

Family Disruption and Child Wellbeing: Understanding the Role of Family Context

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The structure of American families has undergone dramatic change over the past half century (Casper and Bianchi 2002). Increases in divorce, non-marital fertility, cohabitation, and declines in marriage and remarriage have altered the context in which children are raised. Scholars have documented these changes and explored their association with child wellbeing (e.g., Amato and Booth 1997; Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Kiernan and Cherlin 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Morrison and Cherlin 1995; Clarke-Stewart, et al. 2000). These findings suggest that, on average, those in two-biological family households report higher levels of psychological wellbeing and academic success compared to those in other family forms.

And while this body of literature is impressive, much of this work conceptualizes family structure change as a stressor, but as stress theory emphasizes, stress is not an inherent attribute of an event but derives from the context in which it occurs (Wheaton 1990). For some children, family change can have little negative effect or even be beneficial to their socioemotional health when the change represents a positive turning point or escape from a chronically stressful environment. An emerging literature has begun to take pre-disruption factors into account when exploring the role of family change on child wellbeing across the early life course (Clarke-Stewart, et al. 2000; Morrison and Cherlin 1995; Ni Bhrolchain 2001; Booth and Amato 2001). For example, Jekielek's (1998) study of parental conflict, marital disruption, and children's emotional health found that children remaining in high conflict family environments were more depressed than were children who experienced similar levels of conflict but whose parents subsequently divorced. Furthermore, Amato and colleagues (Booth and Amato 2001; Amato and DeBoer 2001) found that, among young adults whose parents divorced, those raised in high conflict families were less likely to divorce themselves and had better quality intimate relationships, more social support from friends and relatives, and better psychological wellbeing than those raised in low conflict families that divorced. These findings suggest the effects of divorce on young people are not monolithic but are conditioned by the context in which divorce or disruption occurs.

Using data drawn from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), this study will investigate this research question. Unlike other studies often used by demographers to study family structure effects on child wellbeing (e.g., Add Health, NLSY, NSFG), this study is not nationally representative. It does, however, offer prospective, longitudinal, multi-source (e.g., mother, father, child, interviewer observations) measurement of family structure, family environment (e.g., marital intimacy and conflict, parenting behaviors), and various indicators of child wellbeing across a 10-year period. This richness makes these data ideal to study the conditions under which family structure change may have minimal or even positive effects on child wellbeing and may help expand our understanding of the ways parents' decisions about marriage, divorce, and romantic relationships help guide the developmental wellbeing of their children.

Data

SECCYD is a comprehensive longitudinal study designed to answer questions about the relation between childcare and child development. Given the richness of these data, however, it has been widely used to study child development in general. The families who participated were recruited from hospitals located in or near Little Rock, AR; Irvine, CA; Lawrence, KS; Boston, MA; Philadelphia, PA; Pittsburgh, PA; Charlottesville, VA; Morganton, NC; Seattle, WA; and Madison, WI; the families lived in urban, suburban, and rural communities near these hospitals. To be eligible, the mother had to be over 18 years of age, healthy, and conversant in English; the infant had to be a singleton and healthy; and the family could not be planning to move within the following year. When infants were one month old, 1,364 families (58% of those contacted) with healthy newborns were enrolled in the study. Although the eligibility criteria eliminated some low-income families, the resulting sample was diverse—24% ethnic minority children, 11% mothers without a high school education, and 14% single mothers. The study consists of three phases: Phase I (1991-1994) followed the children from birth to age 3, Phase II (1995-1999) followed them from age 3 through 1st grade, and Phase III (2000-2004) followed them from 2nd grade through 6th grade. The longitudinal sample through Phase II includes 1079 children and parents (79% of sample).

This study will exploit the SECCYD data by restricting the sample to children born into two-biological parent families—married or cohabitating—who experienced no family change up to 36 months. Such a restriction provides a sample of families *at risk* of disruption for whom we

have multiple measures of family context, pre-disruption. Three dimensions of child socioemotional wellbeing will be considered. Internalizing and externalizing behaviors, drawn from the Child Behavior Checklist, are based on mother reports during the spring of 1st grade and cognitive ability in 1st grade, measured with four subscales that make up the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, will be used. Family structure and the timing of marital disruptions are based on maternal prospective reports of household composition from the child's birth through the end of kindergarten (for a total of 21 data collection points). For each data collection point, family structure is coded into mutually exclusive categories. These data are arrayed and from this array, measures that reflect family structure at birth (e.g., two-biological parents married, two-biological parents cohabitating, other cohabitation, single, other), whether a two-biological parent family experienced a separation or divorce from birth to 36 months (0/1), and whether a two-biological parent family experienced a separation or divorce between 37 months to the end of kindergarten (0/1) are constructed.

Pre-disruption family context measures are drawn from interviews during the child's first two years of life. At month 1, mothers reported on the level of conflict, ambiguity, and love in their relationship with the biological father, drawn from the Love and Relationship questionnaire. At 15 months, mother's stress due to parenting was measured and indicators of the home environment, measured with the HOME inventory and based on semi-structured interviews with the mother and direct observation of mother and child in the home, were also constructed. Finally, mother's education, age, race, and depressive symptoms, measured using the CES-D scale at 6 months, and child's gender are also included in all analyses.

Descriptive Analyses

The analytic sample is restricted to those born into two-biological parent families—married or cohabitating—who experienced no family change up to age 3 ($n = 953$). Overall, about 8% of the sample experienced a family structure change, defined as a parental separation or divorce, between 54 months and the end of kindergarten. Table 1 presents mean differences in child outcomes at 1st grade and key pre-disruption measures for children in families that experienced a disruption and those in stable two-biological parent families. For each outcome considered, children who experienced a family disruption scored lower than those in two-biological parent families. Differences in the family context in early childhood also distinguished those who eventually experienced a family disruption. In the first two years of the

children's lives, mothers reported higher levels of ambivalence and lower levels of love in their intimate relationship with the biological fathers and also higher levels of depression than those in stable two biological parent families. Interviewer also noted lower levels of home enrichment and positive parenting in families that experienced a subsequent separation or divorce. Finally, differences in parent and child sociodemographic characteristics were also detected.

Additional analyses will explore these associations in a multivariate framework, considering the main effects of both the disruption event and pre-disruption family context on indicators of child wellbeing. These analyses will also explore interactions between the disruption event and the family context to assess whether the association between family structure change and wellbeing in middle childhood is less strong or non-existent among children in families marked by high marital ambivalence and conflict, poor parenting, or unsupportive home environments. Such findings would suggest that the developmental implications of family change depend, in part, on the context in which it occurs.