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APRIL, 2017

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COHABITATION AND CHILD WELL-BEING¹

Adapted from "Cohabitation and Child Well-being," by W. D. Manning, in *The Future of Children*, 25(2), pp. 51-66. Copyright 2015 by the Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Cohabitation has in recent decades become an undeniable part of the family-formation system in the United States (Smock & Manning, 2010). Dr. Wendy D. Manning and Dr. Pamela Smock have characterized this phenomenon as the "cohabitation revolution". The following are some key findings in relation to cohabitation in the United States:

1. "Cohabiting parent families are more complex than married parent families" (p. 52). Cohabitation unions are comparatively more unstable in nature than marital unions (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012).
2. By the time they reach 12 years old, 40 percent of all American children are predicted to spend some part of their lives residing in a cohabiting household (Kennedy & Fitch, 2012).
3. Within the last 25 years in United States, the number of young and middle-class individuals who have been part of cohabiting families has doubled (Manning & Stykes, 2015).
4. In the early 1980s, 20 percent of all cohabiting unions included children. That percentage had increased to 40 percent by the early 2000s (Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2015).
5. The percentage of American children born to cohabiting parents has increased from 6 percent in the early 1980s to about 25 percent today (Manning, Brown, Lamidi, & Payne, 2014).
6. Although the percentage of children being raised in cohabiting unions has continued to increase—from 20 percent in the early 1980s to 40 percent by the early 2000s (Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2015)—"children are still more often part of marital unions than cohabiting unions" (p. 52).
7. 30 percent of single pregnant women in the early 1970s chose to get married before the birth of their child. Presumably, this was to provide their child with a stable household, but also likely due to the negative stigmatization of having a child out of wedlock. Today, that number is only 5 percent (England, Wu & Shafer, 2013; Licher, Sassler, & Turner, 2014).
8. Today, about one-fifth of all single women who become pregnant prefer cohabitation to marriage (England, Wu & Shafer, 2013; Licher, Sassler, & Turner, 2014). Of them, only

13.5 percent of women move on to a marital relationship after their children are born (Manning, 2001).

9. Today, only 20% of American women who were unmarried at their child's birth will have married the father by the child's fifth birthday (Gibson-Davis, 2014).
 10. Studies evaluating cohabiting parent families and their children's well-being have focused on different stages of children's life. Some of the focus areas of previous studies include "family structure at birth," "family structure at a specific age" or "groups of children in a specific age range". However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to consider family experiences over the course of an entire childhood (Manning & Bulanda, 2007, p. 3). Otherwise, large portions of children's lives are not considered (Manning & Bulanda, 2007, p. 19-20; Manning, 2015, p. 56).
 11. The social class of parents plays an important role in determining the patterns of their cohabitation and/or marital relationships. Women with lower levels of education are more likely to cohabit than to marry, and women with modest levels of education more frequently have children in cohabiting parent families (Manning, 2013).
 12. There are two fundamental pathways that lead to the formation of cohabiting parent families:
 - i. Children are born into a family with two cohabiting biological parents. In 2013, 43 percent of children living in cohabiting families were residing in the household of two biological cohabiting parents (Kennedy & Fitch, 2012).
 - ii. Children live with either biological parent (in most cases, the mother) and his/her cohabiting partner, forming a cohabiting stepfamily. In 2013, 56 percent of children of cohabiting families were in this category (Kennedy and Fitch, 2012).
 - iii. Cohabiting families can also include adopted children, who "depending on whether they were adopted by both cohabiting parents together or if they live with an adoptive parent and a cohabiting partner" (p. 52), will fall into one of the above-mentioned categories.
 13. The most common type of cohabiting parent family is a biological mother living with a male partner (Manning, 2006, p. 28).
 14. Children living in families with cohabiting biological parents were on average younger than those living in cohabiting stepfamilies (Bulanda & Manning, 2006, p 615).
 15. Children living in cohabiting stepfamilies not only reside with their stepparents, but often (about 37% of the time) with step- or half-siblings (Cohen, 2013).
 16. Some circumstances potentially leading to cohabitation include the following:
 - i. Fragile and short-lived relationships due to unplanned pregnancy may prompt cohabitation (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012).
 - ii. Single women with limited resources may find it economically necessary to pool resources by cohabiting with a partner.
 17. In general, parents with fewer economic resources choose cohabitation over marriage (Brown, Manning, & Payne, 2015). Married parent families are likely to have more wealth (e.g., home ownership) than cohabiting parent families (Kalil & Ryan, 2010).
 18. One of the sources of instability in both marital and cohabiting relationships is unplanned births (Guzzo & Hayford). Children's birth type (planned or unplanned) therefore plays a role in determining whether a family setting is favorable for child-rearing.
 19. Unplanned childbirths are associated:
 - i. More with single mothers than with cohabiting mothers;
 - ii. More with cohabiting mothers than with married parents (Manning, 2002).
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How do Children Fare in Cohabiting Parent Families?

1. Children in married households receive higher levels of social and institutional support than those in cohabiting relationships (Cherlin, 2010; Manning, Smock, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2009) despite the similarities between the basic structure of cohabiting and married parent families. In both cases, two adults are present to help with children's upbringing.
2. "Family stability is a major contributor to children's healthy development" (p. 54).
 - i. Cohabitation unions are less stable and shorter-lived than marital unions. On average, cohabiting unions last for about 18 months (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).
 - ii. Children born to cohabiting parents are three times more likely to experience family transitions (i.e., the creation or dissolution of a marriage or cohabiting union) than those born to married parents (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).
3. "In adolescence, family transitions are associated with delinquency, drug use, depressive symptoms, earlier age of sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, lower school engagement, poorer grades, and lower rates of graduation" (p. 59) (Brown, 2008).
4. Education is an important indicator and source of both economic and social resources. Children with educated parents enjoy better well-being through "income, access to formal and informal resources, social skills, relationship options, and social support" (p. 54). However, cohabiting mothers, in general, have been found to have lower levels of education than married mothers.
5. Parenting behaviors like parental involvement, engagement, and aggravation don't differ much between married and cohabiting biological parents (Carlson & Berger, 2013). Examples of attributes that are similar include "the quality of relationships at the time of their child's birth, levels of engagement and caregiving, the amount of time mothers spend with their children, and mother's involvement with their children at ages five and nine," (p. 55) (Kendig & Bianchi, 2008).
6. Children of cohabiting parent families are more likely to lack health insurance and to rely on public assistance (56%) than children of married parent families (19%) (Williams, 2010).
7. Cohabiting stepfathers are found to spend less time with their young children than married stepfathers (Carlson & Berger, 2013).
8. In terms of behavioral and cognitive outcomes, children in low-income, cohabiting, two-biological-parent families are found to fare similarly to children in low-income, married, two-biological-parent families (Acs, 2007).
9. In general, adolescents fare similarly in "cohabiting step-parent families as they do in married stepparent families" (p. 58).
10. Children born to unmarried single mothers who do not live with the child's father (or who live with another male) seldom experience the marriage of their biological parents. However, nearly half of children born to two cohabiting biological parents will experience their birth-parents' marriage . (Manning, 2015, p. 53).
11. About 50 percent of children born to cohabiting biological parents will experience their biological parents' marriage (Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2015).

Recent Findings

A. Children

1. Children's outcomes are determined by a combination of their parents' marital status, family stability, and their parents' socio-economic status.

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2. Children in cohabitating parent families are more likely to experience behavioral problems than children in married parent families. Evidence suggests this is not because cohabitation causes behavioral problems, but because behavioral problems exhibited by children lead to cohabitation rather than marriage (Manning, 2015, p. 56).
 3. Family structure at birth influences subsequent child development. Up to the age of five, children born to cohabiting parents have higher chances of experiencing asthma, obesity and poor health than children born to married parents (Craigie, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2012, p. 9).
 4. Regardless of marital or cohabiting status, family instability affects children's health in a consistent and negative way (Schmeier, 2011).
 5. The overall health of children raised in stable, married families is on average better than that of children raised in stable, cohabiting families. However, similar patterns of asthma, overall health, and obesity are experienced by children raised in either unstable cohabiting or unstable married families (Bzostek & Beck, 2011).
 6. Health outcomes of young children are influenced by family structure. Children born into cohabiting parent families are more likely have low birthweight than those born to married parents (Schmeier, 2011).

B. Adolescents

1. When sociodemographic characteristics and parents' own health and psychological distress are similar, similar patterns of overall physical health, eating behaviors, and emotional well-being are experienced by adolescents in cohabiting and married step-parent families (Langton & Berger, 2011; Susan & Manning, 2009).
2. Langton and Berger (2011) found higher levels of depressive symptoms in adolescents living in cohabiting stepparent families than in adolescents living in married stepfamilies.
3. About 82 percent of adolescent children living in cohabiting parent families are living with a stepparent (Manning, 2015, p. 58). By adolescence, most children born into cohabiting, two-biological parent families experience either their parents' marriage or their parents' breakup (Manning, 2015, p. 58).
4. Adolescents living in cohabiting and married stepparent families are similar in terms of behavior, relationships, and academic achievement (Brown, 2004). They exhibit similar levels of problem behaviors, such as drinking, marijuana use, juvenile delinquency, smoking, and externalization behaviors (p. 59) (Brown & Rinelli, 2010), and similar levels of teenage pregnancy, early sex, and relationship conflict.
5. "Although high school graduation and college enrollment rates are similar among adolescents in cohabiting and married stepparent families, adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies report lower grades, lower school engagement, and more school suspensions" (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008).
6. "A mother's marriage provides a physical health benefit in adolescence only when the mother stays married to the child's biological father" (Williams et al., 2013).
7. Adolescents' well-being has not found to be related to either age or amount of time spent in cohabiting parent families (Bulanda & Manning, 2003).

C. Adolescents

1. "Adolescents show similar levels of depressive symptoms when they move into both cohabiting and married stepparent families" (Manning, 2015, p. 58).
 2. Adolescents who have experienced divorce, mothers' cohabitation, and remarriage all demonstrate similar graduation levels (Sassler et al, 2013).
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3. Adolescents' levels of school engagement, delinquency, and depressive symptoms are not found to improve when cohabiting stepparents marry (Brown, 2006).

D. Racial Minorities

1. Cohabitation has increased significantly among minority children. "About half (54%) of black children, two-fifths (43%) of Hispanic children, and one-third (35%) of white children are expected to live in a cohabiting parent family at some point" (Manning, 2015, p. 59; Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015).
2. Racial and ethnic differences, family instability, and family structure play roles in a child's well-being (Fomby & Estacion, 2011).

E. Additional Findings

1. A 2007 study by Acs found mixed results regarding children's well-being in married versus cohabiting households. While children of married biological parents presented fewer cognitive and behavioral problems overall, there were more behavioral problems in children transitioning from a cohabiting family structure to a marital one (Acs, 2007, p. 1339-1342).
2. A few studies indicate that "family transitions are more strongly associated with some outcomes for boys than for girls" (Manning, 2015, p. 60). However, more research is required on this topic.
3. "Same-sex marriage may be associated with greater child well-being in terms of family stability, legal protections, and improved economic well-being through full access to state and federal benefits and insurance" (Manning, 2015, p. 60). However, no researchers have used population-based data to empirically evaluate child well-being specifically among children living with married same-sex parents.
4. Policy has been inconsistent in its treatment of cohabiting parent families. Public programs face challenges in terms of whether to include cohabiting partners and their incomes when determining eligibility for services and benefit levels (Meyer & Carlson, 2014).

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