

ACP position paper

The impact of family structure on the health of children: Effects of divorce*

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Nearly three decades of research evaluating the impact of family structure on the health and well-being of children demonstrates that children living with their married, biological parents consistently have better physical, emotional, and academic well-being. Pediatricians and society should promote the family structure that has the best chance of producing healthy children. The best scientific literature to date suggests that, with the exception of parents faced with unresolvable marital violence, children fare better when parents work at maintaining the marriage. Consequently, society should make every effort to support healthy marriages and to discourage married couples from divorcing.

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EPIDEMIOLOGY

The demographics of families are changing, and with that, the philosophical underpinnings of relationships are also changing. Many young adults feel marriage is old-fashioned and confining, and that open cohabitating relationships provide a healthier option that is more conducive to personal development. If a relationship does not provide personal happiness, parents often believe that their children will adapt to new family relationships so that divorce or separation will have few long-term, adverse consequences. These beliefs have led to marriage occurring later, women having fewer children

and doing so later in life, single mothers giving birth to many of our children, more parents cohabitating, and fewer children living with their married, biologic parents.

In 1960, the average age of a woman's first marriage was 20.3 years; that of men was 22.8 years. But by 2010, that changed so that the median age at first marriage was 25.8 years for women and 28.3 years for men (Copen et al. 2012). In 1960, the rate of marriage for women was 76.5 per 10,000, but this had decreased to 37.4 per 10,000 by 2008. The birth rate for the United States is now so low that it is below replacement rate, and 41 percent of all births in 2009 were to unmarried women. Nearly one in five births to women in their thirties was non-marital in 2007, compared with one in seven in 2002.

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Children's lives track with these statistics. In 1970, 84 percent of children lived with their married biologic parents, whereas by 2009, only 60 percent did so. In 2009, only 29 percent of African-American children lived with their married biologic parents, while 50 percent were living in single-mother homes. Furthermore, 58 percent of Hispanic children lived with married biologic parents, while 25 percent were living in single-mother homes. Importantly, a recent Harvard study on single-parent families revealed that the most prominent factor preventing many children from upward mobility is living with a single parent (Chetty et al. 2014).

In addition, the number of couples who choose to cohabit rather than marry has increased dramatically, with 4.9 million cohabiting couples in 2002, versus just 500,000 in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Half of the unmarried births are to mothers who are in cohabitating relationships, and seven in ten children of cohabitating couples will experience parental separation. The dissolution rate of cohabitating couples is four times higher than married couples who did not cohabit before marriage (Osborne, Manning, and Stock 2007).

The Centers for Disease Control stopped gathering complete data on the number of children affected by divorce in 1988, and at that time more than one million children were affected (Cohen 2002). Since then, the incidence of divorce has continued to climb, and according to the 2009 American Community Survey, only 45.8 percent of children reach age 17 years while still living with their biologic parents who were married before or around the time of the child's birth (Fagan and Zill 2011). The majority of divorces affect younger children since 72 percent of

divorces occur during the first 14 years of marriage. Because a high percentage of divorced adults remarry, and 40 percent of these remarriages also end in divorce, children may be subjected to multiple family realignments (Cohen 2002).

The precipitating causes of divorce have also changed over time. Prior to no-fault divorce laws, the legal procedures for obtaining a divorce were often difficult and expensive, so that only the most dysfunctional marriages ended in divorce. Children who are removed from the most dysfunctional environments are more likely to do better after the divorce. However, with the introduction of no-fault divorce laws, it is likely that the child has not experienced severe levels of parental discord, so the divorce has more adverse effects on the child. One study seems to conclude that the majority of more recent divorces were not preceded by an extended period of marital conflict (Amato and Booth 1997 as quoted in Amato 2001).

Divorce and parental separation are damaging to children, families, the economy, and society as a whole, and this paper outlines these adverse effects. While recognizing that not all children or parents will experience every negative consequence listed below, given the seriousness of these adverse outcomes and the magnitude of the issue, it is important that pediatricians support public policies that promote the health and preservation of the child's biologic family.