# Family Instability and Children's Social Development

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## Introduction

Family instability refers to changes in parents' residential and romantic partnerships, such as marriage, divorce, and romantic partners moving in or out of the home. As rates of cohabitation, nonmarital births, and divorce have increased over the past 60 years, more children have experienced some degree of family instability.[1] This increase in family instability can have a negative influence on children's and adolescents' functioning and behavior.[2]

Not all families have been equally affected by the increase in family instability. Families in which the parents are not married and have low household income are much more likely to experience family instability than families with married parents and higher household income.[3,4,5] Family instability influences children and adolescents' functioning, as do household income and parents' relationship status.[6,7] Family stability can promote positive social behavior in children and adolescents, while instability is associated with social maladjustment, including behaviors such as aggression toward peers, teachers, or parents.[8] This brief examines the links between family instability during childhood, relationship status at birth, and household income in adolescence, and social competence and aggression in adolescence.[a]

### Key Terms

**Cohabitation/cohabiting relationship**
mothers who were coresidential with a romantic partner but not married

**Relationship status**
whether mothers were married, cohabiting, or not living with a partner

**Family instability**
a change in parents' residential, romantic partnerships (e.g., divorce, a new partner moving in)

## Key Findings

- Family instability was associated with more aggression but was not associated with social competence.
- Relationship status at birth was associated with social competence and aggression. Adolescents whose mothers were married at birth had higher social competence and lower aggression than those whose mothers were cohabiting or not living with a partner. Adolescents whose mothers were cohabiting at birth had lower aggression than those whose mothers were not living with a partner.

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- Income was significantly associated with social development. Adolescents with household income greater than or equal to 200 percent of the federal poverty line (FPL) had higher social competence and lower aggression than those with household income below 200 percent FPL.
- Adolescents whose parents divorced had higher aggression than those whose parents stayed married, whereas adolescents whose mothers did not live with a partner at birth—but later moved in with a partner– had higher social competence compared to those whose mothers did not move in with a partner. The breakup of a cohabiting relationship was not associated with adolescents' aggression or social competence.
- Divorce was associated with adolescent aggression for those with higher family income.
- Among adolescents from low-income families, those whose mothers did not live with a partner at birth and later moved in with a partner had higher social competence than those whose mother never moved in with a partner.

# Background

An important feature of childhood is the development of positive social skills, or social competence, that represent essential life skills throughout childhood and into adulthood.[9] The counterpart of this—social incompetence or maladjustment, including aggression—is an expected part of normal child development during toddlerhood.[10] However, aggression becomes problematic when it persists into the school years, at which point most children have developed the social competence to interact effectively with others, and have the ability to form and maintain social relationships, regulate their emotions, and respond to the emotions of others.[11,12] The older children are when they display a lack of social competence, the more concerning, especially when such a deficit is expressed through aggression.[13] In adolescence, aggression can involve bullying, physical assault, and other behaviors that may lead to involvement with the criminal justice system and other negative outcomes.[14,15]

Family instability can influence children's development by affecting the amount and quality of resources, both in terms of time and money, available to parents.[16,17] Extensive research shows that parenting is one of the most important influences on children's early development of both social competence and aggression.[18] For example, if a child's biological parents separate and one parent (typically the father) moves out of the house, that type of instability affects the amount of time each parent spends with the child, the income available to support the child, and possibly the quality of the interactions that each parent has with the child. Likewise, a new romantic partner moving into the home may affect the time the parent spends with their child or, potentially, the income available to the household. However, cohabiting couples generally do not share resources,[19] suggesting that this type of instability may be stressful because of the expected reduction in parental time with the child without an increase in resources. Because family instability is stressful for children,[20] greater family instability may be associated with lower levels of social competence and higher levels of aggression.

Not all children are equally likely to experience family instability. In the United States, married couples are typically more stable than their unmarried counterparts.[21] Marriage is also associated with higher income and increased resources compared to cohabitation or living without a partner[22]; both factors are positively linked with social competence.[23] Children in married families, which are typically more stable, may have significantly higher average levels of social competence and lower levels of aggression compared to adolescents with parents who are cohabiting or not living with a partner; however, these children may respond more negatively when their parents divorce, relative to adolescents whose parents have a nonmarital separation. This is because the divorce is a less likely outcome than the nonmarital separation, given the greater likelihood for instability among unmarried parents. Recent research suggests that when children experience an event that is unlikely to occur, such as divorce compared to nonmarital separation,

they suffer worse outcomes than children for whom the event was more likely to occur.[24] This phenomenon is known as *heterogeneity effects*.

The research summarized in this brief highlights that family instability is difficult to disentangle from household income and relationship status. Relationship status is linked with instability and income,[25] instability may cause financial hardship,[26] and those who are low-income to begin with may have life experiences—such as job loss and unstable housing—that make them more likely to experience family instability.[27] We thus examine how each of these factors (family instability, relationship status, and household income) are linked with adolescents' social development. We also examine whether the association between family instability and adolescents' social development differs by their parents' relationship status and household income following instability. Past research has not focused on how families' experiences of instability vary by both relationship status and household income—especially household income—following the family instability. When instability is less "expected," it may affect children more. Moreover, it is possible that higher income acts as a buffer to the negative effects associated with family instability; as such, children whose households maintain higher income after an instance of family instability may be less affected by instability. These children may be able to stay in the same neighborhood or school and their parents may be able to hire help; as a result, their schedules are not disrupted as their parents navigate a new normal. Higher income functions as a protective factor for children, with children from higher-income families, on average, experiencing better outcomes than children from low-income families.[28]

# Methodology and Data

## Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

The study team used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) to examine the relationship between the family instability children experienced from birth to age 9 and children's social competence and aggression at age 15. The FFCW follows a cohort of children born from 1998 to 2000 in 20 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more. There are data from mothers and fathers at the time of their child's birth and again at ages 1, 3, 5, and 9. One caregiver (often the mother) is also interviewed when the child is 15, and the child is interviewed at ages 9 and 15.

The analytic sample used in this brief includes 1,498 children who consistently lived with their mother at least 50 percent of the time from birth to age 9 and whose mothers experienced no or one instance of family instability. We used t-tests to compare whether adolescent social competence and aggression were significantly different for adolescents who did not experience any family instability from birth to age 9, compared to those who experienced one instance of family instability during this time. We then examined differences in the association between family instability from birth to age 9 and adolescent social competence and aggression at age 15 by mother's relationship status at the time of the child's birth and household income when the child was 15.

## Independent variables

We measured family instability dichotomously: no family instability versus one instance. An instance of family instability captures whether the mother reported changing residential romantic partnership status (e.g., moving in with a romantic partner; divorcing from a spouse) up to the age 9 survey wave. At each point in time of the study, mothers reported whether they were living with the child's biological father, a different romantic partner, or no romantic partner. Starting at age 5, mothers also reported whether they had experienced any additional changes in the partner with whom they resided between the points in time when they were surveyed. This variable captures resident status and does not differentiate between

married and unmarried mothers when defining whether a transition has occurred. Thus, when a cohabiting mother marries her partner, this does not count as a form of family instability. We dichotomized this variable because most mothers who experienced any instability experienced one instance (M = 1.3). A dichotomized variable, in conjunction with mothers' relationship status, allows us to identify the type of transition occurring (i.e., divorce, nonmarital breakup, or addition of a coresidential partner), allowing for clearer interpretation of our results. Moreover, preliminary analyses revealed little difference in the level of social competence or aggression associated with each additional instance of family instability beyond the first one. For adolescents whose mothers were married or cohabiting at birth, one instance of family instability is a divorce or breakup from the child's father. For adolescents whose mothers were not living with a partner at birth, one instance of family instability means that a romantic partner moved into the home.

We also examined the association between mothers' relationship status and mothers' household income and adolescents' social competence and aggression. To capture mother's relationship status at birth, we created a categorical variable with three values: married, cohabiting (i.e., coresidential with a romantic partner but not married), and not living with a partner, which included mothers who were in non-coresidential dating relationships or were not in a romantic relationship at all. Income was measured when the child was age 15 with a binary variable indicating whether the household income was below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL), or greater than or equal to 200 percent FPL. We lastly examined differences in the relationship between family instability and child social competence and aggression by mother's relationship status when the child was born and household income when the child was age 15.

## Dependent variable

We measured social competence using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) when the child is age 15. On the SSRS, adolescents report on their own social behaviors, including their ability to make friends easily, their self-confidence in social situations, and their attempts to comfort others when they are upset. The SSRS has a scale of 0 to 24 and scores for this sample ranged from 3 to 24, with an average score of 17.09.

We measured aggression using the aggression subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). The CBCL is a widely used, reliable scale on which mothers report how often their child exhibits behaviors such as destroying things, getting in many fights, or having a hot temper. The CBCL aggression subscale is measured on a scale of 0 to 2 and scores for this sample ranged from 0 to 1.64, with an average score of 0.25, meaning that most children rarely used aggressive behaviors.

# Presentation of Findings

## Family instability and social development

Over one third of the teens in our sample (35%) experienced one instance of family instability from birth to age 9 (Table 1). We found that, on average, family instability was significantly associated with higher levels of aggression, but not significantly associated with lower levels of social competence (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics (n=1,498)

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Family instability (0-9)** | | |
| No instances | 981 | 65 |
| One instance | 517 | 35 |
| **Relationship status (0)** | | |
| Married | 550 | 37 |
| Cohabiting | 466 | 31 |
| Neither[1] | 482 | 32 |
| **Mother's income (15)** | | |
| <200% FPL | 758 | 51 |
| ≥200% FPL | 737 | 49 |

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Note: Child age indicated in (). [1] "Neither" indicates mother was not living with a partner.

## Relationship status at birth and social development

Among our sample of adolescents, 37 percent had mothers who were married at the time of their birth, 31 percent had mothers who were cohabiting at the time of their birth (i.e., unmarried but living with a partner), and 32 percent had mothers who were not living with a partner at the time of their birth (Table 1). Adolescents whose mothers were married at the time of their birth had significantly higher social competence (17.85 on the Social Skills Rating System [SSRS] scale of social competence) than adolescents whose mothers were cohabiting or not living with a partner when they were born (SSRS scores of 16.65 and 16.66, respectively). There was no significant difference between the cohabiting and not living with a partner groups (Table 2). We also examined the association between levels of aggression and relationship status at birth and found the inverse pattern (Table 3). Adolescents whose mothers were married at birth had lower aggression (0.20 on the Child Behavior Check List [CBCL] aggression subscale) than adolescents whose mothers were cohabiting (CBCL score of 0.25). Adolescents whose mothers were cohabiting had significantly lower aggression than adolescents whose mothers were not living with a partner (CBCL score of 0.30).

## Household income at age 15 and social development

Among the analytic sample, 49 percent of households had an annual income greater than or equal to 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL),[b] and 51 percent had an annual income of less than 200 percent FPL (Table 1). Higher income was associated with higher social competence (17.93 on the SSRS) and lower aggression (0.20 on the CBCL), compared to lower income (16.28 and 0.30, respectively) (Tables 2 and 3).

[b] In 2017, the last year in which age 15 data were collected for the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, the federal poverty level (FPL) for a two-person household was $16,240. Families living under 200 percent of the FPL are considered low-income, in part because they earn a low enough income to be eligible for many government benefits; those who live at or above 200 percent of the FPL are considered to be living "out of poverty."

**Table 2.** Child social competence by family instability, mother's relationship status, and household income.

| | Child social competence score at age 15 n=1,443 | p-value[2] |
|---|---|---|
| **Family instability (0-9)** | | |
| No instances | 17.08 | - |
| One instance | 17.11 | |
| **Relationship status (0)** | | |
| Married | 17.85 | ***[3] |
| Cohabiting | 16.65 | - |
| Neither[1] | 16.66 | |
| **Mother's income (15)** | | |
| <200% FPL | 16.28 | ***[4] |
| ≥200% FPL | 17.93 | |

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Notes: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. Child age indicated in (). [1] "Neither" indicates mother was not living with a partner. [2] P-value indicates the significance of a t-test comparing the indicated row to the row below. [3] Children whose mothers were married at birth had significantly higher social competence scores than children whose mothers were cohabiting at birth. [4] Children in households with income below 200% FPL had significantly lower social competence scores than children in households with income greater than or equal to 200% FPL. Social competence was measured using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), which has a scale of 0 to 24. SSRS scores for this sample ranged from 3 to 24.

**Table 3.** Child aggression by family instability, mother's relationship status, and household income.

| | Child aggression score at age 15 n=1,487 | p-value[2] |
|---|---|---|
| **Family instability (0-9)** | | |
| No instances | 0.23 | **[3] |
| One instance | 0.28 | |
| **Relationship status (0)** | | |
| Married | 0.20 | **[4] |
| Cohabiting | 0.25 | *[5] |
| Neither[1] | 0.30 | |
| **Mother's income (15)** | | |
| <200% FPL | 0.30 | ***[6] |
| ≥200% FPL | 0.20 | |

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Notes: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. Child age indicated in (). [1] "Neither" indicates mother was not living with a partner. [2] P-value indicates the significance of a t-test comparing the indicated row to the row below. [3] Children who did not experience any family instability had significantly lower aggression than children who experienced one instance of family instability. [4] Children whose mothers were married at the time of their birth had significantly lower aggression than children whose mothers were cohabiting. [5] Children whose mothers were cohabiting at the time of their birth had significantly lower aggression than children whose mothers were neither married nor cohabiting. [6] Children in households with income below 200% FPL had significantly higher aggression than children in households with income greater than or equal to 200% FPL. Aggression was measured using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) aggression subscale, which has a scale of 0 to 2. CBCL scores for this sample ranged from 0 to 1.64.

## Differences in the association between family instability and social development, by relationship status and household income

Next, we examined group differences in how children responded when they experienced one instance of family instability—compared to no instances of family instability—by their mothers' relationship status at birth and their household income at age 15.

Overall, a divorce or breakup was not associated with social competence (Table 4). However, for adolescents with mothers who were not living with a partner at birth, a romantic partner moving into the home was associated with significantly *higher* social competence (SSRS score of 16.07 increasing to 17.21). This is surprising because developmental theory suggests that any instability or change, even a good one, is stressful for children. Moreover, past research has supported this theory, finding that a partner entering the home can be a stressful event leading to social maladjustment.[29] Higher social competence associated with a mother's partner moving in may reflect an increase in resources for the household or a decrease in the mother's parenting stress. This is discussed in further detail below.

With regard to aggression, we observed the opposite pattern. Divorce, which breaks up the most stable, highest-resourced relationship status (marriage), was associated with higher adolescent aggression than a stable marriage (CBCL scores of 0.29 and 0.18, respectively). For adolescents with cohabiting mothers at birth, a breakup was not significantly associated with aggression. For adolescents with mothers who were not living with a partner at birth, a partner moving into the home was also not significantly associated with aggression (Table 5).

We also examined whether children's overall responses to family instability varied by income group. Within each income group, there were no significant associations between a child's experience of family instability (i.e., experiencing 0 or 1 coresidential transitions from birth to age 9) and their social competence and aggression at age 15 (not shown).

Because relationship status and income are highly correlated, with cohabiting and non-coresidential parents having lower income on average than married parents,[30] we next examined whether children respond differently to family instability by both mothers' relationship status and mothers' household income. Beginning with married mothers, divorce was not associated with adolescent social competence in either income group (Table 4); however, for the higher-income group, divorce was associated with higher aggression (Table 5). The sample sizes of mothers experiencing a divorce were small, so dividing the group further by income creates sample sizes that must be interpreted with caution.

Next, among adolescents whose mothers were cohabiting at birth, a breakup was not associated with social competence for the higher- or low-income groups (Table 4). There were no significant differences in adolescent aggression associated with the breakup of a cohabiting relationship among the higher- or low-income groups, either (Table 5).

Among the low-income group, mothers who were not living with a partner at birth and subsequently gained a partner had adolescents with higher social competence, relative to mothers who remained living without a partner (Table 4). A partner moving into the home of a mother who was not living with a partner at birth was not associated with aggression for adolescents whose mothers were in either income group (Table 5).

**Table 4.** Association between family instability and child social competence, by mother's relationship status and household income.

| | No family instability | One instance of family instability | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Mother's relationship status at birth** | **Child social competence score at age 15 (*n*)** | **Child social competence score at age 15 (*n*)** | **p-value[2]** |
| **Married** | **17.87 (*454*)** | **17.68 (*72*)** | **-** |
| <200% FPL | 17.13 (*100*) | 16.42 (*38*) | - |
| ≥200% FPL | 18.08 (*354*) | 19.09 (*34*) | - |
| **Cohabiting** | **16.59 (*270*)** | **16.75 (*178*)** | **-** |
| <200% FPL | 15.62 (*143*) | 16.46 (*121*) | - |
| ≥200% FPL | 17.69 (*127*) | 17.55 (*56*) | - |
| **Neither[1]** | **16.07 (*228*)** | **17.21 (*241*)** | ** |
| <200% FPL | 15.73 (*165*) | 16.75 (*165*) | * |
| ≥200% FPL | 16.95 (*63*) | 18.15(*75*) | - |

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Notes: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. – indicates result not significant at p<.05. [1] "Neither" indicates mother was not living with a partner. [2] P-value indicates the significance of a t-test comparing scores for children experiencing no family instability to those experiencing one instance of family instability in the indicated row.. Social competence was measured using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), which has a scale of 0 to 24. SSRS scores for this sample ranged from 3 to 24.

**Table 5.** Association between family instability and child aggression, by mother's relationship status and household income.

| | No family instability | One instance of family instability | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Mother's relationship status at birth** | **Child aggression score at age 15 (*n*)** | **Child aggression score at age 15 (*n*)** | **p-value[2]** |
| **Married** | **0.18 (*466*)** | **0.29 (*77*)** | *** |
| <200% FPL | 0.20 (*99*) | 0.30 (*41*) | - |
| ≥200% FPL | 0.18 (*367*) | 0.28 (*36*) | * |
| **Cohabiting** | **0.24 (*277*)** | **0.27 (*189*)** | **-** |
| <200% FPL | 0.30 (*148*) | 0.29 (*129*) | - |
| ≥200% FPL | 0.17 (*129*) | 0.21 (*59*) | - |
| **Neither[1]** | **0.32 (*228*)** | **0.28 (*250*)** | **-** |
| <200% FPL | 0.33 (*165*) | 0.31 (*171*) | - |
| ≥200% FPL | 0.30 (*63*) | 0.22 (*78*) | - |

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.
Notes: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. – indicates result not significant at p<.05. [1] "Neither" indicates mother was not living with a partner.[2] P-value indicates the significance of a t-test comparing scores for children experiencing no family instability to those experiencing one instance of family instability in the indicated row. Aggression was measured using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) aggression subscale, which has a scale of 0 to 2. CBCL scores for this sample ranged from 0 to 1.64.

# Discussion of Findings

This brief examines the association between family instability in early life and social development in adolescence. It also highlights the importance of examining how sociodemographic characteristics—in this case, income and relationship status—shape children's responses to family instability. Both relationship status at birth and family income affect how children respond to family instability.

Overall, we observed that adolescents who experienced a divorce had higher aggression, whereas those who experienced their mother's partner moving into the home had higher social competence. The breakup of a cohabiting relationship was not associated with adolescents' aggression or social competence. These findings are consistent with a heterogeneity effect hypothesis, which suggests that the strongest effects are seen for groups in which a phenomenon is least likely to occur. In this case, children whose parents were married respond with more social maladaptation to a divorce (a relatively rare event) than children who experience other forms of family instability (relatively less rare events). Although we cannot know definitively from the present analyses, aligned with a heterogeneity effect, we hypothesize that a divorce—which tends to be the end of a stable, higher-resourced relationship—is less "expected" than the end of nonmarital relationships. Divorce and loss of resources may be particularly unexpected among mothers who are married at birth and have higher incomes, which could explain why divorce is associated with aggression for higher-income families but not for their lower-income counterparts. Therefore, divorce may be associated with a more dramatic shift in parenting stress and resource availability than the breakup of a cohabiting relationship, and therefore exert a larger influence on adolescent behavior.

The finding of higher levels of social competence in adolescents whose mothers were not living with a partner at birth but then moved in with a partner—compared to those who stayed living without a partner—is not explained by a heterogeneity effect. These findings may be explained in part by increased financial stability or decreased parenting stress among the mothers who gain a new cohabiting partner. However, prior research has found that cohabiting couples are less likely to share resources[31]—the specific factor which would lead to increased financial stability—than their married counterparts. Moreover, research suggests that children fare better, at least academically, with a mother who does not live with a partner than when romantic partners move into the house.[32] The positive association we observed may be driven by biological fathers moving into the house; however, this brief cannot differentiate the biological father versus another partner moving into the home.

This brief also captures social competence, a different domain of development than past research examining how children fare when their mothers move in with a partner, which may explain the inconsistent findings. Nonetheless, children in households in which the mother stably lives without a partner show consistently lower levels of social competence and higher levels of aggression, which should motivate us to consider policies that may alleviate the parenting stress and financial insecurity experienced by low-income parents (who are disproportionately single parents). Such policies may include improving food security, housing security, and guaranteed income, as well as parenting supports such as home visiting. Many programs with a parenting and family focus also aim to build skills for healthy, stable romantic relationships with the intent of benefitting single parents and their children. These intervention points are consistently linked with improved child and family well-being, especially for low-income and single-parent households.

Finally, although children with parents who were stably married had the highest social competence and lowest aggression, on average, not all children who live with two parents in childhood are socially adjusted in their teen years. The quality of a marriage or the presence of other conflict and stress within the family may counteract the protective effect of living with two parents.[33] Although data indicate that a two-parent household is best for children's social adjustment, on average, this is not true for every family's situation.

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