

Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition
Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences

(excerpt of findings)

1. **Children are less likely to thrive in cohabiting households, compared to intact, married families.** On many social, educational, and psychological outcomes, children in cohabiting households do significantly worse than children in intact, married families, and about as poorly as children living in single-parent families. And when it comes to abuse, recent federal data indicate that children in cohabiting households are markedly more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children in both intact, married families and single-parent families. Only in the economic domain do children in cohabiting households fare consistently better than children in single-parent families.
2. **Family instability is generally bad for children.** In recent years, family scholars have turned their attention to the impact that transitions into and out of marriage, cohabitation, and single parenthood have upon children. This report shows that such transitions, especially multiple transitions, are linked to higher reports of school failure, behavioral problems, drug use, and loneliness, among other outcomes. So, it is not just family structure and family process that matter for children; family stability matters as well. And the research indicates that children who are born to married parents are the least likely to be exposed to family instability, and to the risks instability poses to the emotional, social, and educational welfare of children.
3. **American family life is becoming increasingly unstable for children.**¹ Cohabiting couples who have a child together are more than twice as likely to break up before their child turns twelve, compared to couples who are married to one another. Thus, one of the major reasons that children's lives are increasingly turbulent is that more and more children are being born into or raised in cohabiting households that are much more fragile than married families.
4. **The growing instability of the American family life also means that contemporary adults and children are more likely to live in what scholars call "complex households."** For instance, one indicator of this growing complexity is multiple-partner fertility, where parents have children with more than one romantic partner. Children who come from these relationships are more likely to report poor relationships with their parents, to have behavioral and health problems, and to fail in school, even after controlling for factors such as education, income, and race.
5. **The nation's retreat from marriage has hit poor and working-class communities with particular force.** Since the early 1980s, children from college-educated homes have seen their family lives stabilize, whereas children from less-educated homes have seen their family lives become increasingly unstable. More generally, the stratified character of family

trends means that the United States is “devolving into a separate-and-unequal family regime, where the highly educated and the affluent enjoy strong and stable [families] and everyone else is consigned to increasingly unstable, unhappy, and unworkable ones.”²

¹ Data from the NSFG indicate that 71 percent of children were living with both of their parents at age fourteen in the 1980s, compared to 65 percent in the 2000s (2000–2007).

² W. Bradford Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2010), 53, <http://stateofourunions.org/2010/when-marriage-disappears.php>.

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