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Children's Well-Being: A Longitudinal Analysis  
of the Effects of Family Life  
on Children's Outcomes Postdivorce

by

Linda S. Stephens

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

1996

Approved by



(Chairperson of Supervisory Committee)

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Doctoral Dissertation

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University of Washington

Abstract

Children's Well-Being: A Longitudinal Analysis  
of the Effects of Family Life  
on Children's Outcomes Postdivorce

by Linda S. Stephens

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:  
Professor Diane N. Lye  
Department of Sociology

Although a number of studies have examined children's well-being postdivorce, such studies have commonly used non-representative samples and simple cross-sectional designs. To date, analyses of children's well-being after divorce have also been hampered by a lack of data on family characteristics, parenting patterns, and spousal relationships during marriage. Those studies which have considered these characteristics have employed retrospective measures which may be biased. Other studies have not been able to include any measures of family life during marriage, e.g., parental discord, and consequently, could only theorize as to why children should have lower levels of well-being before their parents separated. This analysis overcomes many of these difficulties because it employs a representative

national sample, provides data on the same families over time, and includes a rich variety of indicators.

The analyses of children's behavioral outcomes, emotional problems, and of the parent-child relationship employ five explanatory perspectives of children's well-being postdivorce: family structure, mothers' involvement, family economic status, children's prior well-being, and marital relationship.

The results of these analyses are very encouraging for parents and for policymakers interested in promoting children's well-being. In the case of the behavioral outcomes, the family economic status and the mothers' involvement perspective are most useful in explaining the probability that children would engage in any of the behaviors. Although the parents' marital status has some effect on a few of the outcomes, the effect is quite minor. The predicted probabilities of most of behavioral outcomes suggest that mothers' educational attainment and the frequency of their positive interactions are much more important to good outcomes for the children.

For the children's other outcomes, the prior well-being perspective appears to be most useful. By that, I mean there appears to be a great deal of continuity between the children's well-being at the time of the first interview and their well-being at the time of the second interview.. Likewise continuity in relationship quality between various members of the family is important in explaining the relationship between mothers and their children.

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## DEDICATION

To Sarah and Nick Stephens who remind me daily  
of their love and of the importance of  
children's well-being for all of us.

## Chapter One: Children's Well-Being:

During the summer of 1996, both the Republican and Democratic Conventions were centered around discussions of, platitudes concerning, and calls for family values. In particular, one dialogue emerged at the Republican Convention that was immediately responded to by participants at the Democratic Convention. Both the keynote speaker and the Republican candidate made reference to a recent publication by the First Lady titled *It Takes a Village*. The Republican response to the claim was: "It doesn't take a village, it takes a family to raise a child." At the Democratic Convention, the First Lady immediately defended the claim by explaining the meaning of the book's title. The exchange was, of course, political, but it was also a bit silly since both sides talked in generalities, and neither side clarified how we might act, either as individuals or as a society, to promote the well-being of children.

Although children's well-being is often the topic of political posturing and rhetoric, (not unlike the way politicians kiss babies to show their concern for the American family), it is also essential that scholarly efforts ascertain the factors which actually promote or detract from children's ability to grow and develop to their fullest potential. The consequences of these factors for individuals and for society are obvious. Thus, the purpose of this work is to evaluate a series of factors which potentially affect children's well-being. My specific goal is to examine the relationships between various characteristics of households and of the households' members and children's well-being. In essence, the goal is to provide a better understanding of what it takes to raise a healthy, happy, and productive child.

The analyses which follow focus on differences in children's well-being by family structure because this has been the traditional focus of most social science research and government policy. An analysis of family structure alone, however, is deceiving. Instead, we need to utilize a range of other family characteristics to determine their relative effects on children's well-

being. These include economic, emotional, social, and physical characteristics of family members and their relationships that potentially affect children's well-being. The intent of this work is not to determine the most compelling explanation for children's well-being, but rather, to examine the ways in which many of these factors jointly shape children's lives. Thus, the effects of economic losses are dependent upon the degree to which custodial parents' are able to not only meet their children's economic needs, but also their children's social and psychological needs. The effects of stressful events in children's lives is similarly dependent on the level of the custodial parent's psychological well-being. The effects of contact with an absent parent are dependent on the level of parental conflict. Each of these factors is best understood within the context of the others.

This research addresses four central questions related to the effects of marital and family characteristics on children's well-being. First, what is the relationship between family structure, i.e., the marital status of the parents, and a series of outcomes for children at the end of the 20th Century? To what extent is the

separation or the divorce of parents associated with negative outcomes for children postdivorce?

The second question asks to what extent can those differences between children from intact families and children whose families have experienced marital disruption be attenuated by the children's prior well-being? If children whose parents have ended their marriages are at risk for negative outcomes, can this risk be explained by characteristics of the child that existed prior to the marital break up? These questions examine the possibility that children who experience difficulties or engage in negative behaviors after divorce were more likely to be experiencing difficulties prior to the end of their parents' relationships.

After addressing the first two questions, the next step is to ask how do family characteristics, parenting patterns, and spousal relations during marriage affect children's well-being? How do these characteristics affect children's well-being in families that later experience marital disruption? It is possible that the reason some children do less well after divorce is not divorce, per se, but rather, characteristics of families

which might also place them at a higher risk of divorcing. For example, it seems reasonable that couples who divorce are likely to experience greater levels of marital conflict than couples who remain married. Given this possibility, are children whose parents divorce at greater risk because of the conflict that accompanies the divorce as opposed to being at greater risk because their parents no longer live together?

And finally, this work will examine the possibility that characteristics of the child, e.g., age and gender, might condition the effects of the family characteristics on children's well-being. How might children's outcomes differ for those outcomes for which there is evidence of variation in the effects of the predictor variables on children's outcomes by the age or the gender of the child.

In chapter two, I introduce some of the previous research on these questions and present the five perspectives on children's well-being which I utilize in this work. The perspectives I focus on are family structure, prior well-being of the children, mothers'

involvement with their children, marital relationship, and the family economic status perspectives. After presenting the perspectives, I discuss the findings of earlier research related to each of these perspectives. Finally, I suggest ways in which the research on the relationships between these perspectives and outcomes for children might be enhanced.

In chapter three, I describe the data and general study design employed in this analysis. I also briefly discuss differences in women and men's reports of family life. In chapter four, I begin by addressing the first question of interest. I compare the outcomes for children whose parents' have separated or divorced with those whose parents are still married and living together. I also discuss ways in which men and women vary in their reports of children's psychological and emotional well-being, children's behavioral outcomes, and in the relationships mothers and fathers have with their children. The differences in reports by gender are problematic, and consequently, I suggest a strategy for addressing these problems.

The effects of predivorce characteristics on minor children's behavioral outcomes postdivorce is the subject of chapter five. I focus on five explanatory perspectives: family structure, parent involvement, family economic status, prior well-being, and the marital relationship. I use these perspectives to examine other factors, e.g., marital conflict and parental involvement might be affecting the behavioral outcomes for the minor children. I use logistic regression for these dichotomous outcomes and also examine the predicted probabilities of any of these outcomes occurring.

In chapter six, I examine the effects of the five perspectives on an index of the children's emotional problems and on some measures of the quality of the relationship between the mothers and their children. I also examine how the children's outcomes differ for those outcomes for which there is evidence of variation in the effects of the predictor variables on children's outcomes by the age or the gender of the child. Finally, in chapter seven, I compare the patterns of the predictor variables across all of the outcomes presented in earlier chapters. In doing so, I evaluate the

relative importance of the five perspectives of children's well-being.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Perspectives: Explaining Children's Well-Being Postdivorce**

The increase in the divorce rate in the United States and Europe in recent years has fostered an interest in the effects of marital dissolution on all family members, but particularly an interest in the effects on children's well-being. This body of family scholarship has documented differences in children's well-being between children in families who have experienced divorce and children whose families have remained intact. In general, these studies have suggested that children of divorced parents are more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems and do less well in school than children from intact families (Emery, 1988; McLanahan and Booth, 1989; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). However, early studies of children's well-being postdivorce were primarily cross-sectional, and consequently, did not take into account children's well-being prior to their parents' divorce. Prior to the last ten years, the few existing longitudinal studies were conducted on small or non-representative or clinical samples (Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Cox,

and Cox, 1976; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Prior analyses also tended to be limited in scope. Most focused either on the effects of fathers' absence from the family on children's well-being or on the relationship between parental conflict, family structure, and children's well-being. In this chapter, I briefly discuss the findings from this early research. I then delineate a series of perspectives and their respective hypotheses that I will employ in the subsequent analyses. Finally, I provide findings from some of the past tests of these hypotheses and a discussion of ways in which the present work may improve our understanding of the factors that affect well-being for children whose parents have divorced as well as those whose parents remain married.

### **Prior Research on Father Absence**

Because the vast majority of children live with their mothers following divorce (Buehler, 1989; Furstenberg, 1988b; Grief, 1979; Maccoby, Depner, and Mnookin, 1988; Seltzer, 1990), nonresidential fathers often have very limited contact with their children immediately after the marital disruption (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer et al., 1989; Seltzer and Bianchi, 1988;

Anspach, 1976; Stephens, 1996). Furstenberg and Nord (1985) found that half of the children in a nationally representative sample of children who had experienced marital disruption had not seen their fathers in the last year, and only one out of six children had at least weekly contact. Children were more likely to see their non-custodial fathers immediately after their parents separated, but paternal contact dropped off precipitously for those families who experienced marital separation two or more years earlier (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985).

Most of the early studies of children's well-being postdivorce suggest that frequent contact with nonresidential fathers was positively associated with children's cognitive and social development (McKinnon and Wallerstein, 1986; Steinmann, 1984; Clingempeel, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1982; and Hetherington, 1979). Although these studies often employed small clinical or other non-representative samples which usually contained a disproportionate number of high conflict divorces, contact was found to be beneficial for children as long as the fathers did not have emotional or substance abuse problems and there were low

levels of conflict between the parents (Hetherington, 1979; McKinnon and Wallerstein, 1986; Steinmann, 1984; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, and Wallerstein, 1990; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

In contrast, one study by Furstenberg, Morgan and Allison (1987) finds little evidence that paternal involvement had either harmful or beneficial effects on children's academic performance, personal behaviors, or psychological well-being. The inconsistency in findings on the effects of contact on children's well-being may be explained by several factors. First, the inconsistency may be explained by the differences in the characteristics of the samples; the earlier samples were more likely to consist of families experiencing particularly traumatic divorces. Furstenberg et al. (1987) employed a nationally representative sample of American children in their analysis, and consequently, the difference in findings may be explained by this factor. Likewise, as divorce has become a more common experience for children in this country, much of the stigma associated with divorce and the concomitant effects of the stigma on children may have lessened. And perhaps most importantly, early studies did not

examine the relationship between the child's level of contact with the noncustodial parent and the economic assistance provided by the noncustodial parent for the child. Furstenberg et al. included economic transfers, e.g., child support, in their analysis and found the negative effects on children's well-being attenuated when they controlled for child support payments. Children who endured economic hardships were more likely to experience behavioral and academic difficulties than those children who regularly received child support.

#### **Prior Research on Parental Conflict**

Another explanation for the difference in findings on postdivorce parental contact is that parental conflict may condition the effect of contact on children. Early studies consistently found that parental conflict had a stronger association with children's postdivorce adjustment than either divorce or loss of contact with their fathers (Emery, 1982; Hess and Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979). Similarly, in a recent analysis of a nationally representative sample of children, Amato and Rezac (1994) found contact had positive effects on boys if parental conflict was low, but negative effects on boys if the level of parental

conflict was high. Consequently, parental discord and economic conditions before and after divorce must be taken into consideration when estimating the effects of postdivorce contact on children's well-being.

More recent longitudinal studies in the United States and England have found that the frequency of children's behavioral problems and scholastic difficulties could be explained, in large part, by controls for children's prior characteristics measured while the parents were still married (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, and Teitler, 1991). Simply put, many of the children who experienced difficulties after their parents divorced also were experiencing difficulties during the time in which their parents were married to each other. This finding suggests that among children whose parents divorce, the disadvantages begin long before their parents separate. Consequently, characteristics of the children, their parents, and their marriages may predict children's outcomes postdivorce.

To date, however, analyses of children's well-being as well as analyses of other outcomes of divorce, e.g.,

child support compliance and contact between nonresidential parents and their children, have been hampered by a lack of data on family characteristics, parenting patterns, and spousal relations during marriage. Therefore, the inclusion of measures of family life prior to marital dissolution should improve our understanding of the effects of divorce on children.

#### **Understanding Children's Well-Being After Divorce**

In a recent review of the literature on children's adjustment to divorce, Paul Amato (1993) discusses five explanatory perspectives of children's well-being and summarizes the existing evidence in support of each of these perspectives. Amato suggests children will do better after marital disruption if the custodial parent is able to function effectively, the noncustodial parent has frequent contact with the child, the divorce had low levels of conflict, and the family experiences less financial and other forms of stress. These factors may help to explain the range of responses children experience when their parents separate. Thus, Amato's perspectives provide a useful framework for analyzing the impact of divorce on children's well-being.

Amato's perspectives are particularly useful, however, if we expand them to incorporate the predivorce origins of these factors. For example, postdivorce contact and involvement between parents and children can be better understood if we also examine the predivorce interactions of parents and children. Likewise, the effects of parental conflict postdivorce are better understood when we examine the predivorce marital relationship. In the following section of this chapter, I discuss the relationship between pre-and postdivorce characteristics and briefly delineate the perspectives I utilize in this analysis: family economic status, prior well-being, parent involvement, marital relationship, and family structure.

**Family Structure Perspective:** According to the family structure perspective, the marital status of the parents has a direct effect on children's well-being. Children whose parents separate or divorce will do less well than children whose parents do not. This perspective suggests that when parents separate or divorce, children will have more behavioral problems, do less well in school, have more psychological problems, and will have weaker relationships with their parents.

Furstenberg and Teitler (1994), however, have argued that this view of the relationship between divorce and children's well-being may be too simplistic. They suggest that the relationship is much more complex, and that in fact, for some children, their parents' divorce may even be beneficial.

**Family Economic Status Perspective:** According to the family economic status perspective, children's negative outcomes postdivorce result from the economic decline of their mothers following divorce. Since parents' socioeconomic characteristics, e.g., income and education, are generally positively associated with better outcomes for children, children from intact families may potentially be advantaged. They are advantaged because their parents are able to provide two incomes to meet the family's needs. In addition to the problems associated with having only one income postdivorce, because women often earn less than men and because the majority of children live with their mothers after divorce, many children experience a decline in their economic circumstances (Duncan and Hoffman, 1985; Weitzman, 1985). This perspective also suggests that children of divorce will have a higher level of well-

being if their parents have higher levels of educational attainment. Better educated parents, particularly mothers, will be more aware of findings that suggest children should not be exposed to conflict, they will be likely to encourage good learning habits, and they will spend more of their time and energy helping their children with school work and other constructive activities.

**The Prior Well-Being Perspective:** From the prior well-being perspective, children's well-being postdivorce can be predicted by the children's well-being prior to marital disruption. Children's well-being postdivorce may be determined by their well-being prior to the disruption of their parents' marriages. Consequently, children who have more behavioral and emotional problems after marital disruption probably had more than other children prior to the termination of their parents' marriages.

**Marital Relationship Perspective:** According to the marital relationship perspective, children suffer deleterious effects if they are exposed to high levels of parental conflict. Children may feel they have to

choose between their parents or they may worry that they are the reason their parents are fighting. Children may also learn inappropriate ways of dealing with problems, develop difficulty communicating and negotiating, and learn threatening or violent behaviors if they are exposed to high levels of parental conflict. From this perspective, parental conflict rather than divorce affects children's well-being after divorce.

Consequently, this perspective suggests children's level of well-being will be better after divorce if there are low levels of postdivorce conflict. From this perspective, children in low conflict intact families will have the highest level of well-being, followed by children in low conflict divorced families while children in high conflict families will have the lowest levels of well-being.

The marital relationship perspective also suggests children whose parents will eventually divorce may be exposed to higher levels of conflict before marital disruption than will children whose parents remain together. If this is the case, then at least part of the difference between children's well-being in divorced families and their well-being in intact families can be

explained by characteristics of the marital relationship that existed prior to the parents' separation. If parents argued frequently and heatedly or if they had difficulty discussing their problems during the marriage, the children may be at greater risk for negative outcomes postdivorce, not because of divorce, per se, but because of the parental conflict preceding and following the divorce.

According to the marital relationship perspective, children's well-being improves as the duration of time since the divorce increases because the level of parental conflict also declines with time. Although the duration of time since the divorce may be associated with a decline in the levels of conflict for many families, for other families the passage of time may not be associated with a reduction in acrimony because the duration of time may be associated with additional stressful events, e.g., the custodial parent's remarriage (Hetherington et al., 1985). Likewise parental conflict may persist postdivorce, and consequently, children may continue to be impaired by the effects of their parents' hostility. Therefore, a longitudinal analysis which incorporates levels of

parental conflict before and after marital disruption is necessary to better determine the exact relationship between levels of parental conflict, the duration of time since the divorce, and children's well-being.

**Parent Involvement Perspective:** For most children, marital separation and divorce means children will have limited contact with one of their parents (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991; Stephens, 1996; White, Brinkerhoff, and Booth, 1985). Traditionally, advocates of the parent involvement perspective have argued that children whose parents divorce will experience more difficulties than children in intact families because of the lack of contact and involvement of the noncustodial parent. Children may suffer because they have fewer role models, have less adult supervision, or because they miss the daily affection and companionship of the absent parent. From this perspective, the frequency of contact with the noncustodial parent is positively associated with children's well-being.

This perspective suggests children's well-being postdivorce is also positively associated with the quality of their relationship with their custodial

parents both after and before marital disruption. By including measures of parental involvement with their children during marriage, however, we can better understand the effects of parental contact after divorce. Parents, particularly fathers since they are not as likely to be custodial parents after divorce, who are more involved with their children during marriage should be more involved postdivorce. Although few studies have attempted to examine the relationship between fathers' involvement with their children during marriage and their involvement after marital dissolution, those that have done so have employed retrospective measures of fathers involvement during marriage (Hetherington, 1993; Kruk, 1991; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Therefore, longitudinal data which include non retrospective measures of fathers' level of participation in care giving activities during marriage may help to explain the effects of parental involvement postdivorce.

In addition, the frequency and nature of the interactions between either parent and the child will have beneficial effects on children's well-being later in their lives. For example, if parents have frequent

positive interactions with their sons and daughters, if they frequently play and talk to their children, and if they frequently provide positive reinforcement to their children, the children will have higher levels of well-being. In contrast, if parent frequently have difficult times with their children or often argue with or yell at their children, the children will do less well in the future whether or not the parents separate or divorce. From the parental involvement perspective, positive interactions may insulate the children from the problems associated with family stress that may occur later in the children's lives. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This perspective also suggests that children will do better if the divorce takes place when they are older because more socialization will have taken place. Young children will have spent less of their developmental years with an additional role model in the home. Likewise, young children will experience longer periods of their lives without a second parent's supervision and guidance than will older children.

According to the parental involvement perspective, children will also do better if they have more supportive adults in their lives than if they have fewer supportive adults in their lives. Consequently, children should do better if there are more supportive people, e.g., grandparents, other relatives, friends, and neighbors, in both the children and their custodial parents' lives. Likewise, according to the parent involvement perspective, children also do better if their custodial parents remarry than if their custodial parent remains single because remarriage should introduce another caregiver to the family.

**Prior Findings: Research on the Perspectives  
of Children's Well-Being**

In this section, I discuss earlier analyses of children's well-being after marital disruption. My objective is to ascertain the level of support for each of the perspectives discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

**Family Economic Perspective:** According to the family economic status perspective, differences in children's well-being between children in divorced families and children in intact families will be eliminated or attenuated when income is controlled. Most studies that have used actual income as their measure have supported this hypothesis (McLanahan, 1985; Perry and McLoughlin, 1983). Thus, income appears to attenuate the relationship between divorce and children's well-being.

The family economic status perspective also suggests children's well-being will improve if their custodial parents, usually mothers, remarry. However, little support exists for the remarriage hypothesis, i.e., a

mother's remarriage may bring additional economic resources to her children, but it doesn't necessarily improve the children's well-being. Remarriage may require additional adjustment for all of the members of the reconstituted family, the economic advantage may not be visible. Therefore, it is important to control for income and the possibility that the custodial parent has remarried or is cohabiting with a new partner.

Although past studies have reported mixed results in support of these hypotheses, inconsistencies in the measures of income may explain the varying results. For example, various studies have measured income as actual income, decline in income between marriage and divorce, or amount of child support paid. In addition, many existing studies did not have measures of family income prior to divorce, and therefore, they have had to substitute parents' educational attainment or occupation as indicators of family income during marriage. An analysis which incorporates measures of the families' income prior to the divorce, the custodial parents' income at the time of the postdivorce interview, the amount of child support paid, and the noncustodial parents' income is potentially the best test of the

family economic status perspective because it provides information on actual family income after divorce and on the degree to which that income had changed compared to the family income prior to the marital separation.

In sum, the evidence in support of the family economic status perspective has not been consistent, but this may occur, in part, because of a lack of good measures of income, particularly measures of income prior to the divorce. As suggested by Amato (1993), ideally we want to test whether the relationship between divorce and children's well-being is spurious, (i.e., both are the result of family income prior to marriage), indirect, (i.e., mediated by postdivorce income), or direct.

**Prior Well-Being Perspective:** Recent analyses have found support for the importance of children's well-being prior to marital disruption in predicting children's well-being postdivorce. In a recent longitudinal study of children in England and the United States, Cherlin et al. (1991) found that most of the differences in well-being between children from intact families and children from divorced families were reduced or eliminated when controls for the children's

well-being during marriage were introduced. Similar results have been reported in other recent studies of children's well-being (Block, Block and Gjerde, 1986; Doherty and Needle, 1991; Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994).<sup>2</sup>

Overall, studies tend to support the prior well-being perspective, but methodological problems often plague the studies. For example, because mothers evaluate both their own and their children's state of well-being in many of the studies, their reports may be biased. In addition, parents' may be affected by their children's well-being, and consequently, the direction of the effect is not clear. And finally, adults with psychological problems have a higher risk of divorce.

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<sup>2</sup> Likewise, differences in children's well-being may be attenuated by controls for parents' psychological well-being. The better the parents' adjustment to the new circumstances in their lives, the better the child should do. Few studies have tested this hypothesis, and the results of those studies are mixed (Amato, 1993). These differences may occur because custodial parents often have more personal difficulties during the early months following the separation or divorce, but generally are functioning better within two years (Booth and Amato, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). The prior well-being perspective also suggests that children's well-being improves with time because parents' well-being should improve as the duration of time since the divorce increases. Although cross-sectional studies have not found support for this hypothesis, longitudinal studies have provided a modest level of support (Hetherington et al., 1982). Therefore, it is important to consider mothers' as well as children's well-being.

Likewise, adults with psychological problems are more likely to have children with psychological problems. Consequently, the association between divorce and children's emotional adjustment may be spurious (Amato, 1993). In order to fully understand the relationship between these factors, any analysis must include measures of the parents' and children's psychological adjustment prior to divorce which help to determine the relationship between the parents' psychological state and children's well-being after divorce. Thus, while some support exists for the parental well-being perspective, an analysis which provides a more thorough test which includes longitudinal data that incorporate measures of parents' and children's well-being before marital disruption is necessary for a better understanding of these complicated relationships.

**Marital Conflict Perspective:** Most analyses support the marital conflict hypothesis (Emery, 1982; Hess and Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979; Long, 1986). Berg and Kelly (1979), for example, found children from conflictual intact families experienced lower levels of well-being than children from low conflict single-parent families. Other studies have found conflict rather than

divorce was associated with negative outcomes for children (Mechanic and Hansell, 1989).

Likewise, we might anticipate that children's well-being postdivorce may improve because the level of conflict between the parents declines with time. Currently, the results in support of decline in spousal conflict hypothesis are mixed. Longitudinal studies, however, tend to support this hypothesis, i.e., for many couples, spousal conflict declines as the duration of time since the divorce increases, while cross-sectional studies do not.

Past research provides support for the marital relationship perspective. It is possible, however, that psychologically maladjusted parents are more likely to divorce, to be engaged in conflict with their spouses and former spouses, and to have children with lower levels of well-being (Amato, 1993). Consequently, the relationship between parental conflict and children's well-being may be spurious. Therefore, the inclusion of measures of parents' psychological adjustment during marriage, children's well-being before and after divorce, and levels of parental discord are necessary to

better ascertain the relationship between children's well-being and characteristics of the parents' relationship.

**Parental Involvement Perspective:** The parental involvement perspective suggests that children will do better after divorce if they have frequent contact with both of their parents. However, only about one-half of the studies reviewed by Amato (1993) support this hypothesis; in some studies, children did worse when there was frequent contact while in other studies, there was no relationship between contact and children's well-being. As suggested earlier, the level of parental conflict, however, may explain the difference in findings on the effects of contact on children's well-being. Past studies suggest contact is positively associated with children's adjustment if there are low levels of parental conflict but negatively associated with children's adjustment if there are high levels of parental conflict (Amato and Rezac, 1994; Healy, 1990; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1982). Consequently, contact appears to have some benefit, but only if the level of parental conflict remains low.

A second hypothesis associated with the parental involvement hypothesis suggests children will do better if they have more adults in their lives. Although the number of studies that have tested this hypothesis are limited, the results suggest children do better when there are other adults involved in their lives. For example, teenagers in single-parent families are less likely to become pregnant if they have a grandparent living with them.

Although remarriage is predicted to have positive effects on children's well-being, past studies have not always supported this hypothesis. Instead, the gender of the child appears to condition the effect of having a stepfather present in the home. In some studies boys did better when a stepfather was present, but girls did less well. Likewise there is conflicting evidence in support of the hypothesis that older children do better postdivorce than younger children (see, for example, the review of these studies in Amato, 1993). In sum, past analyses have primarily been cross-sectional, and consequently, have only provided modest support for the parent involvement perspective.

**Organizational Structure: Towards a Better  
Understanding of Children's Well-Being**

Whereas each of the explanatory perspectives of children's postdivorce well-being sketched above has been subjected to some empirical examination, such studies have commonly used non-representative samples and simple cross-sectional designs. Most of the longitudinal studies which have been performed were conducted on either small, non-representative or clinical samples. To date, analyses of children's well-being after divorce have also been hampered by a lack of data on family characteristics, parenting patterns, and spousal relationships during marriage. Those studies which have considered these characteristics have employed retrospective measures which may be biased. Other studies have not been able to include any measures of family life during marriage, e.g., parental discord, and consequently, could only theorize as to why children should have lower levels of well-being before their parents separated.

This analysis overcomes many of these difficulties because it employs a representative national sample,

provides data on the same families over time, and includes a rich variety of indicators. Therefore, this research meaningfully improves our understanding of the effects of divorce on children through the inclusion of measures of family life prior to marital dissolution. This research also improves our understanding because it tests several potential explanations for the differences in children's well-being for children in families who have experienced a divorce and those who have not. In chapter three, I discuss the study design of the surveys that have provided the data to be analyzed, the measures in the data set and their relationships to the perspectives outlined previously, and the dependent variables used in this analysis.

### Chapter Three: Data and Methods

The data I use in these analyses are from the first and second waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a probability sample survey of persons age 19 and older living in households in the United States. Because both family and household composition are likely to fluctuate over time, the NSFH was designed with individuals rather than families or households as the units of observation. Individuals were first interviewed face-to-face in either English or Spanish over a 14-month period ending in May of 1988 again in 1992 and 1993. The survey consisted of 13,017 primary respondents: a main sample of 9,643 and a double sampling of Blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, single-parent families, cohabiting couples, recently married couples, and families with stepchildren. Respondents were interviewed again between 1992 and 1994. Ten thousand and eight respondents participated in the second wave of interviews. Thirteen percent of the interviews were conducted in 1992, 74 % in 1993, and 13 % in 1994.

The sample employed in this analysis consists of primary respondents who were married and living with their spouses at the time of the first interview. Each couple had at least one biological child under the age of 19 living with them at that time.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the second interview, the couple had separated because of marital problems, divorced, or remained together. Households in which one or both parents had died since the first interview were eliminated from the analysis. After these limitations were implemented, 2,484 cases remained in the sample.

Because the National Survey of Families and Households over-sampled many groups of interest to these analyses, weights were applied when running all of the regressions to make the samples representative of the total population. The weighting variable was provided by the National Survey of Families and Households. I divided this weight by the unweighted sample size to determine an unweighted, but representative sample size.

**Dependent Variables:** At the time of the second interview, parents were asked questions about two groups

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<sup>1</sup> The child was the biological child of both parents.

of children: those who were between 18- and 23-years-old at the time of the second interview and those who were between 5 and 18 at the time of the second interview.<sup>2</sup> These children were less than 19 and living with both parents at the time of the first interview. In this work, I examine several series of dependent variables for those children who are between 5- and 18-years-old at the time of the second interview. The first series of questions provide dichotomous measures of whether or not any of the minor children had been in trouble with the police, had skipped school, had been suspended or expelled from school, had repeated a grade, or had dropped out of school.

Parents were also asked to evaluate the quality of their relationship with a focal child on a scale from zero (extremely poor) to ten (absolutely positive). The values from zero to seven were later collapsed because less than three percent of parents rated the relationship with a value less than seven. Parents were also asked a series of questions concerning the frequency with which they engaged in arguments with

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<sup>2</sup> Parents were asked questions about children born since the first interview, but those children are not included in these analyses.

their children over a number of topics such as their friends, how their children dressed, their children's help with housework, their school work, and how late the children stayed out at night. A parent-child argument index was constructed from these measures ( $\alpha=.67$ ). Finally, the parents were provided with 23 statements about the focal child's psychological well-being for which the parents could indicate the description was always or often true, occasionally true, or never true of the focal child.<sup>3</sup> An index of the child's psychological well-being at the time of the second interview was constructed from these measures ( $\alpha=.63$ ). A high score indicates the child had many psychological or emotional problems.

**Independent Variables:** The marital status of the parents at the time of the second interview was used to measure the family structure perspective. The households' income at the time of the first interview and the mothers' educational attainment were used to measure the economic status perspective. Educational attainment was coded into the following categories:

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<sup>3</sup> The statements included assessments of characteristics such as the child is depressed, irritable, sad, stubborn. The complete list of statements is available in Appendix 1.

eighth grade or less, some high school, high school graduate, some college, undergraduate degree, and post baccalaureate. Yearly household income at the time of the first interview was coded into the following categories: 0 to 10,000, 10,001 to 20,000, 20,001 to 30,000, 30,001 to 40,000, 40,001 to 50,000, 50,001 to 60,000, 60,001 to 80,000, and 80,001 or more dollars.

Parental involvement with the children during marriage was measured with a series of questions about the frequencies of various positive and negative interactions that the parents might have with the children. The positive interactions consisted of the frequency of good times between the mother and the child at the time of the first interview. The negative interactions consisted of the frequency of difficult times between the mother and the child at the time of the first interview.

Finally, two measures were utilized to ascertain the effects of the marital relationship at the time of the first interview on children's outcomes at the time of the second interview. Parents were also asked a series of questions concerning the frequency with which they

argued about housework, about childcare, about the in-laws, about sex, about money, and about having another child. A parental conflict index was constructed from these measures ( $\alpha=.76$ ). Parents were asked to assess the overall quality of the marital relationship on a scale of zero to ten.

**Control Variables:** Two additional variables were included in the analysis because they potentially might be important predictors of children's well-being. Without including these features of family life, other measures which might actually be correlated with one of these factors might appear to be related to children's outcomes and a spurious interpretation of the findings might result. The first factor I control for is the mothers' prior well-being. Children will be better adjusted postdivorce if their custodial parents are coping well with the divorce and related changes in their lives, and consequently, are better able to give attention to their children's needs. Parents, for example, who are under high levels of stress may lack patience with their children, be more severe with them, or be more likely to ignore the children's needs (Hetherington et al., 1982). Because divorce and the

concomitant changes associated with it are stressful for both parents and children, there are more likely to be increasing demands on everyone's time, energy, and emotions that may cause children to be more needy and make parents less able to meet those needs. Therefore, children require at least one parent who is cognizant of and responsive to the children's needs.

At the time of the first interview, mothers were given a set of statements about their emotional well-being, (e.g., depressed, unhappy, and irritable) and asked how many days in the last week each of these twelve statements was true of them. These measures were used to construct a psychological well being index for the mothers where their scores could range from 0 to 84, with 0 meaning they never felt any of those negative emotions and 84 meaning they felt all of them everyday of the week. Consequently, mothers were doing less well if they have higher scores. In contrast, children are doing better psychologically at the time of the first interview if they have high scores on their index of well-being. Parents were asked about a series of characteristics that might describe their children, (e.g., fearful, bullies, responsible, unhappy, and tries

new things.) The children's scores could range from nine to twenty-seven and the alpha for the items utilized in the index was .74.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the mothers' employment status at the time of the first interview is also controlled for in this work. Past research suggests mothers who are not working outside the home spend more time with their children on a daily basis. These mothers potentially have a greater ability to supervise their children, and they may exercise more control over their children's development. Therefore, mothers' employment status, rather than the frequency of positive or negative interactions may actually be affecting children's well-being.

In addition the age, sex, and race of the child are included in many of the analyses as control variables. Likewise, the ages of the respondents and their spouses were used as control variables and were coded into the following categories: 16 through 24, 25 through 29, 30 through 34, 35 through 39, 40 through 44, 45 through 49, and 50 years and above.

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<sup>4</sup> The complete list of items used is available in Appendix 2.

As seen in Table 3.1, of the 2,484 cases in the original sample of interest, 1,394 (56%) were women and 1,090 were men. By the time of the second interview, 400 of the respondents had divorced or separated because of marital problems. The average respondent had completed high school or had some college and is in his or her early 30s. More than three-fourths of the sample are white and 13% are Black. The vast majority of the sample are in their first marriage (85%). Two-fifths of the children in the sample are less than five in 1988; only about one-fourth are between twelve and eighteen.

In chapter four, I examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variables described earlier and selected independent variables to determine whether, consistent with much of the earlier research, children from families which have experienced marital disruption are doing less well than children from intact families. I examine these relationships, however, controlling for the gender of the parent who is responding in order to ascertain differences in reporting between mothers and fathers.

**TABLE 3.1: Frequency Distributions of Selected Characteristics of the Sample.**

	<u>Percent</u>		<u>Percent</u>
Marital status (1993)		Sex of respondent	
still married	83.9%	male	44.3%
divorced	11.8	female	55.7%
separated	4.3		
Respondent's education (1987)		Race of respondent	
eighth grade or less	4.8%	Black	12.6%
some high school	8.0	white (not Hispanic)	77.6
high school graduate	39.7	Mexican American	6.6
some college	24.0	other Hispanic	1.8
college graduate	11.7	other	1.3
post BA	11.4		
Focal child's age in 1987		Age of respondent	
0-4	41.7%	less than 24	11.3%
5-11	32.0	25 to 29	20.1
12-18	26.3	30 to 34	26.1
		35 to 39	23.0
		40 to 44	12.5
		45 +	7.0
Number of marriage (1987)			
first	85.3%		
second	12.8		
third +	1.7		
Likelihood will separate (1987)		Any arguments physical 9.1%	
very low	62.5%		
low	18.2		
about even	8.7		
high	1.3		
N=2484			

Note: Data are from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Includes cases in which couples were married and living together in 1987. All primary respondents and their spouses were the biological parents of a focal child less than 19-years-old in 1987.

## Chapter Four: Effects of Marital Disruption

As discussed in chapter two, past research has found children whose parents experience marital disruption are at greater risk for a number of negative outcomes than children whose parents remain married. On average, these children do less well in school, exhibit more behavioral problems, and are more likely to experience negative psychological outcomes, (e.g., depression, anxiety, and low self esteem).

In this chapter, I first examine the association between marital status and several series of outcomes for children. The children's outcomes employed include measures of specific behaviors, emotional and psychological adjustment, and of the relationship between the parent and the child. This is done to ascertain the degree to which these data are consistent with past findings on the relationship between marital status and children's well-being. The second purpose of this chapter is to explore the differences in the reports of mothers and fathers in the sample and ascertain an appropriate strategy for addressing these differences.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These are not matched sets of parents. Therefore, the differences are not between specific couples, but rather reflect differences in men's and women's reports in general.

### **Behavioral Outcomes**

In Table 4.1, I compare the reports of selected behaviors of children who were between 5 and 17 at the time of the second interview.<sup>2</sup> In this and subsequent tables in this chapter, the proportion of children who have exhibited these behaviors is presented by the gender of the reporting parent and by the marital status of the parent at the time of the second interview. As seen in Table 4.1, mothers were more likely to report significant differences in the likelihood that a child had engaged in any of the behaviors than were fathers. Mothers reported that the children were more likely to engage in these behaviors if the parents had separated or divorced for all of the measures, while fathers only reported significant differences for 1 of the 5 measures.

According to the mothers, children were 50 percent more likely to have repeated a grade in school if the mother had separated or divorced since the first interview. Similarly, if the mothers had separated or

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<sup>2</sup> For ease of presentation, I will usually refer to the children who were between 5 and 17 at time two as children or as the minor children.

divorced, the children were twice as likely to have skipped school or to have been expelled or suspended from school. The children were almost three times as likely to have been in trouble with the police if their parents' marriages had ended. According to the fathers, marital disruption was twice as likely to be associated with children's problems with the police. There are no significant differences for any of the other outcomes as reported by the fathers.

These differences in men's and women's reports are important because the conclusions one might draw about children's well-being postdivorce, at least as it applies to their likelihood of engaging in problematic behaviors, is quite different depending on whose observations one employs. Based on the observations of the fathers, there appears to be very little difference in the likelihood that children might engage in these behaviors by their parents' marital status. In contrast, if the mothers' reports are utilized, the children whose parents have experienced marital disruption are at much greater risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors than are children whose parents have remained together.

This difference in the occurrence of problematic behaviors is primarily attributable to differences between the reports of separated or divorced mothers and the responses of separated or divorced fathers. Married men's responses are much closer to married women's responses than is the case for men and women whose marriages have ended. The most probable explanation for these differences is that fathers who have separated or divorced are under reporting the incidence of these behaviors. Since minor children are more likely to have their primary residence with their mothers following marital disruption, fathers are probably not reporting more of these behaviors because they have less contact with their children. Consequently, fathers are less knowledgeable of what is going on in their children's lives.

This low contact hypothesis is further supported by the nature of the items for which fathers do report significant differences. Dads are more likely to know that their children have been in trouble with the police because of the seriousness of the event. The authorities may notify the fathers as well as the mothers, the police or the courts may require the fathers to be in attendance for hearings, or the mothers

may be more anxious to involve fathers if their children are in trouble with the police. In contrast, fathers may be less likely to be called to school if the child is misbehaving, be less likely to know if the child skipped school, and less likely to know if the child has been temporarily suspended or expelled.

### **Emotional Problems**

In addition to the measures of the children's problematic behaviors, measures of the children's psychological and emotional adjustment at the time of the second interview are included as dependent variables in this analysis. Parents were presented with a list of affective characteristics and were asked if each characteristic "never", "sometimes", or "often" was true of the focal child.<sup>3</sup> Parents were also asked about their children's general behavior patterns at home and at school. For example, parents were asked if their child lies and cheats, fights with other children, is disobedient at home and at school, bullies or is cruel, has friends who are in trouble, or has problems with teachers.

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix one contains the full set of questions that parents were asked.

These measures should be informative since minor children have a greater probability of engaging in these behaviors than they have of engaging in many of the problem behaviors examined in Table 4.1. For example, more children are likely to have been disobedient than to have been in trouble with the police. Parents are more likely to report that their young children argue too much rather than that minor children, some as young as five, have been expelled from or dropped out of school. Because of this, the negative consequences of marital disruption may be more evident when these measures are employed.

As seen in Table 4.2, there are significant differences in the children's outcomes of separated or divorced and still-married parents. Mothers report significant differences on 12 of the 23 measures while dads report significant differences on 9 of the 23 measures. For each of the measures that mothers report significant differences, the difference is in the predicted direction, i.e., children whose parents have divorced or separated are doing less well than children whose parents are still married. For example, approximately one-third of the women in intact marriages report that the focal child is overactive, while more

than half of the mothers who have experienced marital disruption report this problem. Approximately one-fourth of the still-married mothers report that the focal child is sad or depressed, while more than 40 percent of the separated or divorced mothers feel that their children are sad or depressed. Separated or divorced moms were also more likely to report that the child lies or cheats, has difficulty concentrating, has obsessions, has friends who are in trouble, is disobedient at school, bullies or is cruel, or is not repentant for their misbehaviors.

Although fathers report almost as many significant differences on these measures as mothers, the differences are not always in the predicted direction. For five of the nine measures in which significant differences were reported, divorced and separated fathers reported that their children were doing better than were the children of the fathers who remained married. For example, less than one-fourth of separated or divorced fathers said their children felt no one loved them, while one-third of still married fathers reported that their children felt they were not loved. Fathers who were still married to their children's mothers said their children were more likely to be

disobedient (49.6%) than divorced or separated fathers (31.7%). They were also more likely to report that their children argued too much (60.6%), were impulsive (53.6%), and lost their tempers (39.5%) than were divorced or separated fathers (46.7%, 43.1%, and 27.9%, respectively).

Although divorced or separated fathers were as likely to report that their children were doing significantly better than the children of still married fathers on many of the measures, these differences probably reflect differences in the fathers' knowledge of their children behaviors and emotional well-being rather than the children's true behavioral patterns or emotional states. Because separated or divorced fathers often spend less time with their children than fathers who are still married to their children's mothers, they may have less knowledge of their children's behaviors or emotional state than fathers in intact marriages. If you don't see your children everyday, you may not be aware of how much they argue, lose their temper, or are disobedient. Divorced or separated fathers are also less likely to hear about their children's emotional well-being or behavioral patterns from the children's mothers than are fathers who are married and living with their children's

mothers. Because fathers often parent through their spouses, divorced or separated fathers are at a disadvantage compared to still married fathers. Still married fathers are kept better informed than fathers who are no longer married to their children's mothers. These indicators are less apparent than even the minor behavioral infractions examined in Table 4.1, and consequently, these findings are consistent with the low contact hypothesis.

### **Relationship Quality**

A third classification of outcomes for children that may be affected by their parents' marital status is the quality of the parent-child relationship. In Table 4.3, I compare the responses of still married parents with those of divorced or separated parents on measures of the overall quality of the relationship and the frequency of arguments between the parent and the child. Parents who have better relationships with their children may argue less with their children and should report that the quality of the relationship with their children is higher than parents with poor relationships with their children. Past research suggests children in intact families will have better relationships with

their parents than children whose parents have separated or divorced.

Very few of the seven measures of relationship quality appear to be significantly different for children by their parents' marital status. According to the mothers reports, no significant differences exist for six of the seven measures of relationship quality. The only item that is significantly different for the two groups is the measure of whether or not the parent and child argue about other family members. Less than one-third of the mothers who are still married, but almost half of the separated or divorced mothers report that they never argue with their children about other family members. This finding is surprising since we generally anticipate more conflict in families that have experienced marital separation.

Divorced or separated dads were less likely to argue with their children over several items. Dads who were still married and living with the children's mothers were significantly more likely to argue with their children about how the children dress (73.0% compared to 64.5% of separated or divorced fathers), about doing housework (55.2% compared to 29.3%), and about other

family members (59.2% compared to 37.2%). In contrast, separated or divorced fathers were significantly less likely to report that the quality of the overall relationship with their children was perfect or almost perfect (74.2% compared to 86.1% of still-married fathers).<sup>4</sup>

The lower levels of relationship quality for divorced or separated fathers is consistent with anticipated outcomes for fathers and children postdivorce, while the lower frequencies of arguments with the children is not consistent with the general hypothesis that families who have experienced separation or divorce are at greater risk for conflict. The lower frequencies of arguments between fathers and their children, however, can again be explained by the greater likelihood that children will be living with their mothers, and consequently, separated or divorced fathers will spend less time with their children after marital disruption than fathers who are still married and living with their children. Therefore, maritally disrupted fathers have less opportunity to argue with their children. Because of

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<sup>4</sup> The quality of the parent-child relationship was measured on a scale from zero to ten. Because very few of the parents reported scores less than seven, zero through seven were later collapsed as zero. Perfect or almost perfect was categorized as a score of two or three. The mean score for still married fathers was 1.8, while the mean for separated or divorced fathers was 1.5.

their limited contact, they also may be less demanding of their children when they are together. Consequently, separated or divorced fathers aren't arguing less because they have better relationships with their children, but rather, they are arguing less because they have less opportunity to argue. Given this representation, the frequency of parent-child arguments may not be a valid measure of the quality of the relationship for nonresidential parents.

### **Parents Reports**

Although children of divorced or separated parents are at greater risk on a number of the factors examined in this chapter, it is noteworthy how often significant differences do not exist by parents' marital status. For example, perhaps, the most interesting finding from Table 4.3 is how little difference is reported in the quality of parent-child relationships for still married and maritally disrupted families with children under 18-years-old. This finding is consistent with past research which found little difference in relationship quality, particularly between mothers and their

children, for young adults whose parents separated or divorced recently (Aquilino, 1994; Booth and Amato, 1994; Cooney, 1994).

Children of divorced or separated parents do appear to be at greater risk of engaging in problematic behaviors than children whose parents are still married. However, the differences are generally only significant when mothers reports are examined. Fathers, particularly divorced or separated fathers, tend to underestimate the frequency with which their children engage in many of the these behaviors. Because of this, in the rest of this work, I will primarily rely on the reports of the mothers.<sup>5</sup> If I used both mothers and fathers reports to examine these outcomes, I would probably bias the results of this analysis.

Beginning in chapter five, I will limit the analysis of children's outcomes to the reports of the mothers. Of the 1394 women, 16% or 219 have separated by the time of the second interview. The rest remain married and living with their husbands. In chapter five, I compare the relative effects of marital status on children's

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<sup>5</sup> A separate analysis of fathers reports will be carried out at a later time. In that analysis, the focus will be on the reports of residential versus nonresidential fathers.

postdivorce outcomes with characteristics of the parents and of family life prior to the marital disruption.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The alpha for the psychological measures was not acceptable when I included both mothers' and fathers' reports, but is reasonable when I limit the analysis to the mothers' reports. Therefore, in chapter five I will use an index of psychological well-being rather than the individual measures.

Table 4.1: Proportion of Men and Women Reporting Selected Behaviors of Children Who Were Between 5 and 17-Years-Old at Time Two by 1992/93 Marital Status.

	married men	divorced/ separated men	married women	divorced/ separated women
problems with police	2.7 * (774)	6.2 * (134)	3.8 *** (985)	10.2 *** (191)
dropped out of school	0.8 (773)	2.2 (134)	0.9 * (985)	2.6 * (192)
repeated a grade	12.5 (768)	16.4 (134)	14.5 ** (984)	21.4 ** (192)
skipped school	6.3 (768)	7.8 (128)	6.3 ** (983)	11.6 ** (190)
expelled or suspended	5.7 (768)	9.8 (133)	6.8 *** (985)	13.6 *** (191)

Note: Data are from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Includes cases in which couples were married and living together in 1987. All primary respondents and their spouses were the biological parents of a focal child less than 19-years-old in 1987.

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001.

Table 4.2: Proportion of Men and Women Reporting Selected Behavioral, Emotional, or Psychological Adjustment Difficulties of Focal Children Who Were Between 5 and 17-Years-Old at Time Two by 1993 Marital Status.

	married men	divorced/ separated men	married women	divorced/ separated women
child has sudden changes in mood	61.6 * (692)	71.5 * (123)	48.1 (855)	45.8 (172)
child feels no one loves	33.4 ** (692)	22.0 ** (123)	35.5 (853)	39.3 (173)
child is high strung, tense, nervous	36.7 (690)	44.7 (123)	33.5 (856)	36.6 (172)
child cheats or lies	33.1 (692)	33.3 (123)	31.3 *** (856)	44.5 *** (173)
too fearful or anxious	39.4 (693)	35.2 (122)	32.4 (854)	37.8 (172)
argues too much	60.6 ** (693)	46.7 ** (122)	63.4 (852)	64.7 (173)
difficulty concentrating	42.9 (692)	45.5 (123)	35.6 *** (856)	48.0 *** (173)
is easily confused	20.3 (693)	18.7 (123)	14.6 * (854)	20.3 * (172)
bullies or is cruel	23.7 (693)	24.6 (122)	23.2 * (853)	30.1 * (173)
disobedient at home	49.6 ** (692)	31.7 ** (123)	54.8 (854)	60.7 (172)

Note: Data are from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Includes cases in which couples were married and living together in 1987. All primary respondents and their spouses were the biological parents of a focal child less than 19-years-old in 1987. \* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001.

Table 4.2 continued

child is not sorry for bad behavior	34.5 (693)	27.6 (123)	27.4 ** (855)	37.2 ** (172)
gets in trouble with other children	25.3 (692)	23.6 (123)	25.0 (853)	27.2 (173)
child is impulsive	53.6 * (692)	43.1 * (123)	50.7 ** (854)	60.8 ** (171)
feels worthless or inferior	21.5 (692)	19.5 (123)	27.1 (852)	26.6 (173)
not liked by other children	14.7 (692)	19.5 (123)	16.2 (855)	19.1 (173)
has obsessions	32.8 * (688)	43.0 * (121)	28.3 ** (851)	39.0 ** (172)
is overly active	46.2 (690)	53.7 (121)	34.2 (852)	51.7 ***** (172)
child is stubborn or irritable	51.2 (686)	45.9 (122)	51.3 * (850)	60.5 * (172)
loses temper easily	39.5 ** (689)	27.9 ** (122)	39.1 (847)	39.5 (172)
sad or depressed	22.2 *** (689)	36.9 *** (122)	26.1 ***** (851)	40.7 ***** (172)
child is withdrawn	14.4 (688)	18.9 (122)	13.7 (849)	18.0 (172)
disobedient at school	16.7 (690)	20.5 (122)	14.3 *** (851)	25.3 *** (170)
trouble with teachers	10.6 * (690)	17.2 * (122)	9.8 * (851)	14.8 * (169)

Note: Data are from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Includes cases in which couples were married and living together in 1987. All primary respondents and their spouses were the biological parents of a focal child less than 19-years-old in 1987

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001, \*\*\*\* p <.0001, \*\*\*\*\* p <.00000.

Table 4.3: Proportion of Men and Women Reporting Selected Characteristics of Their Relationship with Focal Children Who Were between 5 and 17-Years-Old at Time Two by 1993 Marital Status.

	married men	divorced/ separated men	married women	divorced/ separated women
almost perfect relationship with child	86.1 *** (706)	74.2 *** (128)	87.4 (863)	82.5 (177)
never argue about how child dresses	64.5 * (705)	73.0 * (126)	48.1 (863)	45.8 (177)
never argue about child's friends	83.4 (703)	92.0 (125)	76.0 (861)	78.0 (177)
never argue about doing housework	29.3 ***** (706)	55.2 ***** (125)	20.3 (862)	25.4 (177)
never argue about school performance	67.6 (701)	75.2 (125)	64.7 (859)	63.1 (176)
never argue about family members	37.2 ***** (705)	59.2 ***** (125)	30.1 ***** (861)	46.9 ***** (177)
never argues about money	75.6 (704)	78.6 (126)	69.3 (860)	66.7 (177)

Note: Data are from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Includes cases in which couples were married and living together in 1987. All primary respondents and their spouses were the biological parents of a focal child less than 19-years-old in 1987.

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001, \*\*\*\* p <.0001, \*\*\*\*\* p <.00000.

**Chapter Five: Behavioral Outcomes:  
The Effects of Family Characteristics and  
Intrafamilial Relationships on Five Behavioral  
Outcomes for Children**

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between five behavioral outcomes of the children and the five explanatory perspectives identified in chapter two: family structure, parent involvement, family economic status, prior well-being, and marital relationship. The primary focus is on the degree to which the association between marital disruption (either through parental divorce or separation) and these behaviors is attributable to other features of the family situation rather than to the dissolution of the marriage. In addition, I want to discern the other characteristics of family life that have a major influence on the probability that children will skip school, repeat a grade, be expelled or suspended from school, drop out of school, or be in trouble with the police.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the parents' marital status, all of the

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in this chapter, time one, the time of the first interview, and 1987 are all synonymous terms. Likewise, time two, the time of the second interview, and 1993 are all interchangeable.

independent variables are measured in 1987-88, and consequently, describe the families and intrafamilial relationships at a time when the parents were married and living together.

In this chapter, the data analysis strategy begins with a focus on the bivariate associations of the independent variables and five behaviors the children might have engaged in: skipping school, repeating a grade in school, being expelled or suspended from school, dropping out of school, and having been in trouble with the police. I also explore the variable that will subsequently be introduced as controls in the analysis. These control variables represent the different perspectives on the reasons for diminished child well-being. (See Chapter Two for full discussion.)

In the second stage of the analysis, I consider the possibility that the association between family structure and children's postdivorce outcomes appears simply because those same children were experiencing more difficulties prior to the marital break-up. It may in fact be that those children who do less well after divorce were also doing less well than their

counterparts prior to their parents' marital disruption. I first control for a measure of the children's general well-being in 1987 (See Chapter 3 for the details) to see how it affects the relationship between family structure and the children's probability of engaging in any of the problematic behaviors in 1993. If the association between marital disruption and children's negative outcomes disappears or is greatly reduced after control for the general index of prior child well-being, the implication will be that the well-being of the children was impaired prior to the break-up, and I can then search out more specific clues by substituting specific pre-break-up features of family life for the general index of prior well-being. On the other hand, if the association between marital disruption and the children's negative behaviors is not greatly affected by a control for children's prior well-being, the implication will be that the problematic behaviors have developed, either in response to the marital disruption or as a delayed response to earlier family conditions. I will then introduce selected family characteristics, not as a substitute for the general index of prior well-being, but along with the index in order to explore further the effects of the break-up or the pre-existing

conditions that seem to influence the subsequent emergence of problems for children. I utilize a general index of well-being for the control for children's prior well-being rather than the prior level of the specific outcome of interest. While one could argue for the use of the prior specific outcome as a control, by using the same control in all of the equations (i.e., all of the dependent variables), the equations are thereby made nearly comparable.<sup>2</sup>

In the third step of this analysis, I introduce selected children's experiences and family characteristics, as reported in 1987, along with the general index of well-being (as appropriate) and the 1993 family structure (i.e., the marital status of the parents) as simultaneous predictors of the children's outcomes in 1993. On the basis of the results of these equations, I will be able to determine (a) the degree to which the bivariate association between family structure and each of the children's outcomes is explained by certain pre-existing family characteristics, and (b)

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, not all of the children's outcomes in 1993 were measured in 1987. In other cases, only the parents of a narrow age range of children were asked the about the same outcomes during both interviews. Whenever available, however, I ran the models with a measure of the prior behavior and will report those findings as well.

which family features seem to have the greatest impact on each of the outcomes. In the final step in this analysis, I compare the relative effects of the characteristics of family life by determining the predicted probabilities that children will have engaged in each of the behaviors.

With regard to point (a), I note that imperfect measurement in the control variables implies that they are imperfectly controlled and hence a residue of association may be simply due to such imperfect measurement. With regard to the second point, I call attention to the fact that differential reliabilities in the measurement of the pre-existing family conditions may contribute to their differential contribution to the prediction of the outcomes for the children. Hence, comparisons of the relative impact of different pre-existing condition should be made with caution, and with due regard for differential reliability of measurements.

As indicated in the discussion of the five perspectives in Chapter Two, each perspective suggests certain hypotheses about family characteristics that contribute to child well-being. Generally speaking, those

hypotheses can be summarized by stating that "good" experiences lead to "good" outcomes. For example:

- \* Marital disruption has negative outcomes for children.
- \* Frequent positive interactions (good times) between mothers and their children will lower the probability of later negative outcomes.
- \* Frequent negative interactions (difficult times) between mothers and their children will increase the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.
- \* Higher educational attainment by the mother will lower the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.
- \* Higher family income will lower the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.
- \* Difficulties in the marital relationship (e.g., frequent arguments between the parents and the quality of the relationship rated as poor) at an earlier time will increase the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.

\* There is continuity in negative outcomes, i.e., diminished child well-being at an earlier time will continue at a later time.

While these hypotheses might be said to represent the expected outcomes in the analysis presented in this chapter, the issue at stake in each of the propositions above is not whether the hypothesis is supported by a relevant bivariate association. Instead, there are two general issues at stake in this analysis. First, does each of the factors considered have an independent effect on the outcome, i.e., does each factor survive as a predictor when others are controlled? If some do not survive, I will conclude that they have no effect on child well-being, but simply appeared to have an effect because they are correlated with another factor that does have an effect. Second, is the pattern of predictors essentially similar for each of the outcomes under consideration? If so, these factors may influence child well-being in general. In contrast, if the pattern of predictors is evidently different for different outcomes, then the processes may vary by the nature of the various outcomes.

In this chapter, I also control for several characteristics of the mothers which might affect children's outcomes. The quantity of time mothers spend with their children may actually predict children's outcomes. Mothers, for example, who are not working outside the home should have more time to interact with their children on a daily basis. Likewise, stay-at-home mothers can provide more day-to-day supervision of their children. Consequently, it is important to control for mothers' work status in these analyses. In addition, children whose mothers are having more psychological problems may be at greater risk of engaging in problematic behaviors. Children may do less well if their mothers are frequently depressed or unhappy. This may occur because the mothers are distracted or withdrawn, and consequently, the mothers are not providing as much supervision of their children as mothers who have fewer psychological problems. The mothers might also be at greater risk of reporting that their children have low levels of well-being if the mothers have more emotional problems. By controlling for mothers' emotional well-being, I can examine this potential source of spuriousness.

**Bivariate Relationships: Selected Independent  
Variables and Behavioral Outcomes**

In Table 5.1, I present the bivariate associations between five dichotomous measures of children's behavioral outcomes in 1993 and measures of the five explanatory perspectives of children's well-being. As seen in Table 5.1, most of the measures are significantly related to the dependent variables in the anticipated direction. The first row of Table 5.1 shows that children whose parents were married at time one, but had separated or divorced by 1993 were more likely to have skipped school, repeated a grade in school, been expelled or suspended, dropped out of school, or having been in trouble with the police than were children whose parents had not experienced marital disruption.<sup>3</sup>

As seen in table 5.1, children's well-being at the time of the first interview is related to a lower probability of engaging in all but one of the negative outcomes at

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<sup>3</sup> One word of caution when interpreting large exponentiated coefficients. Because negative effects can only fall between zero and one, but positive coefficients can fall between one and infinity, they can't be compared relative to each other.

time two. For each unit increase in children's well-being, for example, there is a 17% decrease in the probability that they had skipped school, a 20% decrease in the probability that they had been expelled or suspended from school, a 19% decrease in the probability that they had been in trouble with the police, and a 12% decrease in the probability that they had repeated a grade.

As reported on Table 5.1, the frequency of good times the mothers had with their children also has a negative effect on the probability that the children would have engaged in any of the outcomes at the time of the second interview. For each unit increase in the frequency of good times between the mothers and their children, there is a 40% decrease in the probability that the child has been in trouble with the police and a 32% decrease in the probability the child has skipped school. Similar results are seen for the other outcomes. In contrast, the frequency of difficult times between the mothers and children is not significantly related to any of the children's time two outcomes.

The patterns seen in Table 5.1 for the measures of family income and for the level of the mothers' educational attainment are also consistent with the hypotheses suggested by the family economic status perspective. Four of the outcomes are related to family income; for each unit increase in family income, there is a decrease in the probability that the children have skipped school, repeated a grade, been expelled or suspended, or been in trouble with the police. Likewise, the mothers' educational attainment reduces the probability of the child having engaged in any of the negative outcomes. For example, there is an approximately 40% decrease in the probability that the children have been in trouble with the police, been suspended or expelled, dropped out of school, or repeated a grade in school for each unit increase in the mothers' education.

Of the five perspectives presented in Table 5.1, the support for the marital relationship perspective is the least consistent across the five behavioral outcomes. The quality of the marital relationship and the frequency of arguments between the parents is associated with the probability that a child has skipped school and

with the probability that a child has been in trouble with the police, but not with any of the other behavioral outcomes. For each unit increase in the reported quality of the marital relationship, there is a 20% reduction in the probability that a child has skipped school and a 24% reduction in the probability that a child has been in trouble with the police. Likewise for each unit increase in the frequency of arguments between the parents, there is a 24% increase in the probability that a child has skipped school and a 7% increase in the probability that a minor child has been in trouble with the police. The marital relationship measures, however, are not significantly related to any of the other outcomes for the children.

I also present the bivariate relationships between two characteristics of the mothers which previous research and theoretical considerations suggests might also be associated with the children's outcomes. Although control theory suggests that the children of mothers who are not employed outside the home should have a lower probability of engaging in each of these problematic behaviors, the bivariate regressions do not support this. Only one of the dependent variables (whether or

not a child has repeated a grade in school) is associated with the mothers' employment status, and children with stay-at-home mothers experience a 40% increase in the probability that they have repeated a grade over children whose mothers work outside the home.

Children whose mothers reported having more depressed and unhappy days in 1987 experience an increase in the probability of skipping school, of repeating a grade, and of having been expelled or suspended from school. However, mothers' psychological well-being does not appear to be associated with the other outcomes in the bivariate regression models.

In sum, the bivariate analyses suggest the parents' marital status, the frequency of good times the child has with the mother, and mothers' level of educational attainment are all associated with the children's outcomes in the direction proposed by the their respective perspectives. The children's prior well-being, the families' income, and the level of emotional stress and depression the mothers are experiencing at time one are also associated with most of the children's outcomes as expected, while the measures of the marital

relationship are related to some of the outcomes, but not to others. Only the mothers' employment status and the frequency of difficult times between the mothers and children do not appear to be associated with any of the outcomes in the predicted directions.

**Multivariate Analyses: Family Characteristics and  
Minor Children's Behavioral Outcomes**

In Table 5.2, I report the results of the multivariate logistic regression models of the five behavioral outcomes. I present two models for each of the children's outcomes in this table. In the first set of models, I incorporate the measure of children's well-being at time one to the variables in the first models. The purpose of this step is to ascertain any attenuation in the relationships between the parents' marital status and the children's outcomes which might result from the inclusion of a prior measure of the children's well-being. For each of the five outcomes, I then present the results of the multivariate regression of all of the variables of interest. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In a separate analysis not shown, I ran trimmed models for each of the outcomes. In the trimmed models, I utilized those family features from the multivariate regression procedures which

As reported earlier, children whose parents have separated or divorced by 1993 experience an increase in the probability that they would have experienced each of the problematic outcomes compared to children whose parents have remained married (Table 5.2, model 1). When a measure of children's prior well-being is added to the model, there is a slight attenuation of the relationship between marital status and each of the outcomes (between 3 and 12%), but all of the outcomes remain significantly related to marital status. For each behavior, children whose parents have separated or divorced have an increased probability of having engaged in the problematic behaviors over children whose parents remain married and living together even net of their prior well-being.

In separate analyses not shown here, I substituted a measure of the specific behavioral outcome (measured at time one) for the general measure of children's prior well-being. Specific measures were available for three of the five outcomes: whether a child has been expelled

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were significantly associated with the children's outcomes in the full model. The results are consistent with those of the full models.

or suspended, had repeated a grade, or had been in trouble with the police. Although there were bivariate associations for the repeated measures of police trouble and of grade retention, none of the specific measures of prior behaviors performed as well as the general measure of well-being seen in Table 5.2. Likewise, a measure of school behavioral problems in 1987 was associated with same three 1993 outcomes (and not with the other two), but did not attenuate the relationship between the 1993 outcomes and the parents' marital status. Consequently, I have used the general measure of prior well-being in all of the analyses.

When all of the predictor variables are included (Table 5.2, model 3), however, the relationship between marital status and each of the outcomes varies. Therefore, I will first discuss the results of the multivariate analyses for each of the outcome measures separately, and then discuss the similarities and differences across the five behavioral outcomes.

When all of the predictor variables are included, the relationship between marital status and the probability that the child has skipped school is no longer

significant. Instead, two other factors remain important in determining the probability that a child has skipped school. First, the frequency of good times the child experienced with the mother at time one reduces the probability that the child will have skipped school at time two. For each unit increase in the frequency of good times experienced between the mother and child, there is a 26% reduction in the probability that the child has skipped school. Mothers' educational attainment also remains an important predictor of the probability of the child having skipped school. The children of mothers with lower level of educational attainment have a greater probability of having skipped school than those children whose mothers have more education. Thus, mothers' educational attainment and their frequency of positive interactions with their children both reduce the probability that their children will skip school and account for the previously observed relationship with marital status.

The relationship between marital status and the probability that a child has repeated a grade is also attenuated by the inclusion of the other predictor variables in the full model, but does remain

statistically significant. Although children whose parents have separated or divorced experience an 85% increase in the probability that they have repeated a grade by the time of the second interview compared to children whose parents remain together, this represents a decrease of approximately 20% when compared to the increase in probability seen in the bivariate regression of marital status and repeating a grade in school. The mothers' level of educational attainment and the frequency of good times together experienced by the mothers and children also are important in determining the probability that a child has repeated a grade. For each unit increase in the mothers' educational attainment, children experience a 39% decrease in the probability that they have repeated a grade. Likewise, there is a 19% decrease in the probability that a child has repeated a grade for each unit increase in the frequency of good times between the mothers and children reported in 1987.

As seen in Table 5.2, the relationship between marital status and the probability that a child has been expelled or suspended from school is no longer statistically significant when the other independent

variables are included in the full model. However, the children's prior well-being remains an important predictor of this outcome in the full model. For each unit increase in children's 1987 well-being, there is a 20% decrease in the probability that the child has been expelled or suspended from school in 1993. In addition, mothers' educational attainment is also an important determinant of the probability that the child has been expelled or suspended. There is a 33% decrease in the probability that the child has experienced this outcome for each unit increase in the mothers' educational attainment.

In the full logistic regression model of the probability that the child has dropped out of school, the increase in the probability that the child has dropped out of school if the parents have separated or divorced is greater than in the bivariate model. There is a 242% increase in the probability of a child having dropped out of school if the parents have experienced a marital disruption.<sup>5</sup> The frequency of good times between the mothers and their children and the mothers'

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<sup>5</sup> This may be due to the small number of children who have dropped out of school among the children in this sample.

level of education again help to determine the probability that the children have dropped out of school. For each unit increase in the frequency of good times between the mothers and their children, there is a 45% decrease in the probability that the child has dropped out of school by the time of the second interview. Similarly, there is a 35% decrease in the probability that the child has dropped out, for each unit increase in the mothers' educational attainment. Therefore, while marital status remains important, mothers' education and the frequency of interactions between the mothers and their children are also important determinants of this outcome.

The relationship between marital status and the final dependent variable: whether the child has been in trouble with the police, is attenuated and no longer statistically significant in the full model. Instead, the frequency of good times between the mothers and their children, the mothers' level of educational attainment, and the level of conflict in the marriage determine the probability that the children have been in trouble with the police. For each unit increase in mothers educational attainment and in the frequency of

good times between the mothers and children, there is a 40 and 33% respectively decrease in the probability that the child has been in trouble with the police.

Likewise, children whose parents argued more often were at greater risk of having been in trouble with the police by the time of the second interview. For each unit increase in arguments between the parents, there is a 7% increase in the probability that the child has been in trouble with the police. Again, we see that characteristics of the family that existed prior to the divorce are important determinants of children's outcomes regardless of marital status.

In sum, the relationship between marital status and each of the five behavioral outcomes for the minor children is attenuated by the inclusion of the other predictors of children's well-being. Three of the five relationships are no longer statistically significant. Instead, mothers' educational attainment and the frequency of good times between the mothers and their children are important determinants for the behavioral outcomes. Children with better educated mothers have reduced probabilities of having been in trouble with the police and of having experienced any of the four school-

related negative outcomes. The frequency of enjoyable times together experienced by the mothers and children reduces the probability of the children having engaged in four of the five outcomes. Thus, mothers' education and mothers' involvement with their children are most often associated with reduced probabilities of the children engaging in these negative outcomes. In the full models, children's prior well-being and the level of conflict in the marriage at time one are useful in determining the probability that a child has engaged in some, but not most of these behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

**Predicted Probabilities:  
Children's Behavioral Outcomes**

A useful way to compare the relative effects of the influential factors from each of the models is to determine the predicted probability of a child having engaged in a behavior given a specified set of values for a particular child. For example, we might compare the probability that a child will drop out of school for

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the exponentiated coefficients for the trimmed models are consistent with those of the full models.

a child whose parents are divorced, who has a college-educated mother, and who has frequent positive interactions with his or her mother to a child whose parents' marriage is intact, who has a mother with less than a high school education, and whose mother rarely has positive interactions with the child. By varying the influential factors, we can determine the relative effects of each factor.

In Tables 5.3 and 5.4, I show the predicted probabilities of a child having engaged in one of the five behaviors under various conditions. The two outcomes for which marital status remains an important explanatory factor: dropping out of school and repeating a grade, are seen in Table 5.3, while the three outcomes for which marital status is not a significant explanatory factor: skipping school, being expelled or suspended, or getting in trouble with the police, are seen in Table 5.4.

As seen in the first panel of Table 5.3, the predicted probability of a child repeating a grade under the best of family situations, i.e., parents are still married, the mother is college educated, and the mother has

frequent positive interactions with the child is .04. If the parents separate or divorce, but the other two factors remain the same, the probability increases, but it is still relatively low (.07). In contrast, if all of the characteristics of the family are detrimental to the child, i.e., the parents have divorced, the mother has less than a high school education, and the mother rarely has good times with the child, the probability that the child will repeat a grade increases to .72. A careful examination of the first panel of Table 5.3 reveals that marital status is less influential than the frequency of good times, but mothers' educational attainment is the most important of the three features of family life in determining the probability that a child repeats a grade. <sup>7</sup> A similar pattern is seen in the second panel of Table 5.3. A child from an intact family whose mother rarely has good times with him or her has a much higher probability of dropping out of school (.12) than a child from a disrupted family whose mother frequently has good times with her or him (.02).

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<sup>7</sup> If, for example, we compare three children who each have a negative value on just one of the three family features, we find that the child whose mother has less than a high school education has a probability of .38, the child who rarely has good times with her or his mother has a probability of .09, and the child whose parents have experienced marital disruption has a predicted probability of .07 of repeating a grade.

In the first panel of Table 5.4, the predicted probability of a child having been expelled or suspended from school is compared given the child's prior well-being and the mother's level of educational attainment. With this outcome, we see that the child's prior well-being is more influential than the mother's educational attainment. If a child was doing well in 1987, but had a mother with less than high school educational attainment, the child has .13 probability of having been expelled or suspended by 1993, while a child who were doing poorly in 1987, but had a college-educated mother has a predicted probability of .63 of having been expelled or suspended from school by 1993. <sup>8</sup> The frequency of positive interactions and the mothers' level of educational attainment have similar effects on the probability of a child skipping school (.15 and .13 respectively). See the second panel of Table 5.4.

As seen in the third panel of Table 5.4, a child of a college-educated mother, whose parents rarely argued, and whose mother had frequent interactions with him or

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<sup>8</sup> These probabilities are for all children regardless of their parents' marital status.

her had a very low risk of having been in trouble with the police in 1993. Children who scored negatively on all three features, i.e., they rarely had good times with their mothers, their parents often argued, and their mothers had little education, had a predicted probability of .77 having been in trouble with the police by 1993. Of the three family characteristics of family life in 1987 which are important in predicting the probability that a child has been in trouble with the police in 1993: mothers' educational attainment, the frequency of good times that the mother spends with the child, and the frequency of times that the parents were arguing, the mothers' level of educational attainment is the most influential. If, for example, we compare three children who each have a positive value on just one of the three family features (i.e., either high education, frequent positive mother-child interactions, or rare parental arguments), we find that the child whose mother is college-educated has a probability of .21, while the child who frequently has good times with her or his mother has a probability of .36, and the child whose parents rarely argue has a predicted probability of .38 of having been in trouble with the police. Thus, mothers' education provides more protection for children

from the probability of getting in trouble with the police than either of the other two predictors.

**Discussion of Findings: Theoretical  
Perspectives and the Outcomes for Minor Children**

The results of the analyses in this chapter suggest that the marital status of parents is associated with negative outcomes for many children, but that, at least in part, that association is attenuated by other characteristics of the parents and of family life prior to the disruption of the parents' marriage. Two factors, in particular, appear to protect children from the probability of having experienced these negative behavioral outcomes.

The first factor that reduces the probability of the children having engaged in these outcomes is the mothers' level of educational attainment. Given four of the five outcome measures are related to children's performance and participation in school, this finding is not surprising. Mothers with higher levels of educational attainment may value education more, and

consequently, they may place more emphasis on school attendance, they may supervise homework more, and they may encourage their children's performance in school-related activities more than mothers' with lower levels of educational attainment. The importance of school and the value of education for the children is more likely to be transmitted to them by mothers who valued their own educational attainment. It may also be that by focusing on school-related activities and the importance of education, these children were insulated from activities that might have brought them into contact with the police.

For these five outcomes, the frequency of good times between the mothers and children is also an important determinant. Children who frequently engaged in enjoyable interactions with their mothers at the time of the first interview were less likely to have experienced the negative outcomes at the time of the second interview. This finding is particularly interesting in view of two other findings from this study. First, the mothers' employment status is not significantly related to the probabilities of children having engaged in any of the negative behaviors. Therefore, the children of

working mothers are at no greater risk of skipping school, dropping out of school, being expelled, getting in trouble with the police, or repeating a grade than the children of stay-at-home mothers.<sup>9</sup> This finding is surprising since we assume that stay-at-home mothers spend more time with their children, provide more supervision of their children, and should have children with lower probabilities of the negative behaviors than mothers who are in the work place. It appears, however, that the quality of the mother and child interactions rather than the quantity of interactions is more important to these outcomes for the minor children.

A second finding of interest is that the frequency of negative times or difficulties that the mothers experienced with their children in 1987 is not related to these behavioral outcomes for the children in 1993. If mothers' positive interactions are important, why aren't mothers negative interactions important? It may be that the good times act to insulate the children from later negative outcomes, but the negative ones do not

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<sup>9</sup> The measure utilized doesn't actually reflect the number of hours per week the mothers spend with their children, but rather, it only provides the mothers' employment status. However, past studies suggest stay-at-home mothers spend more time with their children than mothers who work outside the home.

make them more vulnerable. Or, there may be something unique to the types of difficulties that the mothers and children have at time one that doesn't necessarily mean they will be at greater risk of these negative outcomes later in the children's lives. For example, a parent may frequently argue with a child about picking up his toys, eating her vegetables, or going to bed on time, but these difficulties may have no relationship to their dropping out of school or getting in trouble with the police. It may also be that the families who experience many negative interactions between the mothers and children are not necessarily the same families who experience few positive interactions. Children who have frequent problems with picking up toys, eating vegetables, or going to bed on time may also be ones who have frequent positive times with their parents as well. Or drawing on social learning theory, this may be another example of positive reinforcements being more effective than negative reinforcements. More work needs to be done to understand the relationship between negative parent-child interactions and future behaviors of children.

In this analysis, the specific measures of problematic behaviors measured at the time of the first interview did not perform as well as the general measure of child well-being at time one. In contrast, in Cherlin et al.'s (1991) analysis, the measures of child prior well-being were earlier measures of the same outcome, and they were more effective at explaining the differences in outcomes between children from intact and children from disrupted families than were the specific measures of prior problematic behaviors tested in this work. This difference in results, however, is probably explained by the age of the children in this study and the nature of the outcomes examined. Very few of the children were old enough at the time of the first interview to be likely to have been expelled from school, repeated a grade, or been in trouble with the police. For example, 42% of the children were less than five-years-old at the time of the first interview, and only about one-fourth of the children were teenagers at the time of the first interview. Therefore, prior measures of those behaviors are probably not as useful as a general measure of well-being that might reflect the actual variation in prior

well-being that existed at the time of the first interview.

In chapter six, I focus on three additional outcomes for the minor children in this sample: an overall assessment of the quality of the relationship between the mothers and the children, the frequency of arguments between the mothers and the children, and an assessment of the psychological and emotional problems of the children in 1993. By examining a wider range of outcomes, a better evaluation of the relationship between the five explanatory perspectives and children's well-being may be obtained.

TABLE 5.1: Bivariate Logistic Regressions of Selected 1987 Independent Variables on Children's 1993 Outcomes. (odds ratios) (a)

	child skipped school	repeat a grade	expelled or sus- pended	dropped out of school	in trouble with police
<b>FAMILY STRUCTURE (b)</b>					
marital status	1.87 *	2.07 ***	2.21 **	3.46 *	2.60 ***
<b>PRIOR WELL-BEING</b>					
children's index (c)	.83 ***	.88 ***	.80 *****	.91	.81 ***
<b>MOTHERS' INVOLVEMENT</b>					
good times	.68 ***	.78 **	.71 ***	.58 *	.60 *****
difficult times	1.06	1.09	.97	.88	1.04
<b>FAMILY ECONOMIC STATUS</b>					
family income	.91	.82 *****	.87 **	.88	.88 *
mothers' education	.75 **	.58 *****	.62 *****	.63 **	.62 ****
<b>MARITAL RELATIONSHIP</b>					
relationship quality	.80 **	.98	.93	1.01	.76 **
conflict index	1.24 **	1.02	1.01	1.01	1.07 *
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS</b>					
not employed	.77	1.40 *	.89	.83	.72
emotional stress (d)	1.02 **	1.01 **	1.01 *	1.01	1.01
N=	1173	1176	1176	1177	1176

(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

(b) With the exception of marital status, all independent variables are measured at the time of the first interview. All dependent variables are measured at the time of the second interview.

(c) The children's well-being index at time one was constructed from measures of well-being which the parent could say was "often true," "seldom true," or "never true." Measures are available in Appendix 2.

(d) The mothers' emotional difficulties index consists of 8 statements. Mothers were asked how many days a week each one was true for them. Measures are available in Appendix 2.

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, \*\*\*\* p < .0001, \*\*\*\*\* p < .00000

TABLE 5.2: Multivariate Logistic Regressions of Selected 1987 Independent Variables on Children's 1993 Outcomes. (odds ratios) (a)

	child skipped school	repeat a grade	expelled or sus- pended	dropped out of school	in trouble with police
MODEL ONE					
1993 marital status	1.79 *	2.01 ***	2.07 **	3.38 *	2.46 **
children's index (b)	.84 ***	.88 **	.76 *****	.93	.82 ***
MODEL TWO (full)					
FAMILY STRUCTURE (c)					
1993 marital status	1.69	1.85 **	1.73	4.42 *	2.16
PRIOR WELL-BEING					
children's index (b)	.90	.96	.80 ***	1.05	.93
MOTHERS' INVOLVEMENT					
good times	.74 **	.81 *	.89	.55 **	.67 **
difficult times	.99	1.10	.89	.91	.99
FAMILY ECONOMIC STATUS					
family income	.93	.95	.97	1.04	.98
mothers' education	.81 *	.61 *****	.67 ***	.65 *	.60 ***
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP					
relationship quality	.90	1.07	1.00	1.07	.85
conflict index	1.04	1.01	1.00	1.06	1.07 *
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS					
not employed	.61	1.14	.77	.48	.74
emotional stress (d)	1.01	1.00	1.00	1.02	.99
N=	1173	1176	1176	1177	1176

(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

(b) The children's well-being index at time one was constructed from measures of well-being which the parent could say was "often true," "seldom true," or "never true." Measures are available in Appendix 2.

(c) With the exception of marital status, all independent variables are measured at the time of the first interview. All dependent variables are measured at the time of the second interview.

(d) The mothers' emotional difficulties index consists of 8 statements. Mothers were asked how many days a week each one was true for them. Measures are available in Appendix 2.

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, \*\*\*\* p < .0001, \*\*\*\*\* p < .00000

Table 5.3: Predicted Probabilities of a Child Having Repeated a Grade or of Dropping Out of School by 1993.

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REPEAT A GRADE	marriage intact	marriage disrupted
frequent good times college educated	.04	.07
rare good times college educated	.09	.15
frequent good times less than high school	.38	.53
rare good times less than high school	.59	.72

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DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL	marriage intact	marriage disrupted
frequent good times	.00	.02
rare good times	.12	.19

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(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

Table 5.4: Predicted Probabilities of a Child Having Skipped School, Been expelled or Suspended, or Having Been in Trouble with the Police by 1993.

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EXPELLED OR SUSPENDED	college educated	less than high school degree
good prior well-being	.02	.13
mid-range prior well-being	.14	.61
poor prior well-being	.63	.94

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SKIPPED SCHOOL	college educated	less than high school degree
frequent good times	.04	.15
rare good times	.13	.40

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TROUBLE WITH THE POLICE	college educated	less than high school degree
frequent good times rare parental conflict	.01	.09
frequent good times frequent parental conflict	.04	.36
rare good times rare parental conflict	.05	.38
rare good times frequent parental conflict	.21	.77

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(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

**Chapter Six: Children's Other Outcomes  
The Effects of Family Characteristics  
on Children's Emotional Problems and Children's  
Relationships with their Mothers**

In chapter five, I focused on how selected features of family experiences influence certain types of behavioral outcomes for minor children. In this chapter, I expand that work by examining two additional types of outcomes for children: children's emotional problems and aspects of the relationship between the mothers and children. The primary focus is on the degree to which the association between marital disruption (either through parental separation or divorce) and these outcomes is attributable to other features of the family situation rather than to the break-up of the marital union. But I am also interested in discerning the features of children's family experiences that have a major influence on the level of children's emotional or psychological problems and on the quality of the relationship between the mothers and their children, whether or not those particular features help explain the association between family disruption and children's outcomes.

In accord with the purposes of this chapter, the data analysis strategy begins with a focus on the bivariate association between marital disruption and children's emotional problems, the overall assessment of the quality of the relationship between the children and their mothers, and the frequency of arguments between the mothers and their children. The children's outcomes were assessed by the mothers in 1993 (i.e., at the time of the second interview). Although all of the families were intact in 1987 (i.e., at the time of the first interview), by 1993, 15% of the families had experienced a break-up. Along with this initial exploration of a bivariate association, I will also explore the variables that will subsequently be introduced as controls in the continuing analysis. These control variables, representing the different perspectives on the reasons for diminished child well-being (discussed in Chapter Two) were measured in 1987. Hence, they cannot reasonably be regarded as effects of the marital dissolution, which occurred between the first and second interviews.

In the second stage of the data analysis presented in this chapter, I will consider the possibility that the association between family break-up and children's post-disruption outcomes appears simply because those same children were exhibiting problematic behaviors and other negative characteristics prior to the break-up of the marital union. Otherwise stated, even though we may not know precisely what conditions are responsible for the marital disruption, we should first consider the possibility that the complex of conditions that lead a couple to terminate their relationship have already had deleterious effects on the children before the break-up actually occurs. Therefore, I first control for one variable, a general index of child well-being as measured in 1987 (See Chapter 3 for details). If the association between marital disruption and children's negative outcomes disappears or is greatly reduced after control for the general index of prior child well-being, the implication will be that that the well-being of the children was impaired prior to the break-up, and I can then search out more specific clues by substituting specific pre-break-up features of family life for the general index of prior well-being. On the other hand, if the association between marital disruption and the

children's negative outcomes is not greatly affected by a control for children's prior well-being, the implication will be that the problematic behaviors have developed, either in response to the marital disruption or as a delayed response to earlier family conditions. I will then introduce selected family characteristics, not as a substitute for the general index of prior well-being, but along with the index in order to explore further the effects of the break-up or the pre-existing conditions that seem to influence the subsequent emergence of problems for children. I utilize a general index of well-being for the control for children's prior well-being rather than the prior level of the specific outcome of interest. While one could argue for the use of the prior specific outcome as a control, by using the same control in all of the equations (i.e., all of the dependent variables), the equations are thereby made more nearly comparable. <sup>1</sup>

In the third step of this analysis, I introduce selected children's experiences and family characteristics, as reported in 1987, along with the

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, not all of the children's outcomes in 1993 were measured in 1987. In other cases, only the parents of a narrow age range of children were asked the about the same outcomes during both interviews.

general index of well-being (as appropriate) and the 1993 family structure (i.e., the marital status of the parents) as simultaneous predictors of the children's outcomes in 1993. On the basis of the results of these equations, I will be able to determine (a) the degree to which the bivariate association between family structure and each of the children's outcomes is explained by certain pre-existing family characteristics, and (b) which family features seem to have the greatest impact on each of the outcomes. With regard to the first point, I note that imperfect measurement in the control variables implies that they are imperfectly controlled and hence a residue of association may be due simply to such imperfect measurement. With regard to the second point, I call attention to the fact that differential reliabilities in the measurement of the pre-existing family conditions may contribute to their differential contribution to the prediction of the outcomes for the children. Hence, comparisons of the relative impact of different pre-existing condition should be made with caution, and with due regard for the differential reliability of measurements.

In the final step in this analysis, I examine a somewhat more complicated issue, i.e., does the pattern of predictors vary when I control for characteristics of the children. In this section, I focus only on those outcomes for which there is evidence of variation in the effects of the predictor variables on children's outcomes by the age or the gender of the child.

As indicated in the discussion of the five perspectives in Chapter Two, each perspective suggests certain hypotheses about family characteristics that contribute to child well-being. Generally speaking, those hypotheses can be summarized by stating that positive experiences in a child's early years lead to better outcomes when the child is older. For example:

- \* Marital disruption has negative outcomes for children.
- \* Frequent positive interactions (good times) between mothers and their children will lower the probability of later negative outcomes.
- \* Frequent negative interactions (difficult times) between mothers and their children will increase the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.

- \* Higher educational attainment by the mother will lower the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.
- \* Higher family income will lower the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.
- \* Difficulties in the marital relationship (e.g., frequent arguments between the parents and the quality of the relationship rated as poor) at an earlier time will increase the probability of later negative outcomes for the children.
- \* There is continuity in negative outcomes, i.e., diminished child well-being at an earlier time will continue at a later time.

While these hypotheses might be said to represent the expected outcomes in the analysis presented in this chapter, the issue at stake in each of the propositions above is not whether the hypothesis is supported by a relevant bivariate association. Instead, there are two general issues at stake in this analysis. First, does each of the factors considered have an independent effect on the outcome, i.e., does each factor survive as a predictor when others are controlled? If some do not survive, I will conclude that they have no effect on

child well-being, but simply appeared to have an effect because they are correlated with another factor that does have an effect. Second, is the pattern of predictors essentially similar for each of the outcomes under consideration? If so, these factors may influence child well-being in general. In contrast, if the pattern of predictors is evidently different for different outcomes, then the processes may vary by the nature of the various outcomes.

### **Emotional Problems**

In Table 6.1, I report the bivariate relationships between selected characteristics of family life in 1987 and the 1993 index of children's emotional or psychological problems.<sup>2</sup> All of the features of family life that are significantly related to the dependent variable are in the anticipated direction, and only one of the measures tested (mothers' employment status) is not significantly related to children's well-being. In general, the level of children's emotional problems is lower if the parents remain married, the parents have

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<sup>2</sup> Note that for this index, a higher score means the mother reported that the focal child had more problems. Consequently, positive effects are associated with more psychological problems for the children.

few negative interactions and frequent positive interactions with their children at the time of the first interview, the families' income and mothers' educational attainment are higher in 1987, children and mothers were doing better at the time of the first interview, and the marital relationship was less contentious in 1987. Only mothers' employment status is not associated with children's emotional problems at time two.

In Table 6.2, I first present the results of the multivariate regression that includes the index of prior well-being for the children. As seen in the table, the association between marital status and children's emotional problems is only slightly affected by the addition for the children's prior well-being. This suggests that either the children's emotional problems have developed since the earlier evaluation, perhaps as a result of the marital disruption or some other unidentified factor, or the problems developed as a delayed response to earlier family characteristics. Given this finding, it is appropriate to explore the effects of the other prior family life conditions.

In Model 2 (Table 6.2), I present the results when I incorporate all of the family characteristics in the analysis. Again we see only slight attenuation of the association between marital status and children's emotional problems. This suggests that at least some part of the problems may have resulted from (a) the divorce, (b) some other development in the children's lives since the time of the first interview, (c) some earlier experience omitted from these equations.

In the full model, the association between children's past well-being and their current level of emotional problems remains. Children's lower level of well-being in 1987 is associated with higher levels of emotional problems in 1993, i.e., there is some continuity in respect over the five year period. In addition, the frequency of difficult times the mother reported having with the child in 1987 is positively associated with the level of emotional problems she reports the child has in 1993.

In the full model, the level of relationship between the level of conflict between the parents and children's emotional problems is attenuated, but remains

significant. Higher levels of parental conflict at time one are associated with higher levels of emotional problems for the children at time two. Thus, parental conflict carries a price for the children in this sample. Likewise, mothers with high levels of emotional stress in 1987 have children with more emotional problems in 1993. And finally, prior family income has a negative effect on the level of the children's emotional problems. Families with more income, and consequently more resources, are able to shield their children from some of the emotional problems compared to families with lower levels of income.

### **Relationship Quality**

In Table 6.1, I also report the bivariate relationships between selected characteristics of family life in 1987 and two measures of the quality of the relationship between the mothers and their children in 1993. The first measure is an evaluation of the overall quality of the parent-child relationship and the second measure is

an index of the frequency of arguments between the children and their mothers in 1993.

As seen in Table 6.1, the marital status of the parents in 1993 is not associated with the mothers' evaluation of the quality of the relationship with the child. Divorced and separated mothers are just as likely to report that their relationships are perfect or almost perfect as are mothers in intact marriages. In contrast, the measures of parental involvement, the marital relationship, and children's past well-being are significantly related to the mothers' perception of the quality of their relationships with their children. If the mothers had frequent positive interactions and few negative interactions with their children at time one, the mothers were likely to perceive that they had perfect or almost perfect relationships with their children at time two. If the marital relationship was less contentious and the parents' could negotiate their problems through discussion rather than by yelling at each other at time one, the mother-child relationship was perceived as better at time two. And finally, the mothers of children who were doing better on the 1987 well-being index perceived that their relationships with

their children were better at time two. In addition to the parents' marital status, the families' income, the mothers' educational attainment, the mothers' employment status and the mothers' index of well-being are not significantly related to the mothers' perception of the quality of their relationships with the focal children.

In Table 6.2, I examine which family features have the greatest impact on the quality of the mother and child's relationship. Although marital status was not significantly related to the quality of the relationship between the mothers and children, I retain marital status in the analysis to address the possibility that marital status might be associated with the quality of the relationship when I control for other factors, i.e., it may actually be suppressed in the bivariate test. I have included the index of children's prior well-being in the first model and find that the association between children's prior well-being and the quality of the relationship holds as compared to that reported in Table 6.1, and there is no improvement in the association between marital status and the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Interestingly, in the full model the relationship between children's prior well-being and the quality of the mother and child's relationship disappears. Instead, three characteristics of prior family life appear to be important in explaining the quality of the relationship between mothers and their children. The first two measures reflect the mothers' involvement with their children. Mothers' frequent positive interactions in 1987 are associated with higher levels of relationship quality in 1993, while frequent negative interactions reduce the quality of the relationship between the mothers and their children. Mothers report feeling that their relationships with their children are perfect or near perfect in 1993 if they had few difficult and frequent good times with their children in 1987.

The third characteristic of prior family life that appears to affect the quality of the relationship between the mothers and their children in 1993 is the quality of the relationship between the parents in 1987. Regardless of whether their marriages remained intact, mothers who reported having wonderful relationships with their spouses at the time of the first interview, later

reported having high levels of relationship quality with their children. This suggests that perhaps the ability to form and maintain quality relationships is consistent across families, i.e., women who are able to establish positive relationships with their spouses are also capable of establishing them with their children. A second possibility is that women's perceptions of the relationships may be similarly biased, i.e., women who don't see the problems in their marital relationships also don't see them in their parenting relationships, and those who see problems in one type of relationship, see them in all of their relationships.

The bivariate relationships between the prior family life characteristics and the second measure of the relationship between the mothers and their children: the frequency of arguments between the mothers and children index is shown in Table 6.1. As was the case with the measure of the overall quality of the parent-child relationship, marital status is not associated with the frequency of arguments between the mothers and their children.

Again, we see that frequent negative interactions at time one are positively associated with the frequency of arguments between the mothers and children at time two. If the mothers had frequent difficult times with their children in 1987, there was likely to be more arguments between the mothers and their children in 1993. Not surprisingly, more arguments occurred between the mothers and their children at time two if the parents were frequently arguing with each other and if the mothers reported low levels of marital quality. Mothers who had more depression and moodiness at time one were more likely to be arguing with their children at time two, and higher levels of children's well-being at time one reduced the frequency of arguments between the mothers and children at time two. As was the case with the measure of relationship quality between the mothers and their children, the parents' marital status, the families' income, the mothers' educational attainment, and the mothers' employment status are not significantly associated with the frequency of arguments between mothers and their children.

As seen in Model 1 (Table 6.2), I have included the index of children's prior well-being in the first model

and find that the association between children's prior well-being and the frequency of arguments holds at approximately the same level as that reported in Table 6.1, but there is no improvement in the association between marital status and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Likewise, there is no improvement in the association between arguments and marital status in the full model. Separation and divorce do not appear to be associated with the frequency of arguments between children and their mothers. The children of separated or divorced parents are no more likely to argue with their parent than the children of still-married parents.

Most of the other bivariate relationships between the frequency of arguments and the prior family characteristics reported in Table 6.1 remain significantly related to the dependent variable in the full model. The frequency of difficult times between the children and mothers in 1987 is positively associated with the frequency of arguments between the children and parents in 1993. Children who had frequent difficult times in the past argued more with their mothers at the time of the second interview. Similarly, the frequency of arguments between the parents in 1987

positively affects the frequency of arguments between the mothers and children in 1993. Women who didn't argue with their spouses in 1987 (regardless of their future marital status), didn't argue with their children in 1993.

In the full model, the relationship between children's prior well-being and the frequency of arguments at time two is attenuated but remains significant. Children who had higher levels of past well-being were less likely to be arguing with their mothers. Similarly, the mothers' level of emotional stress in 1987 is positively associated with the frequency of parent-child arguments in 1993. Mothers who in the past, reported lower levels of stress are less likely to argue with their children in the future.

### **Gender and Age of the Child**

Because the gender of the child had significant effects on the frequency of arguments between the mothers and children and on the index of children's emotional problems (boys had more emotional problems and also were

more likely to argue with their mothers), I ran separate analyses for these two outcomes by the gender of the child. This was done to determine if marital status or any of the measures of prior family life might differentially affect these outcomes for children. Likewise, the children's age had significant effects on the quality of the relationship between the mothers and children, and consequently, I re-analyzed the data by the age of the children.<sup>3</sup> In Tables 6.3 and 6.4. I report the results of the multivariate analyses for these measures by the gender or age of the child as appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

As seen in Model 1 of Table 6.3, the effects of marital status on the frequency of arguments between the mothers and children are not significant for either sons or daughters. However, the children's index of prior well-being is associated with a reduction in arguments for boys, but not for girls. Sons who frequently argue with their mothers had lower levels of prior well-being than

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<sup>3</sup> For substantive and empirical reasons, I divided the children into two age categories: children who were less than 13, i.e., ages 6 to 12, and children who were 13 to 18 at the time of the second interview.

<sup>4</sup> Although I do not provide a table of the bivariate associations between the three outcomes by the gender or age of the child, I do comment on any inconsistencies.

sons who infrequently argue with their mothers. For daughters, past well-being is not a useful factor when explaining the frequency of arguments with their mothers. This gender difference is seen in the full model as well. In contrast, the mothers' prior emotional stress is associated with an increase in arguments for daughters, but not for sons. Mothers prior emotional stress does not necessarily lead to more arguments with their sons, but it does with their daughters.

Some interesting gender differences are also seen in the models of children's emotional problems seen in Table 6.3. In Model 1, there is slight attenuation of the association between marital status and emotional problems for both boys and girls. Likewise, the pattern is similar for the association between children's prior well being and current emotional problems for both daughters and sons. In Model 2, however, the attenuation for sons is somewhat larger, and results in the association between marital status and the sons' level of emotional problems no longer being significant.

<sup>5</sup> The children's prior well-being is associated with

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<sup>5</sup> The relationship between marital status and emotional problems remains significant for daughters, but only at the .05 level.

the level of current emotional problems for both sons and daughters but the association is stronger for the boys than the girls.

The level of parental conflict negatively affects daughters, i.e., an increase in emotional problems is associated with higher levels of prior parental conflict, but is not associated with the index of emotional problems for the boys. The daughters of parents who argued frequently in 1987 had more emotional difficulties in 1993, but the level of parental arguments does not appear to be related to boys' emotional problems. In contrast, the mothers' prior emotional stress is associated with a higher number of emotional problems for boys, but not for girls. Finally, we see that the frequency of prior good times between mothers and daughters leads to a reduction in emotional difficulties for daughters, but not for sons. It may be that the effects of continuity are greater for boys than they are for girls, i.e., if boys have emotional problems, they were likely to have carried over from earlier times. In contrast, girls appear to have emotional problems in response to more recent changes, e.g., family structure and parental conflict.

As seen in Table 6.4, the relationship between marital status and the quality of the relationship between the mothers and their children is not significant for either age group of children. <sup>6</sup> In Model 1, the children's index of prior well-being is positively associated with the quality of the relationship for older children, but not for the younger children. However, in the full model, the association between prior well-being and relationship quality is no longer significant for either age group.

Instead the major difference in the effects of prior family life characteristics for the two age groups is seen in the measures of the prior marital relationship. For the older children, higher levels of marital relationship quality in 1987 are associated with higher levels of relationship quality between the mothers and their children in 1993. No pattern of similar association is seen for the younger children in this study. The frequency of parental conflict in 1987,

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<sup>6</sup> This is true for the relationship between mothers and their children, but probably is not true for fathers since most children do not have their primary residence with their fathers. Consequently, we would expect marital disruption would have a greater effect on the relationship between fathers and their children.

however, does have negative effects on the mothers' relationship with the younger children in 1993. It may be that younger children are sensitive to their parents' actual arguments, while the older children are more in tune with their parents' more subtle signals of marital unhappiness. Therefore, the quality of the marital relationship is only relevant for the younger children if their parents are verbalizing their disagreements. <sup>7</sup>

#### **Discussion of Findings:**

##### **Emotional Difficulties and Mother and Child Relationship Outcomes for Minor Children**

In the final section of chapter six, I focus on the patterns revealed in the analyses of children's emotional well-being and of the measures of the mother-child relationship: the overall quality of the relationship as assessed by the mothers and the frequency of arguments between the mothers and their children. I first discuss the importance of marital status for these measures and then examine the relationships between the other predictor variables and the children's outcomes.

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<sup>7</sup> Remember that the younger children were less than 8-years-old at the time the mothers were first interviewed in 1987.

Although the effects of marital status on children's emotional problems is attenuated by the inclusion of measures of the child's prior well-being and characteristics of family life at time one, the relationship remains significant. Several interpretations are suggested by this finding. It may be that marital status, at least for girls produces negative emotional consequences or it may be the case that the appropriate explanatory variable has not yet been included in the model. Although marital status is significant in the final model, two other measures: children's prior well-being and the frequency of difficult times children had with their mothers in the past are more important predictors of the level of emotional problems children had at the time of the second interview, and consequently, the implications that might be drawn from these findings are discussed below.

Children's prior well-being in 1987 is associated with lower levels of emotional problems in 1993. This suggests a continuity of emotional problems for children over time and is particularly true for the boys in this

sample. Boys' emotional difficulties appear to start at an earlier age than they did for the girls. Boys, for example, appear to have already been responding to their mothers' emotional difficulties at the time of the first interview while girls did not. Another interpretation of this finding, however, is that boys might have had more externalized emotional problems than mothers, even mothers with their own emotional difficulties could not ignore. In contrast, if their daughters' emotional difficulties at the time of the interview were of a more internalized nature, it might have been easier for the mothers to overlook the daughters' problems.

As seen in the model of children's emotional problems, the frequency of difficult times the mother reported having with the child in 1987 is also positively associated with the level of emotional problems she reports the child has in 1993. Several potential interpretations of this finding come to mind. First, the emotional problems may result from the difficult times that the mother and child had in the past, either through negative reinforcement or emotional harm brought on by the frequent negative encounters. Another possibility is that the effects of the prior difficult

times are just a reflection of the child's past level of problems, and consequently, this may just reflect continuity in problems for the child. Or, it may be the case that the child's emotional problems preceded the interview in 1987, the child's prior emotional problems may have led the mother to recall selectively the difficult times she was experiencing with the child at the time of the first interview. It seems likely that any of these interpretations are at least partially correct, and that in some cases, more than one of these processes may go on for some of the children.

In contrast to the findings for the children's emotional problems, the measures of relationship quality between the mothers and their children do not appear to be related to marital status of the parents. Instead, there is a very strong relationship between the quality of the parent-child relationship in 1993 and the index of child well-being in 1987. Interestingly, however, when the full models are seen, the relationship between the frequency of arguments and children's prior well-being is attenuated and the relationship between children's prior well-being and the quality of the mother-child relationship actually disappears. In the

former case, the frequency of difficult times remains important while in the latter case both the frequency of good and the frequency of bad times are important predictors. This pattern supports the possibility that there is continuity in the characteristics and behaviors of the children between the two interview times, i.e., children who had difficult times in the past were likely to be still arguing with their mothers in 1993 and children who had good relationships with their mothers in 1993 were likely to have frequent good times and infrequent difficult times with their parent in the past.

Continuity is also seen in the relationship between the marital relationship measures in 1987 and the parent-child relationship measures in 1993. The quality of the marital relationship at time one is associated with the quality of the parent-child relationship at time two, while the frequency of parental arguments at time one is associated with the frequency of mother-child arguments at time two. Simply put, mothers who report good relationships with their spouses, report good relationships with their children, while mothers who argue with their spouses also argue with their children.

Some of this association may be due to reporting bias, but it is particularly interesting that the association occurs at two different reporting times.

Finally, it's interesting to note that children's time one well-being has positive effects on the relationship between the mothers and children while the frequency of time one interactions between the mothers and children is positively related to children's well-being at time two. This suggests that not only do parents' characteristics affect children, but also children's characteristics affect parents, i.e., the parent-child relationship is at least partially determined by the child's well-being. This is noteworthy since too often we assume parents have active roles while children have passive roles in everyday interactions. Too often we assume children, particularly young children, are only powerless players in family dynamics. Consequently, we ignore the importance children have in shaping adult experiences.

In the final chapter of this work, I examine the larger trends in these analyses. I focus on the themes that emerge across all of the analyses and discuss the

relative importance of the six explanatory perspectives  
for explaining children' well-being.

TABLE 6.1: Bivariate Regression Coefficients of Selected 1987 Independent Variables on Children's 1993 Outcomes. (a)

	child's emotional problems	quality of mother-child relationship	mother and child's arguments
FAMILY STRUCTURE (b)			
1993 marital status	.10 ***	-.03	.03
MOTHERS' INVOLVEMENT			
good times	-.08 **	.17 *****	-.04
difficult times	.20 *****	-.22 *****	.23 *****
FAMILY ECONOMIC STATUS			
family income	-.10 **	-.01	-.02
mothers' education	-.08 **	-.05	-.00
PRIOR WELL-BEING			
children's index (c)	-.23 *****	.15 *****	-.16 *****
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP			
relationship quality	-.13 *****	.20 *****	-.15 *****
conflict index	.16 *****	-.14 *****	.10 **
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS			
not employed	.03	.00	-.00
emotional stress (d)	.14 *****	-.04	.17 *****
N=	945	926	911

(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

(b) With the exception of marital status, all independent variables are measured at the time of the first interview. All dependent variables are measured at the time of the second interview.

(c) The children's well-being index at time one was constructed from measures of well-being which the parent could say was "often true," "seldom true," or "never true." Measures are available in Appendix 2.

(d) The mothers' emotional difficulties index consists of 8 statements. Mothers were asked how many days a week each one was true for them. Measures are available in Appendix 2.

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, \*\*\*\* p < .0001, \*\*\*\*\* p < .00000

TABLE 6.2: Multivariate Regression Coefficients of Selected 1987 Independent Variables on Children's 1993 Outcomes. (a)

	child's emotional problems	quality of mother-child relationship	mother and child's arguments
MODEL ONE			
1993 marital status (b)	.09 **	-.03	.02
children's prior index	-.22 *****	.14 *****	-.16 *****
MODEL TWO (full)			
FAMILY STRUCTURE			
1993 marital status	.08 **	-.03	.00
PRIOR WELL-BEING			
children's index (c)	-.17 *****	.04	-.10 **
MOTHERS' INVOLVEMENT			
mothers' good times	-.02	.15 *****	.00
mothers' difficult times	.13 *****	-.18 *****	.16 *****
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP			
relationship quality	-.04	.15 *****	-.05
conflict index	.07 *	-.05	.14 ****
FAMILY ECONOMIC STATUS			
family income	-.07 *	.02	-.02
mothers' education	-.02	-.06	.02
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS			
mothers' not employed	.04	-.04	.02
emotional stress (d)	.06 *	.05	.07 *
N=	945	926	911

(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

(b) With the exception of marital status, all independent variables are measured at the time of the first interview. All dependent variables are measured at the time of the second interview.

(c) The children's well-being index at time one was constructed from measures of well-being which the parent could say was "often true," "seldom true," or "never true." Measures are available in Appendix 2.

(d) The mothers' emotional difficulties index consists of 8 statements. Mothers were asked how many days a week each one was true for them. Measures are available in Appendix 2.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ , \*\*\*\*\*  $p < .00000$

TABLE 6.3: Multivariate Regression Coefficients of Selected  
1987 Family Life Characteristics on Children's 1993 Outcomes  
by the Gender of the Child. (a)

	mother and child's arguments		children's emotional problems	
	sons	daughters	sons	daughters
MODEL ONE				
1993 marital status	.05	-.00	.09 *	.10 *
children's prior index	-.20 *****	-.08	-.23 *****	-.17 *****
MODEL TWO (full)				
FAMILY STRUCTURE				
1993 marital status (b)	.03	-.03	.07	.09 *
PRIOR WELL-BEING				
children's index (c)	-.14 **	-.03	-.20 *****	-.09 *
MOTHERS' INVOLVEMENT				
good times	.02	-.04	.01	-.10 *
difficult times	.13 **	.18 ***	.13 **	.14 **
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP				
relationship quality	-.08	-.05	-.06	-.01
conflict index	.14 **	.14 **	.02	.14 **
FAMILY ECONOMIC STATUS				
family income	.06	-.07	-.07	-.06
mothers' education	.01	.00	-.02	-.04
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS				
mothers' not employed	.02	.05	.01	.08
emotional stress (d)	.05	.10 *	.10 *	.02
N=	458	447	470	456

(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

(b) With the exception of marital status, all independent variables are measured at the time of the first interview. All dependent variables are measured at the time of the second interview.

(c) The children's well-being index at time one was constructed from measures of well-being which the parent could say was "often true," "seldom true," or "never true." Measures are available in Appendix 2.

(d) The mothers' emotional difficulties index consists of 8 statements. Mothers were asked how many days a week each one was true for them. Measures are available in Appendix 2.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ , \*\*\*\*\*  $p < .00000$

TABLE 6.4: Multivariate Regression Coefficients of Selected 1987 Family Life Characteristics on Quality of the Relationship between the Mothers and Children by the Age of the Child. (a)

	quality of the mother-child relationship	
	13 years or older	less than 13 years old
MODEL ONE		
1993 marital status	-.02	-.02
children's prior index	.17 ***	.06
MODEL TWO (full)		
FAMILY STRUCTURE		
1993 marital status (b)	-.04	-.04
PRIOR WELL-BEING		
children's index (c)	.00	.04
MOTHERS' INVOLVEMENT		
mothers' good times	.12 *	.16 ****
mothers' difficult times	-.21 ***	-.16 ***
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP		
relationship quality	.24 *****	.09
conflict index	.01	-.10 *
FAMILY ECONOMIC STATUS		
family income	.08	-.01
mothers' education	-.10	-.06
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS		
mothers' not employed	-.04	-.06
emotional stress (d)	.09	.02
N=	329	585

(a) Children are between 5 and 18 years-old in 1993.

(b) With the exception of marital status, all independent variables are measured at the time of the first interview. All dependent variables are measured at the time of the second interview.

(c) The children's well-being index at time one was constructed from measures of well-being which the parent could say was "often true," "seldom true," or "never true." Measures are available in Appendix 2.

(d) The mothers' emotional difficulties index consists of 8 statements. Mothers were asked how many days a week each one was true for them. Measures are available in Appendix 2.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ , \*\*\*\*\*  $p < .00000$

## **Chapter Seven: Understanding Children's Well-Being**

In the final chapter of this work, I will compare the patterns of the predictors of well-being across all of the outcomes presented in earlier chapters. In doing so, I will evaluate the relative importance of the five perspectives of child-well-being: family structure, prior well-being of the children, family economic status, marital relationship, and mothers' involvement. Based on the results of these analyses, I argue that the family economic status perspective, specifically mothers' educational attainment and the mothers' involvement perspective, specifically the frequency of mothers' good times with their children, provide the most useful predictors of the children's behavioral outcomes examined in this work. I also argue that children's level of emotional problems and their relationship with their mothers are most strongly associated with their prior well-being.

### The Family Structure Perspective

The marital status of the parents in this study was much less important to children's well-being than was the case in many of the earlier studies of children's well-being. The behavioral outcomes presented in earlier chapters were associated with the parents' marital status in the bivariate regressions, i.e., children were more likely to have skipped school, been expelled from school, dropped out of school, repeated a grade in school, or been in trouble with the police, if their parents had separated or divorced. However, the inclusion of measures of children's well-being and family characteristics before the separation or divorce attenuated those relationships, and for three of the five outcomes: police trouble, skipping school, and being expelled from school, the associations were no longer statistically significant after the inclusion of the other predictor variables.<sup>1</sup> A similar attenuation pattern emerges for the relationship between children's

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the results presented in these chapters, I have examined the relationship between marital status and a number of other outcomes for the minor and adult children samples drawn from the National Survey of Families and Households.. Surprisingly, in about two-thirds of the cases, there is no bivariate relationship between the outcomes for the children and their parents' marital status at the time of the second interview.

psychological problems and their parents' marital status. No relationship is seen, however, between the parents' marital status and the measures of the mother-child relationship.

The marital status of their parents is probably less important to the well-being of the children in this study (as compared to prior research) for a number of reasons. First, this project included other measures of family life which have rarely been available in prior data sets. Many of these characteristics, e.g., as the prior well-being of the children, the level of past involvement between mothers and children, characteristics of the marital relationship, and the educational attainment of the mothers, more effectively explain children's well-being than the parents' marital status.

Marital status may also be a less important predictor of children's well-being today than it was in the past because as divorce has become more common, children may feel less deviant and be less ostracized when their parents separate than children experienced even 20 years ago. Most children today have either experienced

divorce in their own families, among their friends' families, or in their neighborhood. And as a society, as marital disruption has become more common, we may be developing more formal policies and informal norms for coping with nontraditional families. For example, many school have support groups for children whose parents have recently separated. More family courts are requiring some counseling at the time of divorce. Although this counseling isn't going to preserve the existing family boundaries, even brief counseling sessions may be making more parents aware of how to protect their children from some of the deleterious effects of divorce. Therefore, not only is the stigma of divorce gone, but our knowledge of the consequences for all family members is enhanced over what it was in the past.

It is particularly gratifying to see that the quality of the relationship between mothers and their children is not associated with the marital status of the parents. Divorced and separated mothers are no more likely to argue with their children than are mothers in intact relationships. Mothers report having close relationships to their children regardless of their

marital status. However, although fathers responses were not included in the primary analyses of children's well-being, it is important to note that fathers did report not having as high quality relationships if they had separated or divorced. Although fathers reports of their children's behaviors were probably less accurate than the mothers' reports, fathers are certainly aware of their own perceptions of their relationships with their children. Consequently, the parent-child relationship quality may be less optimistic for fathers than it is for mothers.

### **Prior Well-Being**

This perspective suggests that the detrimental outcomes often reported for children whose parents have experienced a marital disruption can be explained by inclusion of a measure of children's prior well-being, i.e., children do less well after divorce because they were doing less well prior to divorce. Overall, the attenuation with children's prior well-being in this study is generally quite minor. This is true for the behavioral outcomes and the emotional problems index.

There is always some attenuation of the relationship between the children's outcome and the parents' marital status, but is often quite small in magnitude. Several possible explanations come to mind. One possibility is that the measure of prior well-being isn't appropriate. For example, it may be the case that a measure of the level of the prior characteristic, e.g., a measure of the specific behavior would be more useful. However, as noted in Chapter Five, when measures of the specific behavior at the time of the first interview were available, they were tested in separate models and found to be less useful than the general measure of children's prior well-being. This is probably the case because the children were relatively young at the time of the first interview, and consequently, at low risk of engaging in any of the outcomes of interest: getting in trouble with the police, being expelled from school, and skipping school

The findings related to the prior well-being perspective, however, are consistent with Cherlin et al's 1991 study of children's well-being in the United States and England. In the previous study, the authors report that the differences in math and reading scores

and in the parent- and teacher-rated behavioral assessments were attenuated by the prior measures of the specific measures, but even in those situations, the differences remained significant until other family characteristics were included in the models. <sup>2</sup>

Another explanation for the modest effects of prior well-being on children's outcomes is that it may be the case that the timing between the two interviews isn't appropriate. If, for example, a child, was doing well at the time of the first interview, but not at the time of the second interview it may be that the marital conflict, parental distraction, or other deleterious concomitant factors didn't occur until recently. Five years between interviews may be too long a period of time to assess the effects of children's prior well-being on subsequent behaviors.

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<sup>2</sup> In Furstenberg and Teitler's analysis (1994) of the effects of marital disruption, the measures of children's prior well-being are the fourth addition to the baseline model. Consequently, the effects of prior well-being are minimal, and for some outcomes, the addition of the measures of the children's characteristics actually increases the effects of marital disruption.

### The Family Economic Perspective

The Family Economic Perspective suggests that children will do better if their families have higher incomes and higher levels of educational attainment. These analyses suggest that income, at least predivorce income, is not very important in predicting children's well-being in the future. In contrast, mothers' educational attainment is an important predictor for children's well-being for the behavioral outcomes, but not necessarily for the relationship outcomes. For the behavioral outcomes: skipping school, repeating a grade, being suspended from school, dropping out of school, and getting in trouble with the police, mothers' educational attainment is associated with lower probabilities of occurrence.

This finding suggests that the importance of education to the mothers is in some way is transmitted to the children through the level of educational attainment of the mothers. It may be that the mothers' values are passed on or it may be that better educated mothers require more time spent on homework, that homework is done before other recreational activities, or some other

family behavior or pattern is influenced by mothers' educational attainment. In any case, children will be at lower risk of engaging in these negative outcomes if their mothers' are better educated.

However, another possibility is that better educated mothers are able to be stronger advocates for their children in the school system or with the police. School administrations can be overwhelming; they are certainly bureaucratic, and less-educated mothers may feel they have very little power within such a system. The same might be true if a child comes in contact with the police. A third possibility is that better educated mothers may be more reticent to admit their children have skipped school, been expelled, dropped out of school, or been held back a grade.. Therefore, better educated mothers may be more likely to under-report these behaviors.

Although any of these explanations are plausible, the variation in effects of education on the probability that children will engage in any of these negative school-related activities suggests some support for the second possibility. A review of the relative effects of

mothers' level of educational attainment on the probability that the children will engage in any of these behaviors shows the strongest effects of mothers' education occurs for the probability that the child has repeated a grade and the probability that the child has been expelled from school. In contrast, the reduction in the probability that the child will skip school is not as strong. Since children skip school of their own volition, but whether or not they repeat grades or are expelled is something that may be negotiated between teachers, principals, and parents, this finding is consistent with the second interpretation. This isn't to say the first and third interpretation of the relationship between mothers' education attainment and the school-related outcomes aren't plausible, but rather, some tentative evidence exists in support of the second interpretation.

### **Mothers' Involvement**

The Mothers' Involvement Perspective suggests that positive interactions between mothers and their children may have a protective element for children so that a family crisis, e.g., separation and divorce, is not as

detrimental for the child. Frequent negative interactions between mothers and their children may be associated with higher probabilities of the child engaging in negative behaviors later in life. For the behavioral outcomes examined in this work, the frequency of positive interactions between the mothers and the children reduced the probability that the children engaged in most of the unwanted behaviors. For these outcomes, the mothers' involvement appears to insulate the children from future problems.

In contrast, the frequency of positive interactions was not associated with either the level of emotional problems the child had at the time of the second interview or the frequency of arguments the mother and child and child engaged in. Frequent positive interactions at time one was associated, however, with the mothers' overall assessment of the quality of the mother-child relationship. For this measure the frequency of good times may be less predictive than was the case for the behavioral outcomes, but rather, may reflect the continuity of the relationship between mothers and children. Therefore, mothers and children who have frequent good times also have high quality

relationships; this is probably the case at both interview times.

The frequency of difficult times between the mothers and their children at the time of the first interview is not associated with any of the children's behavioral outcomes. In contrast, for each of these measures of relationship quality and for the measure of children's emotional difficulties at the time of second interview, the frequency of difficult times between the mothers and children in 1987 turns out to be an important factor, i.e., children who frequently had difficult times with their mothers in 1987, were more likely to have emotional problems, more likely to argue with their mothers, and had lower quality of relationship scores with their mothers in 1993.

One possible explanation for the relationship between the frequency of difficult times between mothers and children and the emotional and relationship measures of well-being is that for these three outcomes, the earlier frequency of difficult times may actually be a measure of continuity in the children's functioning, i.e., prior difficult times is a measure of children's prior well-

being rather than a measure of past involvement. This suggestion seems plausible for the relationship and emotional problems outcomes more so that it would be for the behavioral outcomes. Consequently, prior difficult times between mothers and their children might be associated with the relationship and emotional problems outcomes, but not the behavioral outcomes.

It doesn't seem probable that not having difficult times with the child insulates or protects the child down the road the way having frequent good times might insulate the child. Thus, it may be that the frequency of difficult times should be incorporated in the prior well-being perspective for these outcomes. A different type of measure, e.g., the frequency of times the mother yells at the child might serve as a better measure of the nature of parental involvement when assessing the relationship between prior negative involvement and children's subsequent emotional problems. and the quality of their relationships with their mothers.

### Marital Relationship

The Marital Relationship Perspective suggests children will do better if there are low levels of parental conflict and if the quality of the parents' marital relationship is high. In these analyses, the marital relationship measures were rarely important in explaining the probability that children might engage in any of the negative behavioral outcomes, but were particularly important in explaining the quality of the parent-child relationship. Mothers who argue with their children at the time of the second interview also argued with their spouses at time one. Mothers who report low marital quality at time one also report low quality of relationships with their children at time two. The length of time between the interviews may mask the importance of these marital characteristics for the children's behavioral outcomes, but it appears there is a high degree of continuity of these characteristics between the various members of the family. Again, we see there is a great deal of continuity between these factors regardless of marital status.

### Other Factors

The relationships between two of the characteristics of the mother and the children's outcomes provide some interesting insights into family dynamics. First, the fact that mothers' employment status is not associated with any of the outcomes for children, while mothers' positive involvement is associated with many of the outcomes is encouraging. In a time when most children are not going to have a stay-at-home parent of either gender, this has important potential implications for children's well-being. Economic considerations may increase the amount of time parents spend in the work place and limit the amount of time parents can spend with their children, but parents do have some ability to structure their time in the home so as to maximize the positive interactions between themselves and their children. This is a potential aspect of family life that both mothers and fathers can do something about. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word parent here because the results of other analyses suggest that fathers' positive interactions have similar effects on these outcomes. The frequency of fathers' positive interactions were not included in these models because mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children (as reported by the mothers) are highly correlated.

Another characteristic of the mothers, their level of emotional problems, was not associated with most of the outcomes for the children in this analysis. There is no association for the behavioral outcomes and only a weak one for the measures of children's emotional problems and the the frequency of emotional problems between the mothers and their children. This finding suggests mothers' emotional well-being is not as important as the other characteristics of mothers, e.g., their educational attainment and their frequency of positive interactions with their children.

### **Conclusions:**

#### **The Relative Importance of the Five Perspectives**

The relative importance of the five explanatory perspectives varies by the nature of the outcomes examined. In the case of the behavioral outcomes, the family economic status and the mothers involvement perspective are most useful in explaining the probability that children would engage in any of the behaviors. Although the parents' marital status has some effect on a few of the outcomes, the effect is

quite minor. This becomes most apparent when the predicted probabilities that a child would experience any of those behaviors are examined. The predicted probabilities of most of behavioral outcomes suggest that mothers' educational attainment and the frequency of their positive interactions are much more important to good outcomes for the children. One word of caution is appropriate in interpreting the findings on these outcomes. Mothers' educational attainment may be more important for these outcomes than it might be for others because most of these outcomes are related to educational issues. Consequently, we might not see as strong a relationship if the outcomes were other types of behaviors, e.g., engaging in sexual activities or the use of drugs or alcohol.

For the children's other outcomes, the prior well-being perspective appears to be most useful. By that, I mean there appears to be a great deal of continuity between the children's outcomes in 1993 and their well-being in 1987. If we consider the frequency of difficult times experienced between the mothers and their children in 1987 as a measure of continuity for these outcome measures, rather than as a measure of

mothers' prior involvement with their children, the prior well-being of the children appear to be most useful in explaining how children will do at a later point in time. Likewise continuity in relationship quality between various members of the family is important in explaining the relationship between mothers and their children.

The results of these analyses are very encouraging for parents and for policymakers interested in promoting children's well-being. Children will do better after marital disruption if they are doing well prior to disruption. Frequent positive encounters between parents and children can insulate children from many of the negative consequences associated with marital disruption. Likewise, at least for mothers (who most often are custodial parents), strong relationships with their children prior to divorce can be maintained after divorce.

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## Appendix I: Dependent Variables

Since NSFH1, has child (have any of the children) ever been in trouble with the police?

Has child (Have any of these children) been suspended or expelled from school at any time since NSFH1?

Has child (Have any of these children) ever dropped out of school or not been able to attend school for at least three months?

Has child (Have any of these children) ever repeated a grade?

During the last 12 months, has child (have any of these children) skipped school or cut classes without your permission, or refused to go to school?

Taking things all together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is really bad and 10 is absolutely perfect, how would you describe your relationship with (focal child)?

In the last 3 months, how often have you and (focal child) had open disagreements about each of the following:

How (he/she) dresses?

(His/her) (boyfriend/girlfriend)?

(His/her) friends?

(His/her) helping around the house?

(His/her) school?

Getting along with other family members?

Money?

How late (he/she) stays out at night?

(His/her) sexual behavior?

(His/her) drinking, smoking, or drug use?

These questions are about behavior problems that many children have. As you read each behavior, decide if it is not true, sometimes true, or often true of this child's behavior over the past three months.

Has sudden changes in mood or feeling.

Feels or complains that no one loves (him/her).

Is rather high strung, tense and nervous.

Cheats or tells lies.

Is too fearful or anxious.

Argues too much.

Has difficulty concentrating, cannot pay attention for long.

Is easily confused, seems to be in a fog.

Bullies or is cruel or mean to others.

Does not seem to feel sorry after (he/she) misbehaves.

Is impulsive, or acts without thinking.

Feels worthless or inferior.

Is not liked by other children.

Decide if each of these statements is not true, sometimes true, or often true of this child's behavior over the past three months.

Has a lot of difficulty getting (his/her) mind off certain thoughts (has        obsessions).

Is restless or overly active, cannot sit still.

Is stubborn, sullen, or irritable.

Has a very strong temper and loses it easily.

Is unhappy, sad, or depressed.

Is withdrawn, does not get involved with others.

Is disobedient at school.

Has trouble getting along with teachers.

## Appendix II: Independent Variables

Respondents were asked "How much do you (and your husband/wife) owe on 1.) your credit card or charge accounts that you are paying off gradually, 2.) installment loans for major purchases, such as furniture or appliances, but other than auto loans, 3.) educational loans, 4.) personal loans from banks and other businesses other than mortgages or auto loans, 5.) personal loans from friends or relatives, 6.) home improvement loans, and 7.) other bills you have owed for more than two months?"

The self enumerated portion of the interview stated "The questions on this page concern household tasks and who in your household normally spend time doing those tasks. Write in the approximate number of hours per week that you (your spouse) normally spend doing the following things: 1.) preparing meals, 2.) washing dishes, 3.) cleaning house, 4.) outdoor tasks, 5.) shopping, 6.) washing and ironing, 7.) paying bills, 8.) auto maintenance, and 9.) driving.

June 1996

CURRICULUM VITA

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**EDUCATION**

University of Washington, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Sociology

Dissertation: *Children's Well-Being: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Effects of Family Life on Children's Outcomes Postdivorce.*

Ph.D. Advisor: Professor Diane Lye

Certifications: Family and Kinship, Research Methods, and Social Change

University of Washington, 1992, Master of Arts, Sociology

MA Thesis: *Determinants of Postdivorce Contact Between Nonresidential Fathers and Their Children*

MA Advisor: Professor Diane Lye

University of Wisconsin 1990, Bachelor of Arts

Double Majors: Sociology Women Studies

Also completed the *Concentration in Analysis and Research* in Sociology consisting of graduate level courses in statistics, research methods, and computer science, research internship, and research practicum.

## AREAS OF RESEARCH INTEREST

Family, Kinship, and Gender  
 Poverty  
 Social Policy  
 Social Change  
 Social Movements  
 Teenage Sexuality

## AREAS OF TEACHING INTEREST

Family, Kinship, and Gender  
 Research Methods  
 Comparative Poverty Studies  
 Social Policy  
 Human Sexuality  
 Social Change and Development  
 Social Movements  
 Social Problems

## AWARDS AND HONORS

- 1996 Award for Excellence in Teaching for 1995-96,  
 University of Washington
- 1995 Social Sciences Dissertation Fellowship for 1995-96,  
 University of Washington
- 1995 Marie Doman Teaching Award, University of  
 Washington, Women Studies Department
- 1994 Award for Excellence in Teaching, University of  
 Washington, Department of Sociology
- 1993 Award for the Outstanding Performance for the  
 Master of Arts Degree, University of Washington,  
 Department of Sociology 1992-93
- 1993 Sarah Denny Award, University of Washington
- 1993 Pew Fellowship, Pew Foundation
- 1990 Phi Beta Kappa, University of Wisconsin
- 1990 Louise Troxell Award for Intellectual Curiosity,  
 University of Wisconsin
- 1990 Fraser Scholarship, University of Wisconsin

- 1989 Phi Kappa Phi, University of Wisconsin  
 1989 Jay C. Hall Scholarship, University of Wisconsin

## POSITIONS

- 1996- Assistant Professor, Clemson University, Department of Sociology
- 1994- Research Assistant, Interdisciplinary evaluation of the role of evidence in case dispositions for domestic violence cases with Dr. Margaret Gordon, Dean of the Graduate School of Public Affairs.  
 Co-author of grant and responsible for supervision of data collection and analysis.
- 1992-96 Instructor, University of Washington, Sociology Department (Sociology of the Family, Introduction to Sociology, Writing Courses)
- 1991-92 Instructor, University of Washington, Interdisciplinary Writing Department (Criminology and Introduction to Deviance Writing Courses)
- 1990-91 Teaching Assistant, University of Washington, Sociology Department (Sociology of the Family, Introduction to Deviance)
- 1989-90 Research Assistant to Professor Ann Orloff, Institute for Research on Poverty, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin  
 Responsible for data collection and analysis of court records and legislative bills related to changes in child support and child custody laws.
- 1989 Research Internship with Professor Judith Seltzer, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin

## PAPERS

- Stephens, Linda S. 1996. "Will Johnny See Daddy This Week? An Empirical Test of Three Theoretical Perspectives of Postdivorce Contact." *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 17, 466-494..
- Stephens, Linda S., Adrian E. Raftery, and Mark E. Edwards. 1996. "Estimation of Acceptance Rates at the *American Sociological Review*." To be submitted to *Social Forces*.

## GRANTS

The Role of Evidence in Case Dispositions for Domestic Violence Cases.  
(With Margaret Gordon, Cy Ulberg, Paula Nurius, Andrew Gordon,  
Richard N. Brandon, Jocelyn Hollander, Laurie Deppman, and the City  
of Seattle. 1995.) Funded by the National Institute of Justice, U.S.  
Department of Justice. (\$200,000.00)

## PRESENTATIONS

- 1995 "Children's Well-Being: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Effects of Marital Characteristics and Parenting Patterns During Marriage on Children's Outcomes Postdivorce." Paper presented at the national meetings of the American Sociological Association, Washington, D.C.
- 1993 "Determinants of Postdivorce Contact Between Nonresidential Fathers and their Children." Paper presented at the national meetings of the American Sociological Association, Miami, FL.
- 1993 "Beyond the University Classroom: Promoting Critical Thinking Skills after Graduation." Paper presented at the National Conference on the Training and Employment of Graduate Teaching Assistants, Chicago, IL.

## INVITED ADDRESSES

- 1994 "Changing Expectations: Gender Roles, Sexuality, and Sexual Behaviors in the 1990s." Paper presented at the 1994 Orientation for Fulbright Scholars, Seattle, WA.
- 1994 "Appreciating Diversity in Relationship Formation." Paper presented at the Summer Institute of Business and Law for International Graduate Students. Seattle, WA.
- 1994 "Will Johnny See Daddy This Week?: Understanding the Relationship Between Fathers and Their Children After Marital Disruption." Paper presented at the meeting of the Friends of Sociology, Seattle, WA.
- 1993 "Myths and Misconceptions of the American Family." Paper presented at the 1993 Orientation for Fulbright Scholars. Seattle, WA.
- 1993 "Changing Demographic Trends in the American Family." Paper presented at the Summer Institute of Business and Law for International Graduate Students. Seattle, WA.

