

Influences of Family Structure, Conflict, and Change on Transitions to Adulthood

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This project examines the influence of family structure and functioning on multiple outcomes including problem behaviors and family-related transitions to adulthood. In characterizing childhood family experiences, we pay close attention to heterogeneity in intact families and change over time in family experiences. Our analyses rely on data from three waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The availability of prospectively measured self-reports from multiple members of the same family offers a unique opportunity to explore variation not just in childhood family structure, but in parental relationship quality. Three waves of data allow us to examine how changes in family environments between early childhood and late adolescence influence problem behaviors and transitions to adulthood.

Our paper complements and extends the existing literature on work on family structure, conflict, and change. We compare the effects of marital conflict in intact families to the effects of growing up in a single or stepparent family, and we examine trajectories of family experience over time. We examine a multitude of outcomes, looking at whether family structure, conflict, and change have different effects across the domains of problem behaviors and family-related transitions to adulthood. Specifically, we ask the following questions: *How do the effects of parental conflict compare to those of non-intact families across a range of outcomes related to the transition to adulthood?* Explanations of family structure effects based on stress, effective parenting, and socialization suggest that high conflict intact families should influence child outcomes in ways similar to non-intact families. For example, parental conflict and divorce may both lead to stress, lowering school performance, increasing risky behaviors, and hastening home leaving and own family formation. They may also leave children with fewer relationship skills or less confidence in marriage as an institution, increasing rates of union disruption. *Does conflict explain the effects of marital disruption?* We expect some mediating role of conflict in the divorce process, but anticipate independent pathways as well. Finally, *how do trajectories of stability and change in the family lives of children relate to their transitions to adulthood?* Again based on theories of stress and effective parenting, we expect changes in family life, as well as sustained conflict, to affect child wellbeing.

Results of our preliminary analyses clearly show that the advantages of intact families do not accrue to all children who grow up in them. Living in an intact family characterized by high conflict during adolescence increases the odds of dropping out, poor grades, smoking, drinking, and marijuana use relative to living in a low conflict intact family. It also increases the age-specific risk of first sex and nonmarital childbearing, as well as the duration-specific risk of union dissolution. In most cases, its effects are very similar to those of being in a single-parent or stepparent family in adolescence. The effects of high conflict intact families are weaker than nonintact families in dropping out of school, time to first sex, and union formation.

Our analysis of change in family experiences over time shows that parental conflict prior to separation does not mediate the negative impact of separation, but exerts effects independent of the divorce process. Conflict affects 6 of the 10 outcomes examined (it does *not* affect smoking, drinking, direct marriage, or union dissolution). Its effects are statistically indistinguishable from separation in all outcomes examined.

Trajectories of family change reveal considerable variability in family experiences over time. Results suggest that any change in family structure (i.e., separation or re-partnering) increases problem behavior in children and hastens young adult transitions to sex and family formation. Sustained conflict has statistically significant effects on 4 of the 10 outcomes analyzed. For several outcomes, trajectories involving change in family structure exert more influence on child outcomes than sustained conflict. These analyses underscore the importance of stability and change in understanding how families influence children.