



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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Parents' Relationship Status Five Years After a Non-Marital Birth

Background

The high proportion of children born outside marriage – 37 percent in 2005 – has raised concern among policymakers about the quality and stability of unmarried parents' relationships. In response, the federal government's Healthy Marriage Initiative provides funding to programs aimed at strengthening the bonds between unmarried parents through activities such as relationship counseling and building communication skills. The initiative also provides funding for "responsible fatherhood programs" that provide counseling and mentoring on topics such as good parenting practices.

Although evaluations are currently underway to determine whether model programs can improve parents' relationship quality and stability, the results for those programs will not be available for at least several years. In the meantime, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study can provide some insights into the relationship dynamics of unmarried couples who have recently had a child – the target population of the new programs. Information on the trajectories of parents' relationships, the quality of their relationships, and father-child contact can help us understand how much leverage relationship strengthening and responsible fatherhood programs may expect to have in the lives of these families.

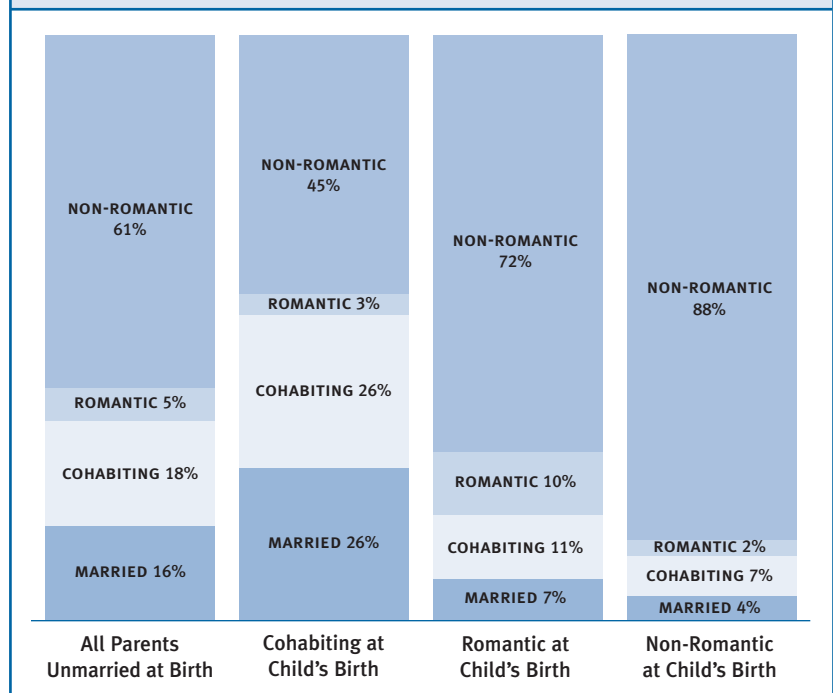
Data and Measures

In this brief, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study on parents' relationship status at the time of their child's birth and again when the child is five year old. All data are based on mothers' reports. The sample includes mothers who were unmarried at the child's birth, who responded to the five-year survey, and who resided in one of the cities randomly selected to be part of the national sample (N=1,979). Data are weighted to be nationally representative of births to unmarried parents in large U.S. cities in 1998-2000 and account for sample attrition.

Results

At the time of the child's birth, one-half of unmarried parents in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study were cohabiting and over 80 percent reported having some romantic involvement. Many of the mothers had "high hopes" for their relationships, with slightly more than half reporting that the chances that they would eventually marry the father of their child were "pretty good" or "almost certain." However, as shown in the first bar of Figure 1, only sixteen percent of unmarried mothers were married to the father at the time of the five year interview. Almost half of these marriages occurred within the first year following the child's birth (not shown). Despite not marrying, many couples were still together – in total about 40 percent of parents were still romantically involved at the five-year interview, either married, living together ("cohabiting"), or simply dating.

Figure 1. Parents' Relationship Status at Five Year Follow-Up, by Relationship Status at Child's Birth



The nature of unmarried parents' relationships at the time of the child's birth is a strong predictor of relationship outcomes five years later. As shown in the second bar of Figure 1, parents who were cohabiting when their child was born were much more likely to be married or cohabiting at the five-year interview than parents who were not cohabiting (even among those who were romantically involved). The percentage of cohabiting parents who were married at the five-year follow-up was almost four times greater than the percentage

ended their relationships report significantly lower levels of relationship quality. The proportions of mothers rating their relationship quality as "very good" or "excellent" ranges from about 72 percent, for mothers who are now married to their child's father, to about 12 percent for mothers who are not romantically involved with the father (Table 1). Nearly three-quarters of mothers who are not romantically involved report that their relationship with the child's father is fair, poor, or non-existent.

Table 1. Father Involvement and Relationship Quality, By Relationship Status at the Five Year Follow-Up

	Father Saw Child in Last Month (Percent)	Mothers' Report of Relationship Quality (Percent)			
		Excellent or Very Good	Good	Fair or Poor	Other (e.g. no relationship)
Married	96	72	17	11	0
Cohabiting	100	66	19	15	0
Romantic	90	39	28	27	6
Non-Romantic	43	12	16	49	23
All	65	33	17	36	14

of romantically involved parents who were married (26 percent vs. 7 percent). In total, just over one-half (55 percent) of parents who were living together when their child was born were either married, still cohabiting, or romantically involved five years later.

In terms of relationship dissolution, 61 percent of unmarried parents were no longer romantically involved at the five-year interview. Most of the mothers who were not romantically involved at the child's birth remained not romantic (88 percent), most of the couples who were dating at the child's birth were no longer romantically involved (72 percent), and nearly one half (45 percent) of the couples who were cohabiting at the child's birth were no longer romantically involved at the five-year interview. About one-half of mothers who had ended their relationship with the father were seriously involved with a new partner. In total, 18 percent of all mothers were living with a new partner and 5 percent were married to a new partner at the time of the five-year interview (not shown in table).

Relationship Quality and Father Involvement

The majority of mothers who are romantically involved with the biological fathers report high levels of relationship quality at the five-year interview, while those who have

Parents' relationship quality likely affects their ability to co-parent the child and may impact the frequency of father-child contact. In cases where parents are no longer romantically involved, slightly more than 40 percent of fathers have seen their child in the previous month. However, there is significant variation in father-child contact depending on the parents' relationship quality. Among mothers who are no longer romantically involved, mothers who report that they are 'friends' with the father are four times more likely to report that the father has seen the child in the previous month than mothers who report 'no relationship,' 74 percent versus 17 percent (not shown).

It is important to note, however, that many fathers who were unmarried when their child was born maintain a high level of involvement in their children's lives. Table 1 shows that two-thirds of fathers unmarried at the child's birth have seen their child in the month prior to the five-year interview. As expected, very high proportions of fathers who are married to, living with, or still dating their child's mother have frequent contact with their child.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In the Healthy Marriage Initiative, program developers and policymakers continue to work to identify interventions

that can successfully help unmarried parents build better relationships.

Early findings from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study indicate that a portion of parents with non-marital births may be strong candidates for these ‘marriage’ programs. However, marriage is the natural trajectory for only a small portion of unmarried parents – primarily those who are living together at the time of their child’s birth. The role of these programs may be, therefore, two-fold. Programs may be able to further strengthen cohabiting relationships that are on the verge of marriage or they may progressively give parents’ the relationship skills which will eventually make a healthy marriage a more realistic goal. On their own, approximately 40 percent of parents with non-marital births maintained a romantic relationship in the first several years of their child’s life and were still together at the five-year follow-up interview. Mothers’ level of satisfaction in these relationships was generally high and the data indicates that many of these couples have a basic foundation upon which program services can build.

As the data in this brief has also emphasized, parents should be equipped with these skills early in their relationship. Giving new or expectant mothers and fathers strategies to improve the way they interact (such as how well they cooperate, make decisions, resolve conflict, and communicate) may help their relationship during this stressful time. Fatherhood

programs, such as education, training, support services, and content addressing issues of shared parenting, may also be appropriate for many new unmarried fathers. Engaging parents in responsible fatherhood programs (and weaving these programs into marriage promotion curriculums) early in their child’s life may also help new fathers develop important parenting skills crucial to their child’s healthy development. These programs may help fathers establish and maintain positive connections with their child and encourage their active participation in raising their child.

Programs which help build relationship skills, particularly communication skills, and teach effective strategies for parenting and co-parenting may prove valuable for parents even when couples are not able to sustain a committed, romantic relationship. As demonstrated in this brief, a substantial portion of relationships do dissolve and, subsequently, parents face new challenges in maintaining positive interactions and raising their child together.

Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study can continue to be used to analyze the ability of these parents to work together as their child grows. As results from the Building Strong Families Project and other evaluations of relationship building and responsible parenting programs become available, program developers and policymakers will be better able to understand how they can most effectively intervene in the lives of these vulnerable families.

RECENT WORKING PAPERS

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>

2007-12-FF: Laura Hussey “Are Social Welfare Policies ‘Pro-Life’? An Individual Level Analysis of Low Income Women”

2007-11-FF: Marcia Carlson “Trajectories of Couple Relationship Quality after Childbirth: Does Marriage Matter?”

2007-10-FF: Jean Knab, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, Emily Moiduddin, Cynthia Osborne “The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on the Timing and Incidence of Marriage following a Nonmarital Birth”

2007-09-FF: Cynthia Osborne “Is Marriage Protective for All Children? Cumulative Risks at Birth and Subsequent Child Behavior Among Urban Families”

2007-08-FF: Kristin Turney, Kristen Harknett “Neighborhood Socioeconomic Disadvantage, Residential Stability, and Perceptions of Social Support among New Mothers”

2007-07-FF: Lawrence Berger, Marcia Carlson, Sharon Bzostek, Cynthia Osborne “Parenting Practices of Resident Fathers: The Role of Marital and Biological Ties”

2007-06-FF: W. Bradford Wilcox, Edwin Hernandez “Bendito Amor: Religion and Relationships among Married and Unmarried Latinos in Urban America”

2007-05-FF: Raymond Swisher, Maureen Waller “Incarceration and Paternal

Involvement among Non-resident White, African American and Latino Fathers”

2007-04-FF: Catherine Kenney “When Father Doesn’t Know Best: Parents’ Management and Control of Money and Children’s Food Insecurity”

2007-03-FF: Catherine Kenney “His Dollar ≠ Her Dollar ≠ Their Dollar: The Effects of Couples’ Money Management Systems on Union Dissolution and Women’s Labor Force Participation”

2007-02-FF: Shirley Liu, Frank Heiland “Should We Get Married? The Effect of Parents’ Marriage on Out-of-Wedlock Children”

2007-01-FF: Julien Teitler, Nancy Reichman “Mental Illness as a Barrier to Marriage Among Mothers With Out-of-Wedlock Births”

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Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study to examine parents' relationship status and quality five years after a non-marital birth.

For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.

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