common among young children (Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, and Hunt, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1979; Kurdek, Blisk, and Siesky, 1981; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975, 1980a).<sup>(2)</sup> Kurdek and Siesky (1980b, c) suggest that older children adjust more readily because they are more likely to discuss the situation with friends (many of whom have had similar experiences), to understand that they are not personally responsible, to recognize the finality of the situation, to appreciate both parents for their positive qualities, and to recognize beneficial consequences such as the end of parental fighting and improved relations with parents.

On the basis of her review of research conducted between 1970 and 1980, Cashion (1984: 483) concludes: "The evidence is overwhelming that after the initial trauma of divorce, the children are as emotionally well-adjusted in these [female-headed] families as in two-parent families." Investigations of long-term effects (Acock and Kiecolt, 1988; Kulka and Weingarten, 1979) suggest that, when socioeconomic status is controlled, adolescents who have experienced a parental divorce or separation have only slightly lower levels of adult adjustment.

In two other studies Kinard and Reinherz (1984, 1986) observed elementary school children in three different family situations (never-disrupted; disrupted prior to starting school; and recently disrupted) and found that children in recently disrupted families suffered pronounced and multidimensional effects: problems in attentiveness at school, lowered academic achievement, withdrawal, dependency, and hostility. While their findings are not definitive, Kinard and Reinherz speculate that either "the effects of parental divorce on children diminish over time; or that the impact of marital disruption is less severe for preschool-age children than for school-age children" (1986: 291). Children's age at the time of disruption may also mediate the impact of these events on other dimensions of their wellbeing (e.g., self-esteem or gender-role orientation) and thus will be discussed in greater detail below (also, see Rohrllich, Ranier, Berg-Cross, and Berg-Cross, 1977, for a clinical perspective on the impact of divorce on children of different ages). But two variables that critically affect children's adjustment to divorce are marital discord and children's gender.

**Marital discord.** A significant pattern in the empirical literature is that personal adjustment, like other dimensions of well-being, is not related to family structure but is adversely affected by parental discord (Ellison, 1983; Rosen, 1979). Kurdek and Siesky's (1980b) extensive data on children who had experienced their parents' divorce indicated that, although learning of the divorce and adjusting to the loss of the noncustodial parent were painful, children indicated that these adjustments were preferable to living in conflict. Many studies report that children's adjustment to divorce is facilitated under conditions of low parental conflict—both prior to and subsequent to the divorce (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, and Lightel, 1986; Jacobson, 1978; Lowenstein and Koopman, 1978; Porter and O'Leary, 1980; Raschke and Raschke, 1979; Rosen, 1979) .

**Children's gender.** Children's gender may be especially important in mediating the effects of family disruption, as most of the evidence suggests that adjustment problems are more severe and last for longer periods of time among boys (Hess and Camara, 1979; Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1978, 1979, 1982; Wallerstein, 1984; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980b).<sup>(3)</sup> Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) found, controlling for social class, that boys in divorced families manifested significantly more maladaptive symptoms and behavior problems than boys in intact families. Girls differed only on the dimension of locus of control; girls in divorced households scored significantly higher than their counterparts in intact households.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Grossman et al. (1980)	294 white male and female college students	262 students from intact families; 24 with history of parental divorce and remarriage; 8 from divorced, non-remarried families	Middle class	EI-ISB, LLCS, LWRISB	Individuals (especially males) whose parents had divorced had higher ego-identity achievement scores than individuals in intact families.
Guidubaldi and Perry (1985)	365 boys and 334 girls in grades 1, 3, and 5 (T1); grades 2, 3, 5, and 7 at follow-up (T2) (National Association of School Psychologists-Kent State University data)	341 children with divorced parents and 358 from intact families	SES (defined separately by family income and by educational and occupational classifications) was examined and was instituted as a control in the analyses, but no breakdown by SES was given.	HESB, PAR, locus of control, optimism-pessimism, VTQ, Achenbach Parent and Teacher Rating Scales	At Time 2 (mean of 6.4 years post-divorce) and controlling for SES, boys in divorced families had a greater frequency of maladaptive symptoms, inappropriate behavior, and unhappiness. Among girls, the only significant difference was that girls in divorced families had higher internal locus of control.
Hainline and Feig (1978)	36 female college students aged 17-23 (mean age = 18.5); 80% white, 20% black	12 women whose fathers had died (6 before age 5, 6 between ages 5-11); 12 women whose parents had divorced (6 before age 5, 6 between ages 5-11); 12 women from intact families	Lower-middle and middle class	BSRI, RRLS, RSRT, RIAS, BSF, RLCS, BMFS	Women whose fathers were absent were virtually indistinguishable from those with fathers present. Early father absence was associated with external locus of control.
Hess and Camara (1979)	32 white boys and girls aged 9-11	16 children in intact families; 16 children in recently divorced families	All children had 2 working parents, each of whom had at least 2 years of college education.	Stress, as measured by parents' ratings on a behavior checklist	Children in divorced families experienced greater stress, as did those who had poor relationships with their parents.
Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979)	48 white boys and 48 white girls; mean age = 3.9 at T1 and 5.8 at T2	24 boys and 24 girls from divorced, mother-custody families; 24 boys and 24 girls from nondivorced families	Middle class	Observational measures of children's free play and social interaction; teacher ratings of behavior; peer nomination measures	Play patterns of boys and girls from divorced families were less socially and cognitively mature immediately following divorce; for boys immature play continued into second year post-divorce. Children in divorced families were also less happy and more anxious, with these effects again lasting longer for boys.

(Continued on next page)

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS—Continued

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Kalter et al. (1984)	48 white boys and girls in 3rd and 5th grade	Evenly divided between intact and divorced families	Middle and upper-middle class	Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale	Children in divorced families had higher internal locus of control.
Kalter et al. (1985)	84 female college students aged 17–22	42 women with divorced parents; 42 with intact home	Middle- and upper-middle class students at a "highly selective, expensive college"	TAT measuring perceptions of masculinity-femininity; questionnaire measuring life satisfaction	No significant differences in life satisfaction or in satisfaction with dating. However, women in divorced families were more likely to hold negative views of both men and women.
Kinard and Reinherz (1984)	202 boys and 192 girls in 3rd grade; 99% white	38 children in early (preschool) disrupted families; 36 in recently disrupted families; 320 in never-disrupted families	Predominantly working class (Classes III and IV on Hollingshead Index)	CAAP, PBQ, SBCL	Children in recently disrupted families had significantly more problems with attention at school, withdrawal, and dependency. No differences on anxiety.
Kurdek and Siesky (1980a)	48 boys and 64 girls in grades 3–8	56 children in intact families; 56 children in divorced families	Middle class, as measured by Hollingshead's Index	Modified version of BSRI	Children in divorced families were significantly more androgynous than children in intact families, who tended to be traditionally sex-typed.
Oshman and Manosevitz (1976)	125 male college students (mean age = 19.8)	39 with biological fathers present; 47 fatherless; 39 with step-fathers	3 groups were matched on parental education and family income (presumably middle class).	EIS	Males with fathers (and stepfathers) present scored significantly higher on psychosocial development than males in fatherless families.
Parish et al. (1980)	158 female and 68 male college students	Intact and fatherless families	No information given	Rokesch Values Survey	Individuals from intact and fatherless families were similar on most values, but individuals in divorced families were more likely to value self-respect, mature love, and being polite.
Rosen (1979)	117 white males and females aged 9–28	92 individuals whose parents had divorced and 25 whose families were intact	Middle class	TAT, ISB, and an in-depth clinical interview	No differences between intact and divorced group. Poor adjustment was associated with parental conflict preceding and during the divorce.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS—Continued

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Santrock (1975)	120 boys in 5th and 6th grade	60 boys in intact families; 20 in early-divorced (boys younger than age 6) families; 20 in late-divorced (boys between 6–10) families; 20 in father-deceased (boys between 6–10) families	Predominantly lower class. Father-present and father-absent groups were matched on SES, race, school, and other background characteristics.	A variety of behavioral measures, including Kohlberg measures of moral judgment, plus teacher ratings of social conscience (e.g., self-discipline, trust)	Controlling for relevant variables, there were no differences on behavioral measures of moral development, but teachers judged father-absent boys to have lower levels of social conscience.
Santrock and Warshak (1979)	33 boys and 27 girls aged 6–11	20 children in father-custody families; 20 in mother-custody families; 20 in intact families	Groups were matched on SES, family size, and sibling status.	A variety of projective, self-report, and observational measures, including the ABIC	Overall, there was no main effect for family structure, but children living with opposite-sex parents were not as well adjusted.
Wyman et al. (1985)	268 children in grades 4–6	98 children with divorced parents; 170 from intact families	Divorce sample "comparable to the intact sample in sociodemographic background"	STAIC A-Trait Scale used to measure trait anxiety	Children in divorced group had significantly higher anxiety.
Young and Parish (1977)	98 female college students aged 17–22	16 daughters of unmarried widows; 12 of remarried widows; 17 of unmarried divorcees; 26 of remarried divorcees; 27 with father present	Middle class	MFF, ACL, SII	Daughters who had lost their fathers (due to divorce or death) and whose mothers had not remarried were more insecure than daughters in father-present families. No differences on impulsivity-reflexivity.

Note: ABIC = Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children; ACL = Adjective Check List; BMFS = Broverman Masculinity-Femininity Scale; BSF = Bendig Short Form of the Manifest Anxiety Scale; BSRI = Bem Sex Role Inventory; CAAP = Child and Adolescent Adjustment Profile; EI-ISB = Marcia Ego-Identity Incomplete Sentence Blank; EIS = Ego Identity Scale; HESB = Hahnemann Elementary School Behavior Rating Scales; ISB = Incomplete Sentence Blank; LLCS = Levenson's Locus of Control Scale; LWRISB = Loewinger, Wessler, and Redmore Incomplete Sentence Blank; MFF = Matching Familiar Figures Test; PAR = Sells and Roff Peer Acceptance-Rejection Rating; PBQ = Preschool Behavior Questionnaire; RIAS = Rubin's Intercourse Acceptability Scale; RLCS = Rotter Locus of Control Scale; RRLS = Rubin's Romantic Love Scale; RSRT = Rubin's Sex Role Traditionalism Scale; SBCL = Simmons Behavior Checklist; SII = Security-Insecurity Inventory; STAIC A-Trait Scale = State Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children; TAT = Thematic Apperception Test; VTQ = Vineland Teacher Questionnaire.

One explanation for boys' greater difficulties in adjusting to parental divorce is that typical postdivorce living arrangements are quite different for them than for girls. While custodial mothers provide girls with same-sex role models, most boys have to adjust to living without same-sex parents. In examining boys and girls living in intact families and in different custodial arrangements, Santrock and Warshak (1979) found that few effects could be attributed to family structure per se, but that children living with opposite-sex parents (mother-custody boys and father-custody girls) were not as well adjusted on measures of competent social behavior. While Father custody is rare, this study illustrates the importance of examining variations in postdivorce family structures (and specifically the combination of parent's gender and child's gender) for estimating the effects of divorce on children.

Along related lines, a number of researchers have examined gender-role orientation and, specifically, the relation of father absence to boys' personality development. Most of the evidence indicates that boys without adult male role models demonstrate more feminine behavior (Biller, 1976; Herzog and Sudia, 1973; Lamb, 1977a), except in lower-class families (Biller, 1981b). A variety of studies have shown that fathers influence children's gender role development to be more traditional because, compared to mothers, they more routinely differentiate between masculine and feminine behaviors and encourage greater conformity to conventional gender roles (Biller, 1981a; Biller and Davids, 1973; Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Heilbrun, 1965; Lamb, 1977b; Noller, 1978). Lamb (1977a) argues that because gender identity is usually developed by age 3 and because family influences are central to this process, the effects of father absence on gender-appropriate behavior may be most pronounced among boys who are very young (ages 5 and under) at the time of family disruption. Beyond early childhood, gender roles are largely established and children experience increasingly diverse extrafamilial social contexts and relationships that bear on their development.<sup>(4)</sup> But it should be reiterated that these effects have been attributed to father absence and thus would be expected to occur among boys in all female-headed families, not simply those that have experienced divorce.

The claim has also been made that boys' adjustment problems are often compounded by custodial mothers' denigrating the masculinity of absent fathers, an occurrence that is particularly likely in black matriarchal families (Billler and Davids, 1973). The assumption here is that boys are trying to be masculine without the benefit of the same-sex role model and that the absent role model is portrayed as undesirable. However, most of the research on boys' adjustment fails to consider the quality or quantity of father-child contact or the availability of alternative male role models (e.g., foster father, grandfather, big brother, other male relatives, coach, friend, etc.), which makes it difficult to assess the impact of changing family structure on boys' behavior. There are also limitations imposed by conceptualizing and measuring masculinity-femininity as a bipolar construct (Bern, 1974; Constantinople, 1973; Worell, 1978), and there is evidence that boys and girls in father-absent families are better described as androgynous (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a).

**Positive outcomes of divorce.** While much of the literature on divorce and children seems ideologically driven and biased toward emphasizing negative effects on children (Edwards, 1987; Raschke and Raschke, 1979), the tendency of children in single-parent families to display more androgynous behavior may be interpreted as a beneficial effect. Because of father absence, children in female-headed families are not pressured as strongly as their counterparts in two-parent families to conform to traditional gender roles. These children frequently assume a variety of domestic responsibilities to compensate for the absent parent (Weiss, 1979), thereby broadening their skills and competencies and their definitions of gender-appropriate behavior. Divorced parents also must broaden their behavioral patterns to meet increased parenting responsibilities, thereby providing more androgynous role models. Kurdek and Siesky (1980a: 250) give the illustration that custodial mothers often "find themselves needing to acquire and demonstrate a greater degree of dominance, assertiveness, and independence while custodial fathers may find themselves in situations eliciting high degrees of warmth, nurturance, and tenderness."

Aside from becoming more androgynous, adolescents living in single-parent families are characterized by greater maturity, feelings of efficacy, and an internal locus of control (Guidubaldi and Perry, 1985; Kalter, Alpern, Spence, and Plunkett, 1984; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974; Weiss, 1979). For adolescent girls this maturity stems partly from the status and responsibilities they acquire in peer and confidant relationships with custodial mothers.(5)

Finally, the relationship between family structure and personal adjustment (and other dimensions of well-being) must be viewed as reciprocal. The child's psychological state prior to changes in family structure is an important element in the child's ability to adjust to new situations and relationships. There is evidence (Kurdek et al., 1981) that children and adolescents with an internal locus of control and a high level of interpersonal reasoning adjust more easily to their parents' divorce and that children's divorce adjustment is related to their more global personal adjustment.

### *Self-Concept*

In Table 3 we summarize studies examining the impact of divorce on children's self-concept. A series of studies by Parish and his collaborators indicates that children in divorced, non-remarried families have lower self-esteem than children in intact families (Parish and Dostal, 1980; Parish and Taylor, 1979; Young and Parish, 1977). Measuring children's self-evaluations in 1979 and again in 1982, Parish and Wigle (1985) demonstrated that children whose family structure was intact throughout the study had the highest self-evaluations, while those whose parents divorced in the intervening years experienced declining self-evaluations, and those whose parents were divorced throughout the 3-year period apparently adjusted to their new situations and reported higher self-evaluations than they had previously. As is the case for most research on children of divorce, however, the studies conducted by Parish and his associates did not investigate pre- or postdivorce levels of family conflict.

**Marital discord.** The bulk of evidence summarized in Table 3 is consistent with the findings on personal adjustment; that is, family structure is unrelated to children's self-esteem (Feldman and Feldman, 1975; Kinard and Reinherz, 1984; Parish, 1981; Parish, Dostal, and Parish, 1981), but parental discord is negatively related (Amato, 1986; Berg and Kelly, 1979; Cooper, Holman, and Braithwaite, 1983; Long, 1986; Raschke and Raschke, 1979; Slater and Haber, 1984). Because this conclusion is based on diverse samples of boys and girls of different ages in

different living arrangements, the failure to obtain effects of family structure suggests either that family composition really does not matter for children's self-concept or that family structure alone is an insufficient index of familial relations. Further, these studies suggest that divorce per se does not adversely affect children's self-concept, Cashion's (1984) review of the literature indicates that children living in single-parent families suffer no losses to self-esteem, except in situations where the child's family situation is stigmatized (Rosenberg, 1979), Cautioning that considerably more research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn, Long (1986: 26) suggests that future work investigate "Hetherington's (1979) idea that a stable home in which parents are divorced is better for a child than is a 'conflict-ridden' home where both parents are present."

Although countless studies have examined global self-esteem, two critical limitations characterize this body of research: (a) nearly all of these studies are cross-sectional, which restricts the assessment of developmental change and stability in self-concept; and (b) little is known about the various dimensions of self-concept (e.g., self-efficacy, nonevaluative self-descriptions) other than overall self-esteem. It is necessary, therefore, to examine different dimensions of self-concept as they change over time and as they relate to different structures and patterns of family interaction.

### *Cognitive Functioning*

Most of the research relating cognitive functioning to family structure (summarized in Table 4) has assessed cognitive performance by using standardized intelligence and academic achievement tests or scholastic grade-point averages. Many of these studies find that family conflict and disruption are associated with inhibited cognitive functioning (Blanchard and Biller, 1971; Feldman and Feldman, 1975; Hess and Camara, 1979; Kinard and Reinherz, 1986; Kurdek, 1981; Raclin, 1981).

Two important reviews of research on children in fatherless families produce different conclusions: Herzog and Sudia (1973) conclude that children's school achievement is not affected by father absence, but Shinn (1978) concludes that father absence has a number of detrimental effects on children's intellectual performance. Basing her conclusions on 30 studies that met reasonable methodological criteria, Shinn reports that "financial hardship, high levels of anxiety, and in particular, low levels of parent-child interaction are important causes of poor performance among children in single-parent families" (1978: 316). In this section we summarize the differential effects of family disruption on academic performance by gender and social class and offer some insights as to the mechanisms by which these effects occur.

**Children's gender.** Some studies suggest that negative effects of family disruption on academic performance are stronger for boys than for girls (Chapman, 1977; Werner and Smith, 1982), but most of the evidence suggests similar effects by gender (Hess and Camara, 1979; Kinard and Reinherz, 1986; Shinn, 1978). While females traditionally outscore males on standardized tests of verbal skills and males outperform females on mathematical skills, males who have experienced family disruption generally score higher on verbal aptitude (Radin, 1981). Thus, the absence of a father may result in a "feminine" orientation toward education (Fowler and Richards, 1978; Herzog and Sudia, 1973). But an important and unresolved question is whether this pattern results from boys acquiring greater verbal skills in mother-headed families or from deficiencies in mathematical skills attributable to father absence. The latter explanation is supported by evidence showing that father-absent girls are disadvantaged in mathematics (Radin, 1981).

TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON SELF-CONCEPT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Berg and Kelly (1979)	57 boys and girls aged 9-15	19 children in "intact-accepted" families; 19 in "intact-rejected" families; 19 whose parents had divorced	No information given	PHCSC	Children in intact but conflict-ridden families had significantly lower self-esteem than those in other 2 groups.
Cooper et al. (1983)	258 boys and 209 girls aged 9-12	Two-parent cohesive families; one-parent cohesive families; isolated child families; divided families; parent-coalition families	40% professional or managerial; 33% clerical, sales, and skilled occupations; 27% unskilled and semiskilled occupations.	CSEI; PHCSC	Children reporting little family support, whether in one- or two-parent families, had lowest self-esteem.
Kalter et al. (1985) <sup>a</sup>	(1) 40 girls in 3rd and 6th grade	14 girls with divorced parents, 26 living with both natural parents	All middle class	PCS	Among 3rd graders, girls in divorced families had significantly lower perceived competence. No significant differences among 6th graders.
	(2) 522 girls aged 11-18 (1972 National Survey of Youth)	62 girls with divorced parents, 460 girls from intact households	Divorced group "represented significantly lower SES households"	Self-esteem	No significant differences.
	(3) 84 female college students aged 17-22	42 women with divorced parents, 42 with intact home	Middle- and upper-middle class students at a "highly selective, expensive college"	Self-esteem	No significant differences.
Kanoy et al. (1984)	153 white children aged 3-21	45 mothers and their 74 children from divorced families, and 44 mothers and their 79 children from intact families	Predivorce annual family income of \$12,000-\$40,000	Self-concept Referents Test (children 3-7); Bills Index of Adjustment and Values (children 10-21)	In divorced families, mothers' present adjustment predicted children's self-concept. In intact families, mothers' past adjustment predicted children's self-concept.
Kinard and Reinherz (1984)	202 boys and 192 girls in 3rd grade; 99% white	38 children in early (preschool) disrupted families; 36 in recently disrupted families; 320 in never-disrupted families	Predominantly working class (Classes III and IV on Hollingshead Index)	PHCSC	No significant differences.

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TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON SELF-CONCEPT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS—Continued

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Long (1986)	199 predominantly white female college freshmen (mean age = 17.7)	150 with intact families; 21 in reconstituted families; 26 in single-parent families; 2 in other arrangements	Predominantly middle class	RSE	Daughter's self-esteem significantly related to parental happiness (even with family structure controlled) but not to family structure (even with parental happiness controlled).
Parish (1981)	1,409 male and female college students	Intact; divorced non-remarried; divorced remarried; death non-remarried; death remarried families	No information given	PAIC	No significant differences by type of family structure.
Parish et al. (1981)	284 male and female children in grades 5-8	Two family types (intact or divorced) and two family dispositions (happy or unhappy)	No information given	PAIC	No main effects for family type, but children from happy families had significantly higher self-concepts. Females from happy, intact families had significantly higher self-concepts and males from unhappy, divorced families had significantly lower self-concepts.
Parish and Dostal (1980)	738 boys and girls aged 11-14	Intact; divorced and remarried; divorced and non-remarried	No information given	PAIC	Children from intact families had significantly higher self-evaluations than children in divorced, non-remarried families.
Parish and Taylor (1979)	406 boys and girls in grades 3-8	347 from intact families; 44 from divorced, female-headed families; 15 from reconstituted families	No information given	PAIC	Children whose parents had divorced and whose mothers had not remarried had significantly lower self-concepts than children in intact families.

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TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON SELF-CONCEPT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS—Continued

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Parish and Wigle (1985)	120 public school students	4 groups of 30 children each, defined by their family structure at 2 points in time (1979 and 1982): intact-intact; divorced-divorced; intact-divorced; and a control group	No information given	PAIC	Children in intact-intact group had highest self-evaluations at both measurement points (T1 and T2). Children whose parents divorced between T1 and T2 experienced a significant decline in self-evaluations, while self-evaluations of children in divorce-divorce group significantly increased by T2.
Raschke and Raschke (1979)	289 black and white boys and girls in grades 3, 6, and 8	70% living with both parents (including reconstituted); 26% with mother only; 4% with neither parent	Unknown, but assumed to be mixed, and skewed toward lower SES	PHCSC	No significant differences by family structure, but significantly lower self-concepts among children reporting high family conflict.
Wyman et al. (1985)	268 children in grades 4-6	98 children with divorced parents, 170 from intact families	Divorce sample "comparable to the intact sample in sociodemographic background"	PCS	No significant differences in perceived social competence, physical competence, or general self-esteem. Divorced group had significantly lower perceived cognitive competence.
Young and Parish (1977)	98 female college students aged 17-22	16 daughters of unmarried widows; 12 of remarried widows; 17 of unmarried divorcees; 26 of remarried divorcees; 27 with father present	Middle class	ACL	Daughters who had lost their fathers (due to divorce or death) and whose mothers had not remarried had significantly more negative self-evaluations.

Note: ACL = Adjective Check List; CSEI = Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory; PAIC = Personal Attribute Inventory for Children; PCS = Perceived Competence Scale for Children; PHCSC = Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale; RSE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

<sup>a</sup>Three separate studies, using three different samples, are presented in Kalter et al. (1985).

**Children's race.** There is a limited amount of evidence that father absence is more harmful to the intelligence and academic achievement of black children (Sciara, 1975), especially black males (Biller and Davids, 1973), but most studies show academic achievement among black children to be unaffected by family structure (Hunt and Hunt, 1975, 1977; Shinn, 1978; Solomon, Hirsch, Scheinfeld, and Jackson, 1972), Svanum, Bringle, and McLaughlin (1982) found, controlling for social class, that there are no significant effects of father absence on cognitive performance for white or black children. Again, these investigations focus on family composition and demonstrate that the effects of family structure on academic performance do not vary as much by race as by social class, but race differences in the impact of divorce remain largely unexplored. As Table 4 illustrates, we did not find any studies that compared white and black populations of children in divorced and nondivorced families.

**Family socioeconomic status.** A review by Hetherington, Camara, and Featherman (1983) underscores the importance of social class as a mediating variable. They note small differences favoring children in two-parent families on standardized tests of intelligence and academic achievement that decrease when socioeconomic circumstances are controlled. Differences remain, however, on measures of school performance (e.g., grade-point average), with children in one-parent families at a disadvantage. In a study of predominantly white working-class children, Kinard and Reinherz (1986) investigated the impact of marital disruption on specific dimensions of school performance. Fourth-graders whose families were recently disrupted (i.e., children whose parents divorced since the children entered school) had lower scores on language aptitude and a composite measure of academic achievement than children in never-disrupted families or families in which disruption had occurred several years earlier. But no group differences were detected in mathematics achievement. When maternal education was controlled, there were no differences in reading achievement. In fact, maternal education had a stronger effect on school performance than did marital disruption. Differences in teacher assessments of productivity disappeared when gender and maternal education were controlled (Kinard and Reinherz, 1984).

These findings direct attention to a major methodological problem indicated in earlier reviews (Herzog and Sudia, 1973; Shinn, 1978), namely, inadequate attention to the role of social class in moderating the effects of family disruption on children's academic performance. When social class is controlled, children in female-headed families fare no worse than children from two-parent families on measures of intelligence (Bachman, 1970; Kopf, 1970), academic achievement (Shinn, 1978; Svanum et al., 1982), and educational attainment (Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston, 1978).<sup>(6)</sup> Further, Svanum et al. (1982: 143) point out that there are many considerations in deciding whether to control for SES in examinations of cognitive performance. While much of the observed variance in cognitive performance may be attributable to SES, "the role that SES assumes in the underlying processes of father absence and cognitive development is unclear at this stage of research." In order to disentangle the intricate effects of family structure and SES on children's cognitive performance, family researchers need to examine the socioeconomic history of intact families and those in which disruption occurs, to examine the economic resources available to children at various stages of cognitive development, and to assess changes in economic resources and family relationships that accompany marital disruption.

TABLE 4. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Chapman (1977)	96 white college students aged 17-23 (mean = 18.9)	16 males and 16 females in each of 3 groups: father-absent, stepfather present, and intact	No information given	Field dependence measured by Form A of EFT; SAT	Intact family males were more field independent and had significantly higher SAT verbal and total scores than males in other 2 groups. Intact family females had lower SAT verbal scores than the other 2 groups.
Hess and Camara (1979)	32 white boys and girls aged 9-11	16 children in intact families; 16 children in recently divorced families	All children had 2 working parents, each of whom had at least 2 years of college education	Work effectiveness at school as measured by school records and teacher ratings	Children in divorced families were less productive in schoolwork. Present child relationships were also significantly related to children's schoolwork.
Kalter et al. (1985) <sup>a</sup>	(1) 40 girls in 3rd and 6th grade	14 girls with divorced parents, 26 living with both natural parents	All middle class	SAT	No significant differences.
	(2) 84 female college students aged 17-22	42 women with divorced parents, 42 with intact home	Middle- and upper-class students at a "highly selective, expensive college"	GPA	No significant differences.
Kinard and Reinherz (1984)	202 boys and 192 girls in 3rd grade; 99% white	38 children in early (preschool) disrupted families; 36 in recently disrupted families; 320 in never-disrupted families	Predominantly working class (Classes III and IV on Hollingshead Index)	CAAP	Controlling for gender and maternal education, there were no differences in students' productivity by family type.
Kinard and Reinherz (1986)	78 girls and 72 boys in 4th grade; 99% white	87 children in never-disrupted families; 33 in early (preschool) disrupted families; 30 in recently disrupted families	Working class (majority in Classes III and IV on the Hollingshead Index)	PSS, CAAP, SFTAA, CAT-70, parent and teacher ratings of academic achievement	Children in recently disrupted families had significantly lower scores on language, total achievement, and productivity. No group differences in mathematics achievement or in reading achievement with maternal education controlled.
Svanum et al. (1982)	Representative national sample of 6,109 male and female children aged 6-11 (National Health Examination Survey, Cycle II)	5,493 children in intact families; 616 children in father-absent families	Representative sample; SES (defined in terms of family income and householder education) used as control variable	Vocabulary and block design subtests of WISC; arithmetic and reading subtests of WRAT	Controlling for SES, no significant effects of father absence for white or black children.

Note: CAAP = Child and Adolescent Adjustment Profile; CAT-70 = California Achievement Test-70; EFT = Embedded Figures Test; GPA = Grade Point Average; PSS = Preschool Screening System; SAT = Stanford Achievement Test; SFTAA = Short Form Test of Academic Aptitude; WISC = Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children; WRAT = Wechsler Reading Achievement Test.

<sup>a</sup>Three separate studies, using three different samples, are presented in Kalter et al. (1985). All three studies are described in Table 3.

**Family processes.** In recent years important insights have been gained into the specific processes by which marital disruption may affect children's school performance. First, family disruption alters daily routines and work schedules and imposes additional demands on adults and children living in single-parent families (Amato, 1987; Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Hetherington et al., 1983; Weiss, 1979). Most adolescents must assume extra domestic and child care responsibilities, and financial conditions require some to work part-time. These burdens

result in greater absenteeism, tardiness, and truancy among children in single-parent households (Hetherington et al., 1983). Second, children in recently disrupted families are prone to experience emotional and behavioral problems such as aggression, distractibility, dependency, anxiety, and withdrawal (Hess and Camara, 1979; Kinard and Reinherz, 1984), factors that may help to explain problems in school conduct and the propensity of teachers to label and stereotype children from broken families (Hess and Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979, 1983). Third, emotional problems may interfere with study patterns, while demanding schedules reduce the time available for single parents to help with homework. In support of the latter point, Furstenberg and Nord (1985) examined parent-child interaction patterns in different family types and found few differences in time spent together in social and recreational activities, but found that resident parents in reconstituted and single-parent families were much less likely than parents in intact families to help with homework. In sum, a variety of personal, family, and school processes operate to the detriment of academic performance among children of divorce,

### *Interpersonal Relationships*

Compared to the large bodies of research on personal adjustment, self-concept, and cognitive functioning, relatively few studies have examined interpersonal relations among children and adolescents in different family structures (see Table 5). Generally, investigations have focused on peer relations among children and dating patterns among adolescents.

**Peer relations.** Studies of preschool children (Hetherington et al., 1979) and preadolescents (Santrock, 1975; Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, and Pedro-Carroll, 1985) suggest that children in disrupted families are less sociable: they have fewer close friends, spend less time with friends, and participate in fewer shared activities. Stolberg and Anker (1983) observe that children in families disrupted by divorce exhibit psychopathology in interpersonal relations, often behaving in unusual and inappropriate ways. Other studies suggest that the effects are temporary. Kinard and Reinherz (1984) found no differences in peer relations among children in intact and disrupted families, but those in recently disrupted families displayed greater hostility. Kurdek et al. (1981) conducted a two-year follow-up of children whose parents had divorced and showed that relationships with peers improved after the divorce and that personal adjustment was facilitated by opportunities to discuss experiences with peers, some of whom had similar experiences. However, Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) observed a much different pattern: among boys, those from divorced families had greater contact with friends, and among girls there were no differences by family structure.

**Dating patterns.** Hetherington (1972) reported that adolescent girls whose fathers were absent prior to age 5 had difficulties in heterosexual relations, but Hainline and Feig's (1978) analyses of female college students indicated that early and later father-absent women could not be distinguished on measures of romanticism and heterosexual attitudes.

An examination of dating and sexual behavior among female college students found that women with divorced parents began dating slightly later than those in intact families, but women in both groups were socially active (Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, and Chen, 1985). Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984) reported that, compared to college students with intact families, those whose parents were divorced or permanently separated exhibited higher levels of dating activity, and this activity increased further if parental or parent-child conflict persisted during and after the divorce. Gender did not mediate the effects of divorce on courtship, nor did the age at which parental divorce occurred. Regarding adolescent sexual behavior, the findings consistently demonstrate that males and females not living with both biological parents initiate coitus earlier than their counterparts in intact families (Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985; Newcomer and Udry, 1987). But Newcomer and Udry propose that, because parental marital status is also associated with a broad range of deviant behaviors, these effects may stem from general loss of parental control rather than simply loss of control over sexual behavior. Studies of antisocial behavior support this interpretation.

TABLE 5. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Booth et al. (1984)	2,538 male and female college students	1,945 students from intact families; 365 with divorced or permanently separated parents; 228 whose parents' marriage was broken by death	19% from blue-collar homes; the remainder presumably from middle- and upper-middle-class background	Level and quality of dating activity	Level of dating activity was slightly higher among students with divorced parents. Quality of courtship relations was affected (negatively) only when postdivorce conflict occurred and parent-child relations deteriorated.
Guidubaldi and Perry (1985)	365 boys and 334 girls in grades 1, 3, and 5 (T1); grades 2, 3, 5, and 7 at follow-up (T2) (National Association of School Psychologists-Kent State University data)	341 children with divorced parents and 358 from intact families	SES (defined separately by family income and by educational and occupational classifications) was examined and was instituted as a control in the analyses, but no breakdown by SES was given.	Child interview used to measure friendships and other variables <sup>a</sup>	Boys from divorced families had greater contact with friends than boys in intact families. No differences among girls.
Hess and Camara (1979)	32 white boys and girls aged 9-11	16 children in intact families; 16 children in recently divorced families	All children had 2 working parents, each of whom had at least 2 years of college education.	Social relations with peers (e.g., peer acceptance, friendships, sociability)	No significant difference by family type, but social relations were significantly better among children who had good relationships with their fathers.
Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979)	48 white boys and 48 white girls; mean age = 3.9 at T1 and 5.8 at T2	24 boys and 24 girls from divorced, mother-custody families; 24 boys and 24 girls from non-divorced families	Middle class	Observational measures of children's free play and social interaction; teacher ratings of behavior; peer nomination measures; sociometric measure of popularity	Both boys and girls in divorced families exhibited immature, ineffective, and negative social behaviors but these behaviors did not last long for girls. Boys in divorced families remained unpopular two years postdivorce.

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TABLE 5. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS—Continued

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Kalter et al. (1985)	84 female college students aged 17-22	42 women with divorced parents, 42 with intact homes	middle- and upper-middle-class students at a "highly selective, expensive college"	Dating and sexual behavior	No significant differences, but women in divorced group began dating slightly later. Both groups socially active.
Kinard and Reinherz (1984)	202 boys and 192 girls in 3rd grade; 99% white	38 children in early (preschool) disrupted families; 36 in recently disrupted families; 320 in never-disrupted families	Predominantly working class (Classes III and IV on Hollingshead Index)	CAAP	No significant differences by family structure
Santrock (1975)	120 boys in 5th and 6th grade	60 boys in intact families; 20 in early-divorced (boys younger than age 6) families; 20 in late-divorced (boys between 6-10) families; 20 in father-deceased (boys between 6-10) families	Predominantly lower class. Father-present and father-absent groups were matched on SES, race, school, and other background characteristics.	Teacher ratings of sociability (e.g., adapts to new situations, social participation)	Father-absent boys were rated as significantly less sociable.
Stolberg and Anker (1983)	42 males and 37 females aged 6-16	39 children with divorced parents; 40 children in intact families	Two groups were matched on predivorce annual per capita income.	3 social competence scales from CBCL	Children in divorce group were significantly less prosocial in school-related behaviors.
Wyman et al. (1985)	286 children in grades 4-6	98 children with divorced parents, 170 from intact families	Divorce sample "comparable to the intact sample in sociodemographic background"	Parent questionnaire measuring children's sources of social support	Children of divorced parents had fewer close friends, spent less time with friends, and participated in fewer activities.

Note: CAAP = Child and Adolescent Adjustment Profile; CBCL = Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist.

<sup>a</sup>See Table 2 for more details on other dimensions of this study.

### *Antisocial Behavior*

Many studies over the years have linked juvenile delinquency, deviancy, and antisocial behavior to children living in broken homes (Bandura and Walters, 1959; Glueck and Glueck, 1962; Hoffman, 1971; McCord, McCord, and Thurber, 1962; Santrock, 1975; Stolberg and Anker, 1983; Tooley, 1976; Tuckman and Regan, 1966).

Unfortunately, these studies either relied on clinical samples or failed to control for social class and other factors related to delinquency. However, as shown in Table 6, a number of studies involving large representative samples and controlling for social class provide similar findings (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, and Gross, 1985; Kalter et al., 1985; Peterson and Zill, 1986; Rickel and Langner, 1985). Kalter et al. (1985) studied 522 teenage girls and found that girls in divorced families committed more delinquent acts (e.g., drug use, larceny, skipping school) than their counterparts in intact families. Dornbusch et al. (1985) examined a representative national sample of male and female youth aged 12- 17 and found that adolescents in mother-only households were more likely than their counterparts in intact families to engage in deviant acts, partly because of their tendency to make decisions independent of parental input. The presence of an additional adult (a grandparent, an uncle, a lover, a friend) in mother-only households increased control over adolescent behavior and lowered rates of deviant behavior, which suggests that "there are functional equivalents of two-parent families—nontraditional groupings that can do the job of parenting" (1985: 340). Peterson and Zill (1986) examined children of virtually the same ages (12-16) and found a higher incidence of behavior problems among children who had experienced marital disruption.

A tentative conclusion based on the evidence reviewed here is that antisocial behavior is less likely to occur in families where two adults are present, whether as biological parents, stepparents, or some combination of biological parents and other adults. Short-term increases in antisocial behavior may occur during periods of disruption, however, as children adjust to restructured relationships and parents struggle to maintain consistency in disciplining (Rickel and Langner, 1985). It is reasonable to expect that an important variable in predicting antisocial behavior is the level of family conflict, but most research has failed to examine the nature and quality of familial relationships in intact and other family structures. Peterson and Zill (1986) demonstrated that, when social class was controlled, behavior problems were as likely to occur among adolescents living in intact families characterized by persistent conflict as among those living in disrupted families. A related and often overlooked concern in tracing the effects of family structure on children's well-being is the quality of parent- child relationships experienced by children in different living arrangements. Peterson and Zill found that "poor parent-child relationships lead to more negative child behavior, yet maintaining good relationships with parents can go some way in reducing the effects of conflict and disruption" (1986: 306). Hess and Camara's (1979) analyses of a much smaller sample yielded a similar conclusion: aggressive behavior in children was unrelated to family type but was more common in situations characterized by infrequent or low-quality parent-child interaction and parental discord.

### *Summary of Empirical Evidence*

The empirical evidence on children of divorce, although inconsistent in places, is punctuated by a number of consistent findings. Research on personal adjustment suggests that young children, particularly boys, suffer temporary deleterious effects when their parents divorce, while adolescents are not as much affected by family structure as by parental discord. Adolescents living in single-parent families also acquire certain strengths, notably a sense of responsibility, as a consequence of altered family routines. Likewise, the evidence on self- concept indicates that family structure is unrelated but parental discord is negatively related to children's self- esteem. We cannot be certain of the degree to which family structure influences children's academic performance (or other aspects of cognitive functioning) because the effects of race and social class have not been controlled. But the available body of research demonstrates that children in single-parent families are slightly disadvantaged in school performance. The evidence on interpersonal relationships is sparse but suggests that children in disrupted families experience problems in peer relations, while adolescents in such families tend to be more active in dating and sexual relations. Research on antisocial behavior consistently illustrates that adolescents in mother-only households and in conflict-ridden families are more prone to commit delinquent acts.

TABLE 6. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Dornbusch et al. (1985)	Representative national sample of 6,710 adolescents aged 12-17 (National Health Examination Survey, Cycle III)	Primarily analyses of mother-only families and intact families	Defined separately by family income (high, middle, and low for the period 1966-1970) and father's education	Contact with the law, arrests, running away, cigarette smoking, truancy, school discipline	Youth in mother-only households were more likely to make decisions without direct parental input and more likely to exhibit deviant behavior. Results held with family income and parental education controlled.
Hess and Camara (1979)	32 white boys and girls aged 9-11	16 children in intact families; 16 children in recently divorced families	All children had 2 working parents, each of whom had at least 2 years of college education	Aggression, as reported by parents	Nonsignificant difference by family type. Parental harmony and parent-child relationships were significantly related to aggressive behavior.
Kalter et al. (1985)	522 girls aged 11-18 (1972 National Survey of Youth)	62 girls with divorced parents; 460 girls from intact households	Divorced group "represented significantly lower SES households"	Delinquent behavior	Girls in divorced families committed more delinquent acts (e.g., drug use, larceny, skipping school).
Kinard and Reinherz (1984)	202 boys and 192 girls in 3rd grade; 99% white	38 children in early (preschool) disrupted families; 36 in recently disrupted families; 320 in never-disrupted families	Predominantly working class (Classes III and IV on Hollingshead Index)	CAAP	Children in recently disrupted families displayed greatest hostility; those in never-disrupted families, least hostility.
Peterson and Zill (1986)	Representative national sample of 1,423 boys and girls aged 12-16 (National Survey of Children)	Children living with both biological (or adoptive) parents; those living with biological mothers but not fathers; and those living with biological fathers but not mothers	Nationally representative SES composition	3 subscales of Achenbach and Edelbrock index measuring depressed/withdrawn behavior; antisocial behavior; and impulsive/hyperactive behavior; plus 2 measures of school behavior problems	Both overcontrolled and undercontrolled behavior were more common in children who experienced marital disruption. Persistent marital conflict in intact families was strongly related to antisocial behavior.

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TABLE 6. SUMMARY OF RECENT STUDIES ON EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS—Continued

Study	Description of Sample	Family Structure of Respondents	Socioeconomic Background	Dependent Measures	Major Findings
Rickel and Langner (1985)	Representative, ethnically diverse sample of 1,034 families (T1) with children aged 6-18; 732 families at T2 (5-6 years later)	Children living with natural father, no father, or surrogate father; 25-50% had experienced marital disruption	Trichotomized into upper, middle, and low SES based on employment status, occupation, family income, and rent	Isolation; conflict with parents/siblings/friends; delinquency; as reported by mothers	At both Time 1 and Time 2 children with natural father exhibited the least delinquency, and children with surrogate fathers had the most disordered behavior. These findings persisted with ethnicity and social class controlled.
Santrock (1975)	120 boys in 5th and 6th grade	60 boys in intact families; 20 in early-divorced (boys younger than age 6) families; 20 in late-divorced (boys between 6-10) families; 20 in father-deceased (boys between 6-10) families	Predominantly lower class. Father-present and father-absent groups were matched on SES, race, school, and other background characteristics.	A variety of behavioral measures plus teacher ratings of social deviation (e.g., getting into trouble, stealing, cheating).	Controlling for relevant variables, there were no differences on behavioral measures, but teachers rated father-absent boys to be more socially deviant.
Stolberg and Anker (1983)	42 males and 37 females aged 6-16	39 children with divorced parents; 40 children in intact families	Two groups were matched on pre-divorce annual per capita income	9 behavior problem scales from CBCL	Children in divorce group who experienced considerable change displayed greatest behavior pathology depression, social withdrawal, aggressiveness, and delinquency.

Note: CAAP = Child and Adolescent Adjustment Profile; CBCL = Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist.

## LIMITATIONS OF PRIOR RESEARCH

In this section we discuss some of the principal limitations of research assessing the impact of divorce on children. In most cases we do not cite individual studies because many of the problems pertain to virtually all of the extant research. However, the reader should consider these problems in evaluating the findings of particular studies.

### *Nonrepresentative Samples*

Sampling is a virtually universal dilemma for researchers. There are excellent national surveys that analyze demographic variables but largely ignore social psychological issues such as personal adjustment or self-concept. Alternatively, there are excellent studies that incorporate these social psychological factors but are based on convenience samples.

Among the most problematic nonrepresentative samples are those that rely on clinical populations. While these studies are crucial to our understanding of children and adolescents who are most severely influenced by divorce, they tell us little or nothing about the typical experience following divorce. Since most children whose parents divorce do not receive professional help, such studies can be very misleading about the consequences of divorce for the majority of youth.

While nonrepresentative samples have shortcomings, national surveys typically involve reanalysis of data collected for other purposes and for which the effects of divorce are not a central concern. Because these surveys are not designed to investigate the consequences of divorce, many theoretically important variables are either excluded or poorly operationalized and important control variables are often absent.

### *What Family Structures Are Being Compared?*

Generally, investigations of family structure rely on classification schemes, such as father absence, in which the types derive from different events. For example, many military families are classified as father-absent, but the absence is temporary, the father's income is available to the family, and no social stigma is attached. Alternatively, a single-parent household may consist of a 25-year-old never-married woman and her five children. Other families are father-absent as the result of death, permanent separation, or divorce. A central problem in identifying the effects of family structure is that all of these families are frequently classified as one monolithic family form called "father-absent." One investigation involved five types of black family structures (male-headed, parent-incarcerated, separated, divorced, and widowed) and found that these arrangements varied in role structure, family cohesiveness, and parent-child relationships (Savage, Adair, and Friedman, 1978). For example, separated parents spent considerably less time with their children than parents in other family structures, and women with incarcerated husbands were most inclined to use corporal punishment on their children. Until family researchers distinguish father-absent families in terms of the cause and length of father absence, the quality of mother-child interaction, and the availability of other male role models, the conclusions drawn must be viewed with skepticism.

### *Failure to Control for Income or Social Class*

Perhaps the most significant limitation of research linking family structure and children's well-being, as Tables 2-6 reveal, is a failure to examine the moderating or mediating effects of income or social class. With very few exceptions, the studies rely on samples of children in one socioeconomic category, usually the middle class, for whom the economic consequences of divorce are dissimilar to those of children in lower socioeconomic categories. As a result, it is impossible to distinguish the effects of divorce and family structure from those of socioeconomic conditions. In explaining academic achievement, for example, the classic study by Coleman et al. (1966) demonstrated that income is more important than family structure (see also Herzog and Sudia, 1973; Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). Thus, effects that appear to be caused by divorce may actually be the result of inadequate income—the loss of the father being relatively less critical than the loss of his financial contribution.

Economic factors are important considerations in explicating causal processes for several reasons (see Greenberg and Wolf, 1982; Hill and Duncan, 1987; Kinard and Reinherz, 1984; McLanahan, 1985). First, low-income, single-parent mothers are more likely to work and, as a result, may provide inadequate supervision (Colletta, 1979). Children's behavioral problems associated with "mother-absence" (Hill, Augustyniak, and Ponza, 1986)

may therefore be attributable to low income and the need for maternal employment rather than being the result of single-parent family structure per se. Second, the effects of marital disruption on children may be indirect, operating through the economic and emotional impact of divorce on custodial mothers (Longfellow, 1979; Shinn, 1978). As mothers adjust to divorce, single-parenthood, and lower economic status, their anxiety and emotional distress may induce anxiety and stress in children, which in turn may hinder children's academic performance (Kinard and Reinherz, 1986). Failure to examine socioeconomic variation in single-parent families thus obscures the specific processes through which marital disruption affects children. Third, children in single-parent households are more likely to assume adult roles at an early age—for example, working full-time and being responsible for younger siblings, responsibilities that require many adolescents to leave school (Kelly and Wal lerstein, 1979; Weiss, 1979). The effects (both positive and negative) of these accelerated life course transitions are consequences of economic deprivation.

Other issues related to income and social class need to be considered. First, it is not clear whether the effect is due to inadequate family income or loss of family income. Single-parent families precipitated by divorce may be poor as a result of a sudden loss of income. Dramatic changes in lifestyle, financial instability, and loss of status may affect children indirectly through custodial parents' loss of control and altered childrearing practices. Increased labor force participation or increased transfer payments may help, but the net effect is still a dramatic loss of income (Cherlin, 1981; Hoffman, 1977; Weitzman, 1985).

While many families lose a stable middle-class environment and encounter stigmatization and financial instability, other families experience relatively minor changes. Santrock and Warshak (1979) report that postdivorce income losses were severe for mother-custody families but not for father-custody families. Further, the source of income is an important consideration, in that welfare dollars may stigmatize the poor and child support payments are unreliable (Bould, 1977).

The generally negative effects of divorce on family income must also be distinguished from the effects of divorce on female labor force participation and single mothers' personal income. Using the National Longitudinal Survey to trace the marital and work careers of women over a 10-year period, Porter (1984) found that divorced, never-remarried women earned more than the continuously married or the currently married (also see Corcoran, 1979). The long-term positive effect of divorce on the earning power of women needs to be recognized and may explain why most of the adverse effects of divorce diminish over time. Employed single mothers may provide stronger role models than dependent mothers in intact families, fostering egalitarian sex role attitudes among both women and men whose parents divorced (Kiecolt and Acock, 1988).

### *Ecological Fallacy*

A common error in social research is termed the "ecological fallacy," occurring when relationships examined at the aggregate level are assumed to apply at the individual level. Herzog and Sudia (1973), for example, report several studies that correlate the proportion of single-parent households with the incidence of delinquency and other behavior problems in census tracts. But even substantial correlations tell us nothing about whether the delinquents come from two-parent or single-parent families. Rather than providing information on family structure, such correlations may indicate the aggregate effects of poverty, discrimination, inadequate education, and lack of opportunity.

### *Failure to Examine Contextual Factors*

A number of contextual factors that distinguish the living conditions of children in intact and disrupted families may be linked to behavioral differences between the two groups. Glenn and Supancic (1984) note that divorced persons participate less in church activities than married persons. While parents' religious orientations are individual-level factors, involvement in church activities provides a contextual variable. If children living in single-parent households are systematically less likely to be exposed to other children who are active in a church, this may have a substantial impact on their adjustment. Evidence supporting this kind of contextual effect is provided by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982). They found that, although children from single-parent households were much more likely than those from two-parent families to drop out of public schools, there was no

difference in Catholic schools—a result that illustrates a contextual effect involving norms and social networks operating in the Catholic community.

Another contextual variable is urban residence. Single-parent households are far more common in urban areas. Urban areas provide a different environment for children than do suburbs, rural areas, or small towns. The quality of the educational system and the exposure to deviant subcultures are two correlates of residential patterns that may affect children who live in a female-headed household. Contextual factors have an important influence on all children, regardless of family structure, adequacy of parenting, or income. Other contextual factors that influence children include the number of fatherless children in their school, neighborhood SES, presence of a gang subculture, presence of peer groups using drugs (Blechman, Berberian, and Thompson, 1977), and the geographic mobility of peers. Research has yet to disentangle such contextual factors from the direct effect of family structure. Contextual factors may prove as important as the immediate family history of the child.

### *Lack of Longitudinal Designs*

Among the hundreds of studies on children of divorce, there are only a pair of widely cited longitudinal studies (Hetherington et al., 1978, 1979; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980b), and even these studies have serious methodological limitations (Blechman, 1982; Cherlin, 1981). Yet adjustment to changes in family structure is a developmental process. Retrospective data are rarely used, so typical cross-sectional comparisons of children living in disrupted families with children in intact families provide very little, if any, information on the socioeconomic history of these families, level of family conflict, parent-child relations, and so on. If, for example, children from single-parent households were formerly in two-parent households that were poor and conflict-ridden, any problems the children now have may be scars from long ago rather than a direct consequence of the divorce. A partial solution is to collect retrospective information on numerous theoretically relevant dimensions of family life prior to the divorce (and to collect the same retrospective information on intact families). Unfortunately, most of the extant studies rely on cross-sectional information, and family researchers must therefore be cautious in interpreting results.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is reason to question the validity of the family composition hypothesis. Theoretically, it has been assumed that the nuclear family is the norm and, by implication, that any departure from it is deviant and therefore deleterious to those involved. Even if this were the case, no theoretical perspective recognizes that these effects may be short-lived or otherwise mitigated by compensatory mechanisms and alternative role models. In the absence of a parent, it is possible that developmental needs are met by other actors.

It is simplistic and inaccurate to think of divorce as having uniform consequences for children. The consequences of divorce vary along different dimensions of well-being, characteristics of children (e.g., predivorce adjustment, age at the time of disruption) and characteristics of families (e.g., socioeconomic history, pre- and postdivorce level of conflict, parent-child relationships, and maternal employment). Most of the evidence reviewed here suggests that some sociodemographic characteristics of children, such as race and gender, are not as important as characteristics of families in mediating the effects of divorce. Many studies report boys to be at a greater disadvantage, but these differences usually disappear when other relevant variables are controlled. At present, there are too few methodologically adequate studies comparing white and black children to conclude that one group is more damaged by family disruption than the other.

Characteristics of families, on the other hand, are critical to youthful well-being. Family conflict contributes to many problems in social development, emotional stability, and cognitive skills (Edwards, 1987; Kurdek, 1981), and these effects continue long after the divorce is finalized. Slater and Haber (1984) report that ongoing high levels of conflict, whether in intact or divorced homes, produce lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and a loss of self-control. Conflict also reduces the child's attraction to the parents (White, Brinkerhoff, and Booth, 1985). Rosen (1979) concludes that parental separation is more beneficial for children than continued conflict, and Blechman (1982) proposes that parent absence is not the key to adjustment problems but simply a surrogate for more fundamental causes, including family conflict and a hostile family environment. Such conflict and hostility may account for adolescent adjustment problems whether the family in question goes through divorce or remains

intact (Hoffman, 1971). The level of conflict is thus an important dimension of family interaction that can precipitate changes in family structure and affect children's well-being.

Maternal employment is another variable mediating the consequences of divorce for children. Divorced women often find the dual responsibilities of provider and parent to be stressful (Brofenbrenner, 1976). But studies indicate that women who work prior to the divorce do not find continued employment problematic (Kinard and Reinherz, 1984); the problem occurs for women who enter the labor force after the divorce and who view the loss of time with their children as another detriment to the children that is caused by the divorce (Kinard and Reinherz, 1984). As a practical matter, the alternative to employment for single-parent mothers is likely to be poverty or, at best, economic dependency. The effects of maternal employment on children's well-being need to be compared to the effects of nonemployment and consequent poverty.

Other bases of social support for single-parent mothers and their children must also be examined. The presence of strong social networks may ease the parents' and, presumably, the child's adjustment after a divorce (Milardo, 1987; Savage et al., 1978). However, women who are poor, have many children, and must work long hours are likely to have limited social networks and few friends. Typically, the single mother and her children are also isolated from her ex-husband's family (Anspach, 1976). By reuniting with her family of origin, the mother may be isolated from her community and new social experiences for herself and her children (McLanahan, Wedemeyer, and Adelberg, 1981). Kinship ties are usually strained, as both biological parents and parents-in-law are more critical of the divorce than friends are (Spanier and Thompson, 1984). Little has been done to relate these considerations about kinship relations and social networks or divorced women to the well-being of children and adolescents. We believe that these social relations are important, but empirical verification is needed.

Methodologically, research in support of the family composition hypothesis has been flawed in a number of respects (Blechman, 1982). As described above, most studies (a) rely on simplistic classifications of family structure; (b) overlook potentially confounding factors such as income and social class; (c) use nonrepresentative samples; (d) examine limited dimensions of social and psychological well-being; (e) fail to assess possible beneficial effects deriving from different family structures; and (f) rely on nonlongitudinal designs to detect developmental processes.(7)

In order to address the deficiencies of previous research, future studies must compare the four most prevalent family structures: (a) intact nuclear families with parents in their first marriage; (b) reconstituted families where one biological and one stepparent are present; (c) single-parent families consisting of a divorced or separated mother and child; and (d) mother-child units where the parent has never been married. Important variations within these structures must also be examined—for example, mother-custody and father-custody families. Our review suggests that researchers need to explore the effects of factors that may intervene between family structure and youthful well-being—factors mediating the impact of changing family forms. Social class, marital quality, parent-child relations, and contextual factors are important considerations in tracing the effects of family structure on children's social and psychological well-being. Not least, longitudinal designs should be employed, allowing estimation of the duration of any detected adverse effects. To the extent that we lack systematic evidence of this kind, the processes through which divorce and family structure affect children's well-being remain largely unknown,

## NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meetings of the Southern Sociological Society, Atlanta, April 1987. The authors express their appreciation to John N. Edwards for sharing many valuable insights related to the focus of this review. They also thank him and K. Jill Kiecolt for critical and constructive suggestions on an earlier draft, Theodore D. Fnlter for demographic consultation, Sampson Lee Blair for assistance in assembling the vast literature reviewed here, and the anonymous reviewers for their thorough comments and useful ideas.

- (1) In cases where a study involves measures of multiple dimensions of well-being, the study is listed in each corresponding table. Not included in the tables are studies of clinical populations (e.g., Jacobson, 1978; Wallerstein, 1984; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975, 1980a, 1980b), studies that do not involve comparisons of children in disrupted families with children in intact families, and studies examining aspects of divorce other than children's well-being (e.g., analyses of demographic trends and examinations of adult children of divorce).
- (2) Other studies focusing on the timing of divorce provide evidence that children's adjustment is unaffected by the length of time since marital disruption (Hodges, Wechsler, and Ballantine, 1979; Kalter and Rembar, 1981; Santrock, 1975).
- (3) Other studies, several using predominantly white samples (e.g., Kinard and Reinherz, 1984), and one involving a predominantly black sample (Kellem, Ensminger, and Turner, 1977) report no gender differences in adjustment.
- (4) Another study presents evidence that male gender role development is unaffected by the timing of father absence and by the availability of male siblings and father substitutes, but father absence is associated nevertheless with "less appropriate" gender role orientation (Drake and McDougall, 1977).
- (5) This is not to say that such responsibilities and status have uniformly positive effects, Weiss (1979) contends that these arrangements may have benefits for older children but may lead to excessive self-reliance among younger children. Even for adolescents, however, the nature of confidant relations is important in that discussions of adult issues (e.g., mother's sex life, work stress) may be deleterious. There is also the risk of losing this status when the mother remarries, thus creating further problems,
- (6) Featherman and Hauser (1978) obtained different results in controlling for social class and race. They found that American males born between 1907 and 1951 who lived in one-parent families completed approximately three-fourths of a year less schooling than their counterparts who lived with both parents. The same pattern held for Canadian males and females.
- (7) The recent National Survey of Families and Households contains extensive data on diverse family structures and child outcomes, Five groups were oversampled: single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, recently married couples, and minorities. Detailed information on life history and family relations was collected, and a 5-year follow-up is planned. Documentation is available through the Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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