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THE CONSEQUENCES OF PARENTHOOD FOR THE
MARITAL STABILITY OF YOUNG ADULTS

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**THE CONSEQUENCES OF PARENTHOOD FOR
THE MARITAL STABILITY OF YOUNG ADULTS***

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This paper examines how the birth of the first child affects the stability of marriages over the short run: it uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972. Our results show strong, positive effects of the first birth on the marital stability of young adults. We estimate that by the time the first child reaches his second birthday more than 20 percent of the parents would have been divorced or separated if the child had not been born, compared to actual disruption rates of 5-8 percent.

Researchers and students of the family have puzzled over the effects of children on marital stability. Some have argued that parenthood holds couples together, either because it increases the joys and satisfactions of family life or because it makes divorce more costly. Others see the arrival of children as a turning point for the worse in marital relations, an event that strains and changes the nature of the marital bond. Some evidence exists to support both perspectives.

This paper examines the effects of a first birth on the short-run stability of marriages of individuals, using data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS). We follow both fathers and mothers over the three years surrounding the first birth, and compare the stability of their marriages to that which we estimate they

would have experienced in the absence of parenthood. This longitudinal perspective, in combination with our estimates of marital dissolution in the absence of parenthood, allows us to provide additional evidence on the relationship between presence of children and marital stability.

The notion that children hold families together has long held appeal for religious leaders, policy makers, and even researchers, but recent evidence suggests that the relationship between parenthood and marital disruption is more subtle and complex than it was once thought (Cherlin, 1977; Hannan et al., 1977; Thornton, 1977).

Several mechanisms could produce the negative relationship sometimes found between the presence of children and marital instability. Having children may increase the costs of divorce. For preschool-age children, the high costs in time, effort, and money required to care for them may make divorce more expensive (Cherlin, 1977). For children of any age, divorce reduces the noncustodial parent's access to the children, increases the burden of child care on the custodial parent, and, on average, reduces the financial well-being of the mother and children (Hoffman, 1977). Parents may be more reluctant than the childless to end their marriages because they believe that disruption will harm the children

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(see Thornton, 1977, for a review of this literature). According to the reasoning presented in Becker et al. (1977), children are a prime example of marriage-specific capital, having substantially more value within a marriage than outside it. As such, children contribute to the stability of a marriage because the drop in their value to the parents in the case of divorce raises the costs of divorce.

However, several theoretical perspectives suggest—indirectly—that children may *reduce* marital stability by decreasing the general quality of life for parents. The birth of the first child may be a crisis for parents (Dyer, 1963), changing the objective quality of their lives (Waldron and Routh, 1981), reducing their satisfaction with their lives (Campbell et al., 1976), and requiring adjustments in the roles and expectations of both the mother and father (Haggstrom et al., 1984; Rossi, 1968; Udry, 1971). These adjustments—and the dissatisfaction found among parents of young children—may increase marital instability. Hill (1984) suggests that children decrease marital stability indirectly because their presence, as she shows, interferes with the leisure time parents spend together, and shared leisure activities create a bond that strengthens marriage.

Although this research on children, marital satisfaction, and quality of life leads one to expect a positive relationship between children and divorce, few other studies find such a link (Mott and Moore, 1979).

This paper uses data on a single cohort of young adults, surveyed over a recent period, to provide additional evidence on the nature and strength of the relationship between parenthood and remaining married, although our data do not allow us to explore the causal processes underlying this link. We trace the marital stability of male and female parents over the three years surrounding the first birth, and compare this with estimates we develop of their marital stability if the first birth had not occurred.

DATA

The National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS) provides a comprehensive data base for studying the educational, vocational, and personal development of high school graduates as they pass through the critical years of early adulthood. The NLS began in the spring of 1972 when 19,001 seniors from 1061 high schools were asked to complete lengthy questionnaires and take a 69-minute test battery measuring both verbal and nonverbal abilities. The participating schools were also asked to provide further information about the seniors from their student record files.

Later, four follow-up surveys were administered in the fall of 1973, 1974, 1976, and 1979 to over 23,000 members of the same graduating class, including most of the seniors who were in the base-year sample.

For most respondents, the NLS provides information that allows us to pinpoint quite accurately the date of marriage and timing of first birth. Information on marital status was gathered on all four follow-up surveys, and married respondents were asked their dates of marriage. In the pre-1979 follow-up surveys, participants were also asked how many children they had as of the first week of October in the year the survey was taken. The 1979 follow-up elicited the exact birth dates of all the respondents' children, both natural and adopted. The timing of first birth can be determined exactly for respondents to the 1979 survey, and estimated for most other respondents.¹

Among the 11,837 female and 11,222 male NLS participants, we identified 4,663 women and 3,368 men who became parents by October 1979. Because our analysis of the effects of parenthood over time required pinpointing the months of marriage and entry into parenthood, we eliminated records for (a) 269 adoptive parents for whom the timing of entry into parenthood was uncertain; (b) 1750 other parents, mainly nonrespondents to the 1979 follow-up survey, whose children's birth dates were not reported; (c) 60 others whose marriage dates were not reported; (d) 369 others who became parents before October 1972; (e) 42 others whose race or parents' socioeconomic status were unknown; and (f) 660 others who were unwed when their first children were born. This left a sample of 2,901 mothers and 1,979 fathers who became parents between October

¹ Because our methodology for assessing the consequences of parenthood for the marital stability of young adults depends heavily on our ability to date the birth of the first child, we devised a procedure for combining the many relevant items on the five surveys to determine marital and parenthood status as of October of each year from 1972 to 1979. For the most part, this procedure used the responses to the questions on marital status, date of marriage, the number of children reported at each follow-up survey, and their birth dates. Missing values on marital status were estimated (wherever possible) from marriage dates reported on a later survey or from later "never married" responses. Inconsistent and highly improbable birth dates (for example, births prior to age 14 or births one to eight months apart) were eliminated. In general, parenthood status was classified unknown in cases involving impossible or unlikely birth dates, inconsistent reporting across surveys, or conflicting information provided by the respondent.

1972 and October 1979, and whose months of marriage and entry into parenthood were known.

Our procedure for estimating the effects of parenthood on marital stability contrasts the observed marital dissolution rates for this sample of parents with their predicted rates in the absence of parenthood, based on observations of marital dissolution among 2,807 female and 2,477 male NLS participants who married but remained childless through October 1979 (or October 1976 if they did not respond to the 1979 survey). Although information on marital dissolution was gathered on all four follow-up surveys, only the survey responses that post-dated marriage provide usable observations on marital dissolution. The number of these observations among the ever-married nonparents was 6,029, of which 3,467 were for women.

The main source of sample size loss both for the parents and ever-married nonparents under study was nonresponse to the 1979 follow-up survey, for which the overall response rate was 79 percent. To assess the possible effects of that loss, we compared the characteristics of respondents to the 1979 survey with those of nonrespondents. Sample loss was selective by background characteristics, but this selectivity appears modest.²

² The NLS is not a representative sample from the Class of 1972. Schools in low-income areas and schools with high proportions of minority students were sampled at approximately twice the sampling rate used for other schools. However, estimates of the national proportions with various characteristics can be obtained from the NLS by weighting the respondents proportional to the reciprocals of their sample inclusion probabilities. We have made these estimates (see Haggstrom et al., 1984). According to our estimates, approximately 38 percent of the females in the class of 1972 had borne a first child while married, 6 percent became unwed parents, and 1 percent became parents by adopting a child; the comparable figures for males are 27 percent married parents, 4 percent unwed parents, and 2 percent adoptive parents. Two-thirds of the males and 56 percent of the females were still not parents as of October 1979, when the typical member of the Class of 1972 reached age 25. These figures match those for females from the Current Population Survey. The recent report on childspacing (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984:20) shows that women in the birth cohort 1950-54 had 636 first births per 1,000 women by age 25 for high school graduates, and 301 first births per 1,000 women for those with one year of college or more. Since all the NLS participants in our sample completed high school, and about 60 percent completed some college, application of these national rates to the female NLS sample implies that about 44 percent had a first birth by age 25, exactly what our results show. Unfortunately, very little information on age at entry into parenthood exists for males.

Marital dissolution in this analysis includes divorce and separation, since both signal a breakdown of the marital relationship. Although separation need not be permanent, it usually leads to divorce; often, a considerable period may elapse between the separation and the legal death of the union (Glick and Norton, 1977).

Our measure of disruption is an indicator variable for those NLS participants who reported being divorced or separated as of the first week of October in the survey year.³ Since the NLS did not obtain a complete marital history, we cannot identify those who separated and reconciled within a year, or those who divorced and remarried between surveys. This poses minor problems, however; separations and divorces distribute themselves throughout the year, so that the average elapsed time between the event and the survey will be about six months for surveys one year apart. Since median time to remarriage is about three years (Glick and Norton, 1977; Grady, 1980), we will miss relatively few speedy remarriers. Moreover, remarriage occurs most rapidly for those who are young and childless at divorce (Glick and Norton, 1977; Grady, 1980), so our estimates will understate the proportion divorced most for this group. Our estimates of the effects of parenthood on divorce will therefore be biased downward, if at all.

METHODS

In this study, we use an individual effects methodology similar to that used by Haggstrom et al. (1981). Its basic premise is that the effects of parenthood on the marital status of a particular individual can be estimated by comparing changes over time in the individual's marital status with estimates of the expected changes for that individual in the absence of parenthood. The expected changes are estimated here using logistic regression equations fitted to observations on the married NLS participants who remained childless through the most recent survey date.

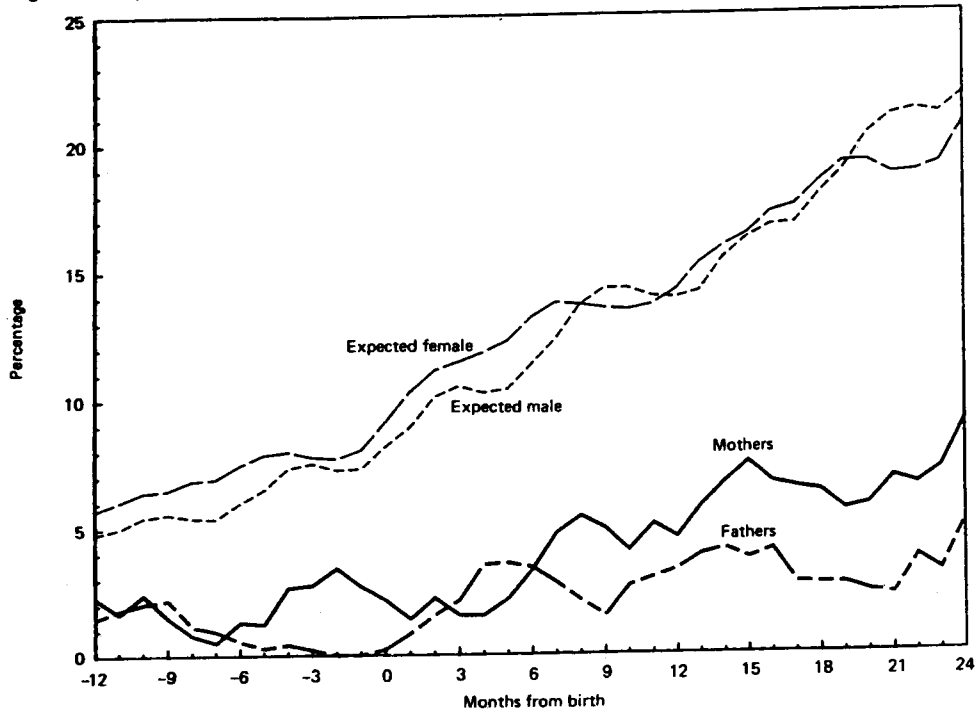
We use this methodology to calculate the estimated average effects of parenthood, which vary over time, on marital stability for each month from the twelfth month before the birth date of the first child ($t = -12$) through two years after the birth date ($t = 24$). We set $t = 0$ for the birth month of the NLS respondent's firstborn child.

Observations of marital status are available

³ The coding of marital status in the NLS included separated, widowed and divorced in one category. However, because widowhood is virtually nonexistent for this age group, we discuss only separation and divorce.

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Figure 1. Proportion Currently Divorced or Separated



for, at most, four time points—the months of the four follow-up surveys. These observation times are dated relative to the first birth. For example, an NLS respondent who first became a parent in December 1973 provides observations on marital status at $t_1 = -2$ (October 1973), $t_2 = 10$ (October 1974), $t_3 = 34$ (October 1976), and $t_4 = 70$ (October 1979).

In calculating the proportion divorced p_t for a particular value of t , say $t = 10$, we averaged the values of the dissolution indicator variables y_t over all parents who provided observations on the tenth month following entrance into parenthood. The numbers of observations, which were distributed approximately uniformly across the values of t , averaged 103 per time point for women and 62 for men. Having calculated these proportions p_t for all values of t , we then "smoothed" the time series of means using a 7-point, third-degree polynomial smoothing procedure.⁴ The resulting graphs are presented in Figure 1, labeled "Mothers" and "Fathers".

To estimate the predicted proportion divorced for parents if they remained childless, we used fitted values from a logistic regression

⁴ The effect of smoothing is to reduce the variance of the estimated proportions p_t by approximately one-half. For further methodological details, see Haggstrom et al., (1984).

equation derived from observations on the 2807 female and 2477 male ever-married non-parents in the comparison group. This equation, specified in Table 1, incorporated a variety of background characteristics (high school measures, race/ethnicity, and family background) as well as year of observation, duration of marriage, and educational attainment. The last three characteristics reflect the respondent's status at the time of observation. The fitted equation provides a means for predicting the time paths of marital stability that typical parents might have followed if they had remained childless, taking into account the timing of their marriage, their educational progress, their backgrounds, and the dates at which their outcomes were measured.

This logistic regression equation was evaluated at the means of the independent variables for parents to obtain predicted probabilities of being divorced or separated for each month in the 3-year period around the birth. The resulting graphs are labeled "Expected male" and "Expected female" in Figure 1.

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Table 1 presents the results from the logistic regression of marital disruption on the charac-

Table 1. Logistic Regression Results for Marital Disruption

Variable	Females		Males	
	b	t	b	t
Constant	-7.806		-2.791	
<i>Marital status</i>				
Years since first marriage	0.649	18.1	0.710	14.9
<i>Postsecondary education</i>				
None (omitted)				
Less than two years	0.465	3.1	0.283	1.4
Two or more years, no BA	0.703	3.8	0.045	0.2
College graduate	0.124	0.6	-0.172	-0.6
<i>High school measures</i>				
(Ability measure)/100	1.032	3.9	0.417	1.3
(Percentile rank in class)/100	-1.460	-5.3	-1.356	-4.0
Academic program	-0.400	-2.6	0.103	0.6
Vocational program	-0.137	-0.9	-0.175	-0.9
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>				
Black	1.019	3.7	0.101	0.3
Hispanic	-0.036	-0.1	-0.113	-0.3
Other (omitted)				
<i>Family background</i>				
Parents' education	0.027	0.8	-0.071	-1.6
Father's occupation (SEI/100)	-0.799	-2.6	1.117	3.0
Logarithm of family income	0.199	1.7	-0.153	-1.0
<i>Region</i>				
North Central (omitted)				
Northeast	0.064	0.4	-0.472	-2.3
South	0.143	1.0	-0.028	-0.2
West	0.170	0.9	0.187	0.9
<i>Year</i>				
1973	0.804	3.1	0.102	0.2
1974	0.779	3.7	0.138	0.5
1976	0.769	5.3	0.443	2.5
1979 (omitted)				
F	27.9		18.2	
N	3467		2562	

teristics of the individual. As noted, these results apply to ever-married nonparents. Logistic regression coefficients for females appear in the left-most columns, those for males in the right-most columns.

Several aspects of these results are worth noting. First, years since first marriage has a strong positive effect on divorce or separation for two reasons. One is that the longer individuals have been married, the longer the risk of divorce. This is true in any sample, but especially so in a young sample such as the NLS, where additional time spent married increases risk by a substantial amount. Another reason, however, is that length of time since first marriage is related to age at first marriage. The equation includes not only a term for years since first marriage but also one for the year of observation; it doesn't control for age at first marriage, but for age at observation; on average, those with more years since first marriage married at younger ages. The positive effect,

then, of years since first marriage also reflects the generally observed positive effect of young ages at marriage on disruption (Moore and Waite, 1981; Becker et al., 1977).

The youthfulness of the NLS sample and the measurement of the dependent variable makes comparison of the results in Table 2 with previous findings difficult. In addition, this equation is estimated using only data from NLS respondents who were married but were not parents; this group probably consists predominantly of young couples who will become parents but have not yet had time to do so.

Figure 1 shows actual proportions currently disrupted for ever-married male and female parents in the two years following the first birth, along with the estimated expected disruption rates in the absence of parenthood, predicted from the coefficients for married nonparents given in Table 2 and the mean characteristics of parents. Parents of both sexes have very low disruption rates through-

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out the 3-year period. Other research shows that those currently in intact marriages are more likely to become parents than those whose marriages are disrupted, although a rather high proportion of all twice-married women bear a child between marriages (Rindfuss and Bumpass, 1977).

Our data show that virtually none of the fathers and only 1-2 percent of the mothers were divorced or separated at the time of first birth. The proportion increases following the birth, but the increase is small and gradual. By two years after becoming parents, only about 4 percent of the men are divorced or separated. The disruption rate rises somewhat more for women, from about 3 percent just before the birth to about 8 percent by the time the child reaches age two. Some of these sex differences may result from differences in age at marriage: women tend to marry a year or two younger than men do, on average (Thornton and Rogers, 1983), and to marry men a year or two older than they are. Within the age group represented by the NLS respondents, through 1979, the married men are less typical of their age peers than are the married women.

Comparing the observed divorce rates in Figure 1 with our estimates of expected proportion divorced or separated in the absence of the first birth, we see that the divorce rates for both male and female parents rise much more slowly than would be expected in the absence of the first birth. Estimated expected marital dissolution rises steadily for both sexes from about 5 percent one year before the birth through the two years after. These estimates agree closely for men and women, with male disruption slightly higher for most of the three-year period. By the time the child reaches his second birthday, these results suggest that more than 20 percent of the mothers and fathers would have divorced or separated had they not become parents, compared with actual disruption rates of 5-8 percent.

To provide further analytic support for the striking results in Figure 1, we first note that the regression results in Table 1 indicate that years since first marriage is the dominant predictor variable for marital dissolution among NLS participants. This suggests a second approach for comparing dissolution rates of parents and nonparents over time, namely, group them into cohorts by years of marriage and calculate separate time series of dissolution rates for each cohort. Tabulations of this form, not reproduced here, confirm the magnitudes of the estimated effects evident in Figure 1 and show rates of dissolution for the childless up to three times as high as for parents for both sexes. The tabulations also indicate that the

positive effects of parenthood on marital stability are more pronounced for high school graduates who marry shortly after leaving high school than they are for those who defer marriage for several years.

These results provide compelling evidence that children increase marital stability. As our results pertain directly to the period thought to be most difficult in the transition to parenthood—the birth of the first child—we find no support for the contention that the difficulty of this transition increases the chances of marital breakup in the short run.

Findings reported by Hofferth (1981) match ours quite closely. She concludes that the birth of a first child greatly reduces the likelihood of marital disruption relative to that faced by childless couples. This effect is substantial and long lasting. Hofferth's analysis differs from ours in that it compares childless couples and parents (by parity), rather than comparing divorce probabilities for parents with estimates of what their divorce probabilities would have been had the first birth not occurred. Morgan and Rindfuss (1985) also reach conclusions similar to ours, using a sample from the June 1980 Current Population Survey. They find that marital births—whether conceived inside or outside marriage—reduce the risk of marital disruption.

The increase that we observe in the estimated expected divorce rate in the absence of the first birth occurs primarily because of the strong positive effect of years since first marriage on the likelihood of disruption (see Table 1), combined with the steadily increasing average marital duration among parents in the years following the first birth. At the first birth, fathers had been married for an average of 1.8 years, and mothers for 2.0 years. By two years after the birth, average marital duration had risen to 3.6 for fathers and 3.8 for mothers.⁵ The mean for the variable years since first marriage for married nonparents in Table 2 is 2.2 for males and 2.6 for females. Our estimates suggest, therefore, that the increasing exposure to the risk of divorce reflected in years since marriage would have meant much higher proportions disrupted in the absence of the first birth.

CONCLUSIONS

These analyses point to a consistent, powerful, and positive relationship between having children and marital stability, at least in the short run. This stabilizing effect of children is found

⁵ The latter average is not simply the earlier average plus two years because of changes in the sample used to compute the means.

both for males and females, in a recent sample of high school graduates who married and bore a first child before age 25.

These results do not tell us *why* parents are less likely to divorce than those without children. Perhaps characteristics of the individuals—such as a strong taste for family life, or religious beliefs—simultaneously increase the chances of parenthood and decrease the chances of separation or divorce, without any direct effect of having children on remaining married. Perhaps those with the most stable marriages are more willing to have children for that reason. Perhaps having children does tend to hold marriages together, either by making them more satisfying, or by increasing the cost of dissolving them. Our model of marital instability for married nonparents includes many of the parents' characteristics, as well as marital duration, but it does not control for tastes for family life or similar personality or attitudinal variables rarely measured in social surveys.

These findings of a strong connection between parenthood and marital stability are striking, but the selective character of the NLS sample makes them more suggestive than definitive. As has been noted, virtually all the NLS respondents are high school graduates—members of a single graduating class. In addition, the structure of the data restricts us to examination of the relationship between entry into parenthood and marital stability during early adulthood only, and to those who marry and become parents by their mid-twenties. Some of those who have not yet become parents—and some of those who are not currently divorced—will later do so. Finally, the data contain no information on marital satisfaction, attitudes toward family life, or religiosity, all of which would be quite useful in testing among competing explanations for these findings.

Nevertheless, these results are so striking that they deserve further research attention. Does the association between having a child and marital stability persist over longer periods? Do those marrying and becoming parents at later ages show the same pattern? Does this relationship exist among those with lower levels of education? Does causality run from marital stability to timing and/or likelihood of a birth as well as from children to marital stability? And perhaps most importantly, what are the *causal* mechanisms that produce the strong association between the birth of the first child and marital stability over the short run?

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