

# Marriage, Family Structure, and Children's Educational Attainment

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Most parents want their children to succeed in school but are often unaware that family life itself has significant impact on their child's academic capacity. We list below the effects of the intact family on children's educational achievement and school behavior, as well as its effect on the home environment.

## Raw Achievement

1. **Test Scores:** Elementary school children from intact biological families earn higher reading and math test scores than children in cohabiting and divorced single and always-single parent families.<sup>1</sup>
2. **Test Scores:** Adolescents from non-intact families have lower scores than their counterparts in intact married families on math, science, history, and reading tests.<sup>2</sup>
3. **Test Scores:** Adolescents living in intact married families or married stepfamilies (with stepfathers) performed similarly on the Peabody Vocabulary Test, but adolescents living in single-mother families or in cohabiting stepfamilies (with their biological mother) did worse than those in intact families.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Grades:** High school students who live in intact married families have a higher average combined GPA in English and math (2.9) than those in married stepfamilies, divorced families, or intact cohabiting families (2.6) and those in always-single parent families or cohabiting stepfamilies (2.5).<sup>4</sup>
5. **Attending College:** Over 57 percent of children who live in intact biological families enter college, compared to 32.5 percent of children in stepfamilies, 47.5 percent of children in single-parent families, and 31.8 percent of children who live in families without either parent present.<sup>5</sup>
6. **College Graduation:** Students from disrupted families are less likely to complete four-year college than their peers from intact biological families.<sup>6</sup>

7. **Overall:** Adolescents from single-parent families and cohabiting families are more likely to have low achievement scores, lower expectations for college, lower grades, and higher dropout rates than children from intact biological families (after controlling for other family socioeconomic factors).<sup>7</sup>

## School Behavior

1. **Behavior:** First grade students born to married mothers are less likely to behave disruptively (i.e. disobey a teacher, be aggressive with other children) than those born to single or cohabiting mothers.<sup>8</sup>
2. **Suspension:** Adolescents in single-parent families, married stepfamilies, or cohabiting stepfamilies are more likely than adolescents in intact married families to have ever been suspended or expelled from school, to have participated in delinquent activities, and to have problems getting along with teachers, doing homework, and paying attention in school.<sup>9</sup>
3. **Care:** Children and adolescents in intact married families are more likely to care about doing well in school, to do schoolwork without being forced, to do more than “just enough to get by,” and to do their homework.<sup>10</sup>
4. **Engagement:** Adolescents who live in blended families and stepfamilies are less positively engaged in school than are adolescents from intact biological families.<sup>11</sup>
5. **Attendance:** Compared to adolescents from intact married families, those from divorced families and cohabiting families have many more unexcused absences and skip more classes.<sup>12</sup>
6. **Dropping Out:** Students from stepfamilies and single-parent families are three times as likely to drop out of school as students from intact biological families, even when controlling for socioeconomic status.<sup>13</sup>
7. **High School Graduation:** Eighty-five percent of adolescents in intact biological families graduate from high school, compared to 67.2 percent in single-parent families, 65.4 percent in stepfamilies, and 51.9 percent who live with no parents.<sup>14</sup>
8. **Applying to College:** Sixty-nine percent of children from intact biological families applied to college, according to one study, compared to only 60 percent of students who were not from intact families.<sup>15</sup>

## Parental Impact on Education

1. **Educational Expectations:** The adolescent children of single-parent families or stepfamilies reported that their parents had lower educational expectations for them, were less likely to monitor schoolwork, and supervised social activities less than the parents of children in intact biological families.<sup>16</sup>
2. **College Expectations:** Whereas 31.3 percent of sons and 26.7 percent of daughters from intact biological families plan to get a college degree, 42.4 percent of sons and 35.9 percent of daughters in single-parent families *do not* plan to get a college degree.<sup>17</sup>

3. **Parental Expectations:** Sixty percent of mothers in intact married families expected their child to graduate college, compared to 40 percent of mothers in cohabiting stepfamilies and 36 percent of always-single mothers.<sup>18</sup>
4. **Graduate Studies Expectations:** About 40 percent of sons and 44.7 percent of daughters from intact biological families aim to get more education after obtaining their undergraduate degree, compared to 30.7 percent of sons and 35.3 percent of daughters from single-parent families.<sup>19</sup>
5. **Parental Involvement:** The intact biological family facilitates parental involvement in adolescent children's education.<sup>20</sup>
6. **Parental School Participation:** Adolescents in intact biological families reported that their parents participated more in school, that they discussed school more with their parents, and that they knew more of their friends' parents than those in single-parent families and stepfamilies.<sup>21</sup>

## Family Religious Practice

1. **Worship:** Children in intact married families are more likely to worship regularly.<sup>22</sup>
2. **Emotional Stability:** First-graders and kindergartners whose parents attend religious services are less likely to experience anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness.<sup>23</sup>
3. **Self-Control:** Compared to children whose parents did not attend church at all, children whose parents attended church services exhibited more self-control while under parental supervision in their homes.<sup>24</sup>
4. **Poverty and Attainment:** For children from families in poverty, regular weekly worship has profound positive effects on their educational attainment.<sup>25</sup>
5. **Years of Schooling:** Adolescents who attend church regularly tend to complete more years of school.<sup>26</sup>
6. **Marriage, Religion, and GPA:** Teenagers in intact married families who attend religious services weekly or more than monthly have a higher combined English and math GPA (2.9) than those in non-intact families who attend religious services monthly or never (2.5).<sup>27</sup>

## Family Income

1. **Enrichment:** Intact married families are stronger economically.<sup>28</sup>
2. **Cognitive Development:** Infants and toddlers from higher-income families are more likely to master age-appropriate cognitive and language skills than those from lower-income families.<sup>29</sup>
3. **Neighborhood:** Intact biological families tend to have larger incomes, which affects the neighborhoods in which families can afford to live<sup>30</sup> and thereby the quality and resources of the schools their children will attend.

4. **College Support:** Intact biological families save earlier and more for (and expect to spend more to support) their children's first year in college.<sup>31</sup>

## Summary

Marriage is a major contributor to educational success and therefore to the economy as well. The more united parents are, the better their children do.

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