



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

June 2005 • Number 33

# Young Children's Behavioral Problems in Married and Cohabiting Families

## Background

The proportion of children born to cohabiting parents more than doubled during the past twenty years, increasing from 6% of all births in the 1980s to approximately 15% of births at the end of the century. Over the same period, births to married parents declined from 82% of all births in 1980 to 66% of all births in 1999. Despite this dramatic increase in the proportion of children born to cohabiting parents, very little is known about how children fare in these families, as compared to children born into married-parent families.

This brief examines the behavior of children born to married and cohabiting parents in stable unions to determine whether marital status at birth is associated with behavior problems at age three. Behavioral problems at very early ages, especially childhood aggression, are associated with anti-social behavior in adolescence and adulthood. If differences in child behavior exist between stably married and cohabiting couples, we ask what proportion of these problems is due to differences in parents' demographic characteristics as well as their economic resources, relationship quality, health and health behaviors. Finally, we compare children born to cohabiting parents who marry after birth with children born to cohabiting parents who remain in cohabiting relationships to see if marriage following a cohabiting birth is associated with fewer child behavior problems.

## Data and Methods

The analysis is based on data from the baseline, one- and three-year follow-up surveys of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (See Box). The sample is limited to the 1,370 mothers who were married or cohabiting with their child's biological

father at birth and who were living with the father when the child was three years old.

To measure children's emotional and behavioral problems at age three we use three indicators: aggressive, withdrawn, and anxious/ depressive behavior. These measures are derived from Achenbach's 1992 Child Behavior Checklist for two and three year olds and are based on mothers' reports about their child's behavior.

Our models include controls for parents' background characteristics, economic resources, relationship quality, and health status. Indicators of mother's background characteristics include age, race, immigrant status, whether her parents were married when she was age 15, number of children, and whether she has children from a previous partnership. Indicators of father's background characteristics include age, race, and whether he has children from a previous partnership.

To measure parents' economic resources, we use education and earnings during the year prior to the child's birth. To measure parent's relationship quality, we use a scale

Table 1. Means of Independent Variables

Mother characteristics	Married (N=715)	Cohabiting (N=655)
Age (mean)	29.6	24.6
Less than high school ed	14.9	36.9
Intact family	65.7	41.8
Child with other partner	12.2	39.1
Earnings > \$25,000	28.1	6.3
Fair/poor health	4.8	9.0
Prenatal smoking	6.4	20.5

All differences are statistically significant at the p = .05 level

that indicates how much emotional support the mother feels from the father and an indicator of the frequency of couple-disagreement. Both variables are intended to measure relationship quality in the month prior to the child's birth.

parents. Cohabiting mothers have much lower levels of education than do married mothers and they also have lower earnings. Among mothers with earnings (about 80 percent), cohabiting mothers are much more likely to have very low earnings and much less likely to earn more

than \$25,000 per year. This pattern is similar for married and cohabiting fathers. Further, cohabiting mothers are almost twice as likely as married mothers to report being in fair or poor health at their child's birth. Over 20 percent of cohabiting mothers report smoking during their pregnancy, as compared to just over six percent of married mothers. Interestingly, married and cohabiting parents in stable relationships do

not differ very much in terms of their relationship quality (not shown). The differences in parental characteristics reported in Table 1 must be taken into account when comparing the outcomes of children born to married and cohabiting parents.

Table 2 reports the results from models that compare the behavior of children born to married and cohabiting parents, before and after taking account of parental characteristics. The first column of the Table indicates that, before adjusting for differences in parental characteristics, children born to cohabiting parents have more reported aggressive, withdrawn, and anxious/depressive behaviors at

**Table 2. Relationship between cohabitation and child behavior (OLS coefficients)**

	Unadjusted	Demog	Full model
<b>Agressive Behavior</b>			
Cohabiting	.10**	.07**	.02
<b>Withdrawn Behavior</b>			
Cohabiting	.06**	.03*	.00
<b>Anxious/Depressive Behavior</b>			
Cohabiting	.12**	.08**	.04*

Source: Fragile Families Study  
 \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$  + $p < .10$   
 Reference category is married.  
 Demographic charts include race, age,...  
 Full model includes demographics, economics, rel quality, health and health behaviors

To measure mother's health, we use an indicator of overall health status, an indicator of psychological wellbeing (measured at the one-year follow-up), and two indicators of mother's prenatal behaviors (smoking and drug use) measured at the child's birth. To measure father's health, we use three indicators: whether father has a health problem that limits his ability to work, whether he smokes, and whether he has a drug or alcohol problem that limits his ability to work or maintain relationships. All measures are reported by the mother at the time of the child's birth.

## Results

Table 1 shows the differences in parental characteristics and resources for children born to married and cohabiting parents who remain together for the child's first three years. Married parents are older, more likely to come from intact families and less likely to have a child from a previous partner than cohabiting

**Table 3. Results from Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models: Child Behavior Stable Cohabiting and Married Relative to Cohabitors Who Marry After Child's Birth**

	Agressive	Withdrawn	Anxious/Depressive
<b>Stably cohabiting</b>	-.01	-.02	.02
<b>Stably married</b>	-.07**	-.04*	-.06**

Source: Fragile Families Study  
 \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$  + $p < .10$   
 Reference category is transitioning from cohabitation to marriage.  
 Model controls for background characteristics of mothers and fathers.

age three than children born to married parents. As shown in column 2, controlling for differences in parents' demographic characteristics, such as age, race, immigrant status, and parity, explains about one-third of the cohabitation-marriage difference for aggressive and anxious/depressive behaviors and about one half of the difference for withdrawn behaviors. As shown in column 3, controlling for differences in parents' economic and health resources explains all of the remaining difference in child outcomes. [Although parents' relationship quality is strongly associated with child behavior outcomes, it does not account for marital status differences since married and cohabiting mothers report similar levels of relationship quality].

Table 3 compares children born to cohabiting parents who marry after birth with children born to cohabiting parents who remain in stable cohabiting unions. According to Table 3, marriage following a cohabiting birth is *not* associated with better child outcomes. While we might have expected that marriage would confer economic, relational, or health benefits to the parents that would in turn translate into better child outcomes, this does not appear to be the case. It is possible that we need a longer time frame in order to capture the benefits of marriages for these parents and their children.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Our findings indicate that although children raised in stable, cohabiting-parent families exhibit more behavior problems at age three than children raised in stable, married-parent families, the difference is largely due to differences in the background characteristics of the parents who choose marriage over cohabitation. Once these factors are taken into account, children of cohabiting and married parents are very similar in terms of their behavioral problems. Moreover, the children of cohabiting parents who marry after birth are no better off than the children of cohabiting parents who remain unmarried.

What do these findings imply for the new marriage programs currently under development? Several implications can be drawn, not all of which are consistent. On the one hand, the findings may be interpreted as indicating that marital unions per se are no more beneficial to children than cohabiting unions, as *long as the union remains stable*. On the other hand, we know from other research that marriages are more stable than cohabiting unions and this stability is good for children. The findings also indicate that policies that seek to improve parents' economic resources and health as well as relationship quality are likely to improve child outcomes.

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## 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: [crcw.princeton.edu/papers.html](http://crcw.princeton.edu/papers.html)

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## Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to determine whether marital status at birth is associated with behavior problems at age 3.

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The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies> or email the CRCW at [crcw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crcw@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "Young Children's Behavioral Problems in Married and Cohabiting Families" by Cynthia Osborne, Sara McLanahan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn.

To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the Fragile Families link, click on Publications, then click on Working Papers Series.

The Fragile Families Research Brief is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.