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MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING: *What the Research Tells Us*

Research confirms that children develop best in families formed by both *biological* parents in a *low-conflict* marriage. Both parts of this equation are important:

- Marriage to a step-parent is generally not as good for children as marriage between two biological parents.
- Marriages that are violent, abusive, or high-conflict can be harmful to children.

Children born to unmarried mothers are disadvantaged relative to children born to married mothers.

- They are more likely to be poor (40 percent of children in single-mother families were poor in 2000—five times the rate for children in married-couple families).
- They are more likely to grow up in a single-parent family and to experience multiple living arrangements during childhood.
- Children who experience poverty and multiple living arrangements tend to have lower educational attainment and are at higher risk of teen and nonmarital childbearing.

Almost half of all babies born outside of marriage are born to cohabiting couples. Yet cohabitation is not the same as marriage in terms of the benefits it conveys to children.

- Cohabiting relationships in the United States tend to be fragile and relatively short in duration. (Less than half of these relationships last five years or more.)

At this point, researchers don't know how to assure strong, stable marriages, especially among highly disadvantaged couples, nor do they know how to reduce nonmarital childbearing among adults.

- Demonstration projects, if they are rigorously evaluated, may help answer these questions.
- If children's well-being is the goal of marriage promotion programs, then their well-being should be studied as part of any demonstration project.

Child Trends is a nonpartisan research center that studies children and families.

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