

# TRENDS Child RESEARCH BRIEF

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## PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND CHILD OUTCOMES ACROSS SUBGROUPS

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### OVERVIEW

*Numerous studies have found links between the quality of the parents' relationship and positive outcomes for children and families.<sup>1</sup> Yet very little research has examined whether this association holds across various population subgroups, especially among disadvantaged groups.<sup>2</sup> Is the quality of the parents' relationship really associated with outcomes for children of low-income couples? For ethnic minority couples? For unmarried couples?*

*To address this issue, Child Trends analyzed data from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health. Analyses focus on more than 64,000 respondents<sup>3</sup> whose children were between the ages of six and 17.*

*Results indicate that the parents' relationship quality is very consistently and positively associated with a range of child and family outcomes, including: child behavior problems (externalizing), child social competence, child school engagement, child internalizing (depression), parent-child communication, and parental feelings of aggravation. This association holds across varied subgroups, including: white, black and Hispanic couples; married and cohabiting couples; lower and higher income families; boys and girls, teens and younger children, immigrants and non-immigrants; and parents with post-secondary education, a high school education, and less than a high school education. In addition, the association holds in all but one comparison when social and economic differences are taken into account.*

### BACKGROUND

In recent years, studies have examined the association between parental relationship quality and conflict and children's development.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> This research suggests that, on average, parents in higher quality relationships tend to have better-adjusted children with more positive attitudes toward marriage, who themselves are more likely to have quality relationships and marriages.<sup>8,9</sup>

However, a number of the studies on this topic are limited by a lack of nationally representative samples with information on *both* parental relationship quality and child outcomes. In addition, many studies ignore couples in cohabiting relationships.<sup>10,11</sup> These limitations have led some scholars to ask if parental relationships matter for all children, or whether it is generally a middle-class phenomenon.<sup>12,13</sup> Rarely have researchers had access to data that allow them to examine whether the benefits of healthy parental relationships cut across social, economic, and racial/ethnic subgroups. Recent data from the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) now make such analyses possible.

In addition to child outcomes, we also examine parent-child communication and parental aggravation, because parenting appears to be a critical pathway by which healthy parental relationships affect positive child outcomes.<sup>14,15,16</sup> High levels of stress and anger from difficult relationships can spill over to

parents' interactions with their children.<sup>17,18</sup> This spillover affects child outcomes ranging from physical health, to academic success, to psychological and social outcomes. This body of research has led to several large-scale random assignment evaluation studies that are exploring whether relationship education can improve marital and relationship quality and, thereby, enhance child outcomes in lower income populations.

### **CURRENT ANALYSES**

In this brief, we analyze reported parental relationship happiness across six child and family outcomes to determine whether the association between parental relationship quality for child outcomes holds across subsets of the population. This brief uses a measure of relationship happiness that separates those who describe themselves as “completely happy,” “very happy,” “fairly happy,” or “not very happy” to address the positive skew on self-reported happiness.<sup>19</sup>

As noted, these analyses draw upon a sample of 64,076 children between the ages of six and 17, living with two parents from the 2007 wave of the NSCH. The large sample size allows us to examine this association for an economically, racially, and ethnically diverse cross-section of respondents (see box on page 8).

### **FINDINGS**

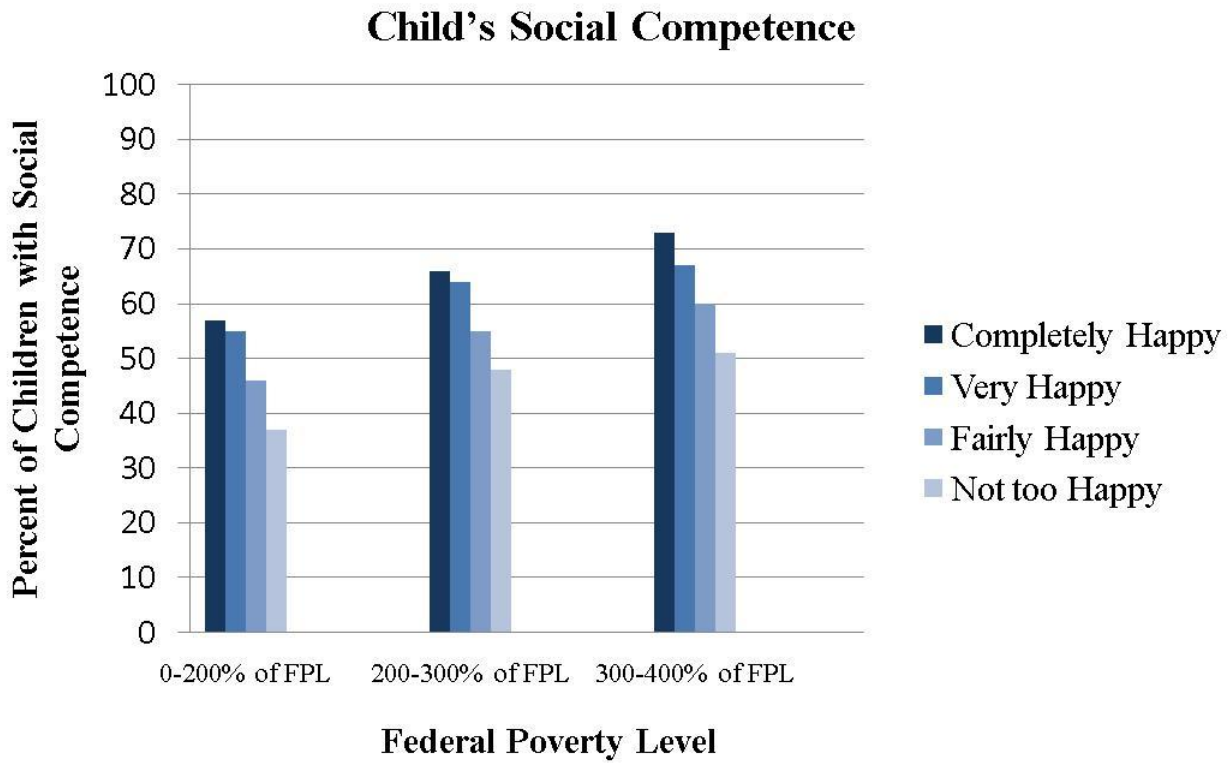
The results of our analyses are reported in full in Table 1. The overwhelming number of statistically significant associations detailed in Table 1 makes it clear that child outcomes are better when the reported happiness of their parents' relationship is higher. Almost without exception, the lowest levels of positive child outcomes are found among children in families where the parent reports that their relationship is “not too happy.” In contrast, the best child outcomes are found almost without exception among children whose parents report that their relationship is “completely happy.” Positive child outcomes for children whose parents report a “very happy” relationship are generally second highest, and children whose parents have a “fairly happy” relationship fall next.

This pattern holds across various subgroups of child gender, child age, family type, race and ethnicity, immigrant status, parent education, and family income.

Recognizing that the data are cross-sectional (i.e., collected at one specific point in time instead of over several or more years) and causality cannot be determined, the overall pattern suggests that the quality of parents' relationships matters for children in every sub-population, almost without exception. To illustrate the associations we find, specific examples are provided below.

As shown in Figure 1, and as found in other research, children who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes are less likely to be described as socially competent.<sup>20</sup> Within each category of family income in relation to the federal poverty level, however, the critical issue for these analyses, one can see that children with happier parents are more likely to be socially competent.

**FIGURE 1: Child’s Social Competence by Parental Happiness and by Family Income Relative to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)**



**FIGURE 2: Child’s School Engagement by Parental Relationship Happiness Across Racial/Ethnic Groups**

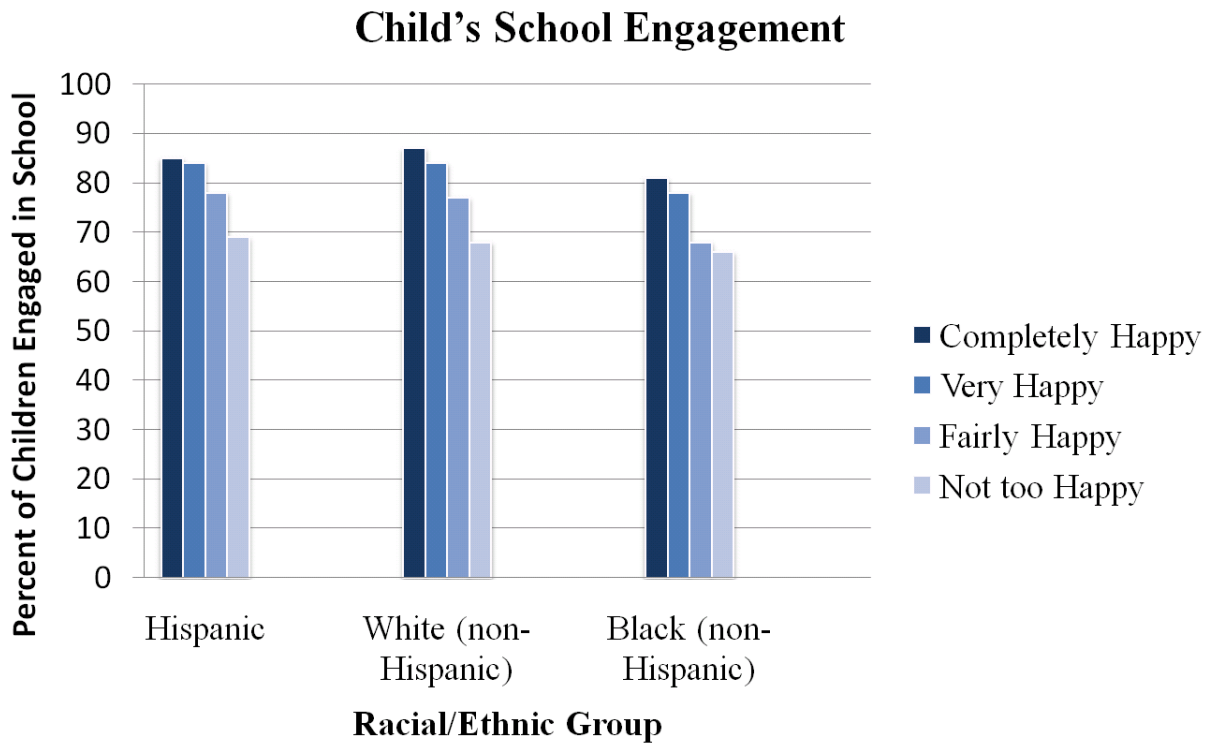


Figure 2 depicts children’s school engagement across racial/ethnic groups. Within each group, children whose parents have a happier relationship are more likely to be engaged in school.

**FIGURE 3: Parent-Child Communication by Parental Relationship Happiness Across Family Structure Types**

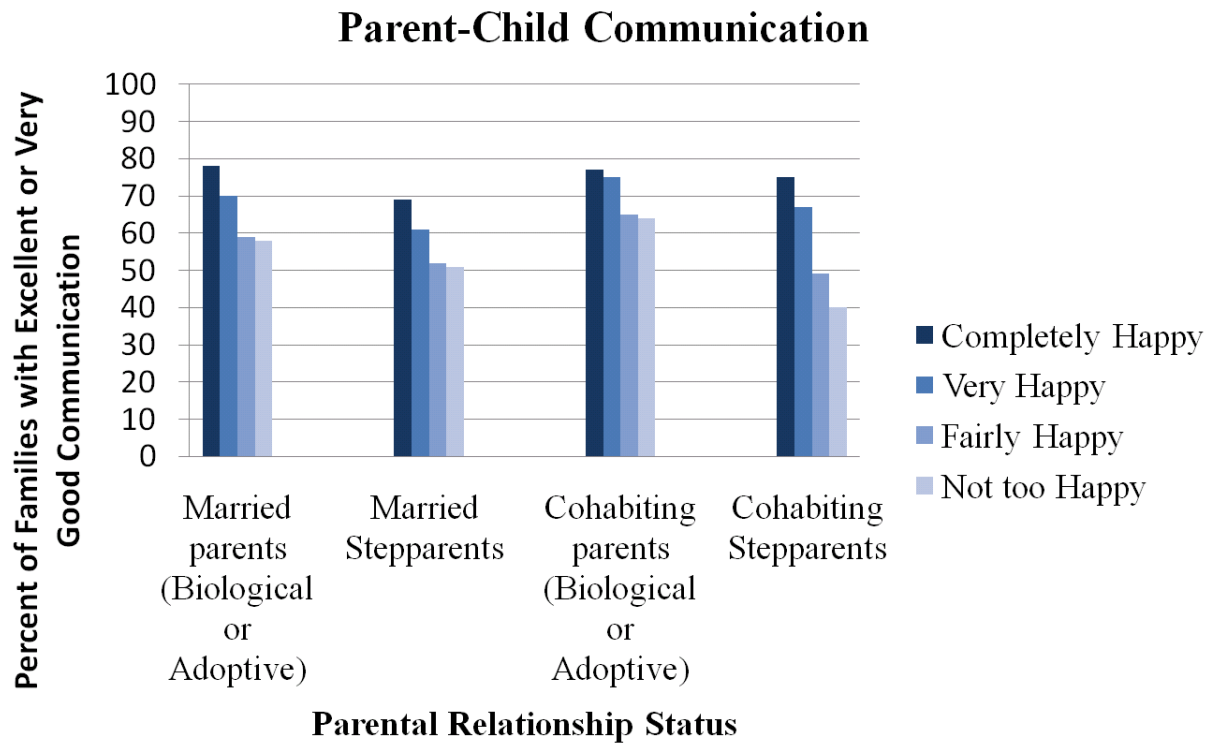


Figure 3 reports on parent-child communication across family structure types. As seen in the figure, parent-child communication tends to be better for those families in which both parents are married. However, within each family type, parent-communication is reported much more positively when parents are in a happier relationship.

**FIGURE 4: Child’s Externalizing Behavior by Parental Relationship Happiness Across Parent Education Levels**

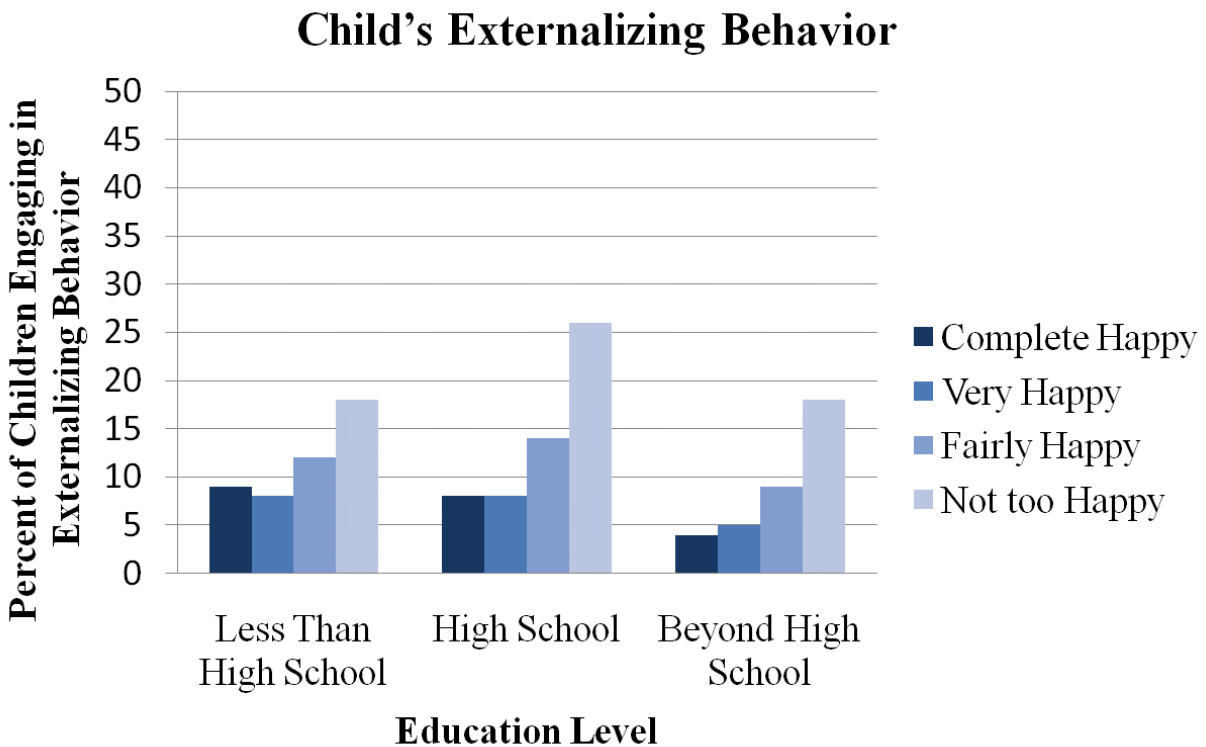


Figure 4 reports on child externalizing behavior across parent education levels. As seen above, children are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors if they are from more educationally advantaged homes. That is, children with better educated parents are less likely to engage in externalizing behavior. The important finding here, however, is that *within each education level*, children whose parents have happier relationships tend to engage in fewer problem behaviors.

## MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES

It is, of course, the case that relationship happiness reflects many influences, such as economic stress, and parent education. However, results of multivariate analyses indicate that, after controlling for child age, child race/ethnicity, family structure, family poverty level, and parental education, all but one of the associations depicted in Table 1 remained statistically significant.<sup>21</sup> The only exception is internalizing behavior (e.g., being depressed, withdrawing from others) with immigrant status.

## CONCLUSION

These results confirm findings from previous studies that, when parent relationship quality is high, their families and children have better outcomes. While having a child who is flourishing can contribute to the quality of a parent's relationship, considerable research indicates that relationship quality can also predict children's development. Our analyses extended previous work to address a very important question – how general is the association between relationship quality and child outcomes?

In sum, we found that happy parental relationships are quite consistently related to better outcomes for children and families across all types of subgroups. That is, this association holds not only for economically or educationally privileged families and children, but also holds across varied economic, racial, ethnic, and family structure subgroups.

One major limitation of this analysis is the fact that a single reporter provided information on the quality of the parents' relationship, as well as the child's outcomes. To best assess the quality of a relationship, multiple reports of child outcomes should be obtained, ideally including the child's report. Using this level of assessment, parent reports on relationship quality could be combined with child reports on outcomes. In addition, future analyses might include more items on relationship quality to more fully approach the construct of relationship happiness.<sup>22</sup> Also, with longitudinal data it is possible to examine the association between parental relationship quality and child outcomes over time. Because the data are cross-sectional, the causal direction of the association cannot be definitely established.

With these caveats, the findings presented in this brief suggest that programs and policies that increase relationship quality could have positive implications for child outcomes across many population subgroups. More research to replicate these results and to examine the pathways that might account for this association is needed, as is evaluation research on diverse populations to determine whether and how these findings can best inform efforts to enhance children's outcomes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DATA SOURCE USED FOR THIS BRIEF

The **National Survey of Children's Health (2007)** is a national telephone survey involving 91,642 interviews with a parent or guardian completed between, 2007-2008. One child under the age of 18 was randomly selected in each household as the subject of the survey. The most knowledgeable parent or guardian of the child served as the respondent. Data were collected by the Maternal Child and Health Bureau in collaboration with the National Center for Health Statistics.

**The following measures were used in this brief:**

### Measure of Relationship Happiness

Would you say that your relationship is completely happy, very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy?

### Measures of Child Outcomes

Please tell me if this statement was never, rarely, sometimes, usually, or always true for [CHILD'S NAME] during the past month.

#### *Externalizing*

[He/She] argues too much. [He/She] bullies or is cruel or mean to others.  
[He/She] is disobedient. [He/She] is stubborn, sullen, or irritable.

#### *Internalizing*

[He/She] feels worthless or inferior. [He/She] is unhappy, sad, or depressed.  
[He/She] is withdrawn, and does not get involved with others.

#### *Social Competence*

[He/She] shows respect for teachers and neighbors. [He/She] tries to resolve conflicts with classmates,  
[He/She] gets along well with other children. family, or friends.  
[He/She] tries to understand other people's feelings.

#### *School Engagement*

[He/She] cares about doing well in school. [He/She] does all required homework.

### Measures of Family Outcomes

#### *Parent Aggravation*

During the past month, how often have you felt [CHILD'S NAME] is much harder to care for than most children (his/her) age?  
During the past month, how often have you felt [he/she] does things that really bother you a lot?  
During the past month, how often have you felt angry with him/her)?

#### *Parent-Child Communication*

How well can you and [CHILD'S NAME] share ideas or talk about things that really matter?

**Percentage Distributions & Unweighted Sample Sizes for Parent-Reported Relationship Happiness**

Relationship Happiness

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Completely Happy	24,828	35.2%
Very Happy	33,607	47.6%
Fairly Happy	9,527	13.5%
Not Too Happy	1,230	1.7%

Unweighted *Sample Sizes* Relative to Relationship Happiness

	<b>Completely Happy</b>	<b>Very Happy</b>	<b>Fairly Happy</b>	<b>Not Too Happy</b>
<b>Externalizing</b>	17,059	24,507	7,644	1,126
<b>Internalizing</b>	16,992	24,415	7,576	1,107
<b>Social Competence</b>	16,999	24,444	7,611	1,113
<b>School Engagement</b>	17,046	24,512	7,630	1,127
<b>Parent-Child Communication</b>	17,092	24,577	7,659	1,133
<b>Parent Aggravation</b>	17,051	24,516	7,640	1,132

**Table 1**

**Externalizing: Percent of Children with Behavior Problems "All or Most of the Time"**

	Child Gender		Child Age			Family Type				Race/Ethnicity			Immigrant Status		Parent Education			Income		
	Male	Female	Ages 6 to 11	Ages 12 to 14	Ages 15 to 17	Married Adoptive Bio	Married Step	Cohabit Adoptive Bio	Cohabit Step	Hispanic	White	Black	Yes, Immigrant	Non-Immigrant	< HS	HS	> HS	< 200 FPL	200-400 FPL	200-400 FPL
Completely Happy	4	5	4	5	5	4	9	6	11	6	5	5	4	5	9	8	4	9	5	3
Very Happy	5	6	5	6	6	5	11	6	13	7	5	7	6	5	8	8	5	9	6	4
Fairly Happy	10	10	10	11	10	9	15	11	20	11	10	11	9	10	12	14	9	14	11	7
Not Too Happy	18	21	18	19	21	17	25	20	28	21	21	21	16	20	18	26	18	24	18	14

**Internalizing: Percent of Children Exhibiting Internalizing Behaviors "All or Most of the Time"**

	Child Gender		Child Age			Family Type				Race/Ethnicity			Immigrant Status		Parent Education			Income		
	Male	Female	Ages 6 to 11	Ages 12 to 14	Ages 15 to 17	Married Adoptive Bio	Married Step	Cohabit Adoptive Bio	Cohabit Step	Hispanic	White	Black	Yes, Immigrant	Non-Immigrant	< HS	HS	> HS	< 200 FPL	200-400 FPL	200-400 FPL
Completely Happy	<1	<1	<1	<1	1.0	<1	<1	<1	2.4	1.9	<1	1.4	1.2	<1	2.3	<1	<1	1.4	<1	<1
Very Happy	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	1.3	1.4	<1	1.7	<1	<1	1.0	<1	3.0	1.1	<1	1.7	<1	<1
Fairly Happy	1.6	1.0	<1	1.4	1.9	1.2	1.8	<1	3.1	2.0	1.1	2.1	1.1	1.3	3.3	2.2	<1	2.4	1.4	<1
Not Too Happy	2.6	4.9	1.2	5.1	5.5	3.3	5.1	3.2	9.5	4.5	3.7	1.7	4.1	3.7	6.7	3.0	3.5	6.0	2.3	2.6

**Social Competence: Percent of Children Engaging in Socially Competent Behavior "All or Most of the Time"**

	Child Gender		Child Age			Family Type				Race/Ethnicity			Immigrant Status		Parent Education			Income		
	Male	Female	Ages 6 to 11	Ages 12 to 14	Ages 15 to 17	Married Adoptive Bio	Married Step	Cohabit Adoptive Bio	Cohabit Step	Hispanic	White	Black	Yes, Immigrant	Non-Immigrant	< HS	HS	> HS	< 200 FPL	200-400 FPL	200-400 FPL
Completely Happy	65	71	67	68	68	70	60	58	57	60	70	56	64	69	55	59	71	57	66	73
Very Happy	60	68	63	64	65	66	54	55	51	58	65	52	62	65	48	58	67	55	64	67
Fairly Happy	50	60	54	55	55	58	45	51	41	50	57	43	53	56	47	47	58	46	55	60
Not Too Happy	41	50	43	48	46	49	37	46	41	43	49	36	40	49	35	42	50	37	48	51



**School Engagement: Percent of Children With High Level of School Engagement**

	Child Gender		Child Age			Family Type				Race/Ethnicity			Immigrant Status		Parent Education			Income		
	Male	Female	Ages 6 to 11	Ages 12 to 14	Ages 15 to 17	Married Adoptive Bio	Married Step	Cohabit Adoptive Bio	Cohabit Step	Hispanic	White	Black	Yes, Immigrant	Non-Immigrant	< HS	HS	> HS	< 200 FPL	200-400 FPL	200-400 FPL
Completely Happy	82	91	91	85	80	88	79	82	76	85	87	81	89	87	82	82	88	82	85	89
Very Happy	79	89	89	82	78	86	74	82	71	84	84	78	87	84	78	79	86	79	83	86
Fairly Happy	69	84	53	73	70	79	66	76	63	78	77	68	81	76	78	68	79	69	75	81
Not Too Happy	61	76	75	66	62	72	62	70	51	69	68	66	69	69	61	63	72	65	68	72

**Parent Aggravation: Percent of Parents Aggravated "All or Most of the Time"**

	Child Gender		Child Age			Family Type				Race/Ethnicity			Immigrant Status		Parent Education			Income		
	Male	Female	Ages 6 to 11	Ages 12 to 14	Ages 15 to 17	Married Adoptive Bio	Married Step	Cohabit Adoptive Bio	Cohabit Step	Hispanic	White	Black	Yes, Immigrant	Non-Immigrant	< HS	HS	> HS	< 200 FPL	200-400 FPL	200-400 FPL
Completely Happy	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	3	2	1	2	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1
Very Happy	2	2	1	2	2	1	4	3	4	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	1
Fairly Happy	5	4	4	5	5	4	7	2	11	5	4	6	5	4	4	6	4	6	4	4
Not Too Happy	11	8	7	10	12	7	10	14	12	11	9	9	10	8	10	13	7	12	9	5

**Parent-Child Communication: Percent of Parents who Communicate With Their Children "Very Well"**

	Child Gender		Child Age			Family Type				Race/Ethnicity			Immigrant Status		Parent Education			Income		
	Male	Female	Ages 6 to 11	Ages 12 to 14	Ages 15 to 17	Married Adoptive Bio	Married Step	Cohabit Adoptive Bio	Cohabit Step	Hispanic	White	Black	Yes, Immigrant	Non-Immigrant	< HS	HS	> HS	< 200 FPL	200-400 FPL	200-400 FPL
Completely Happy	76	77	86	74	68	78	69	77	75	75	77	78	77	77	72	75	78	75	76	78
Very Happy	69	70	77	67	61	70	61	75	67	70	69	74	71	69	69	69	69	71	69	69
Fairly Happy	57	58	65	54	51	59	52	65	49	58	58	62	58	58	58	54	59	57	58	59
Not Too Happy	58	56	65	53	51	58	51	64	40	59	56	61	59	56	54	59	57	58	54	57

Note: All associations are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ , unless cells are shown in grey.

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<sup>19</sup> While a more multi-faceted measure of relationship quality has been conceptualized and developed (see Moore et al., 2006), overall relationship happiness is often used as a brief, overall measure of quality. The large sample size and the fact that this measure was used for cohabiting, as well as married couples represent important offsetting strengths.

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