

## Article 8: Human Development and Family Issues

**Family issues** can have a profound impact on **human development** across the lifespan. Two of the most recurrent concerns in this context are **family dysfunction** (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; King University, 2017; Noble et al., 2025; Orth, 2018), and **parental divorce** (Johnston et al., 2025; D’Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Watkins et al., 2025).

### Human Development and Family Dysfunction

Family dysfunction refers to unhealthy patterns of communication, conflict, and behavior within families, which can negatively impact the well-being and development of their members (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; King University, 2017; Noble et al., 2025; Orth, 2018).

For instance, one study examined how different family structures influence children’s behavioral problems and cognitive outcomes between ages 7 and 10. Specifically, the study employed a quantitative, longitudinal observational design to assess the effects of family structure and household dysfunction on child development. In this context, "household dysfunction" included factors such as father absence, single-parent (mother-only) households, and family instability. (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

Results showed that all three aspects of household dysfunction negatively impacted children’s behavioral and cognitive development, given that participants from dysfunctional or unstable households performed worse both emotionally and academically. The key findings are shown below:

- Behavioral Development
  - o Children living without a resident father exhibited higher rates of behavioral problems: such as antisocial behavior, emotional issues, and troubles at school.
  - o Single-mother households were associated with greater incidence of internalizing symptoms (anxiety, depression) and externalizing behavior compared to children in two-parent families.
  
- Cognitive Development
  - o Father absence or a fluid family structure (e.g., parental separation or new cohabiting partners) correlated with lower cognitive scores and academic outcomes.
  - o Family structure effects were mediated in part by resource dilution: larger sibling counts and unstable households reduced parental time/resources per child, impacting cognitive achievement.

Thus, researchers concluded that economic support and parenting resources—especially for single-mother and low-resource households—are essential to mitigate these developmental disadvantages. (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). However, it is important to note that recent research has challenged the notion that economic support alone can improve children’s development and wellbeing. For instance, a study examined whether monthly unconditional cash transfers to low-income families in the U.S. improved children’s cognitive, behavioral, and health development by age four. Results showed that such transfers did not produce statistically significant improvements in children’s cognitive or behavioral development at the time. Hence, researchers argued that cash transfers may need to be

paired with targeted services (e.g., early education, healthcare) to promote child development effectively (Noble et al., 2025).

Another study looked at various aspects of the early family environment (from birth to age 6) and their impact on self-esteem from childhood through early adulthood (ages 8–27). Particularly, researchers wished to test whether early family conditions like emotional support, family stability, parental mental health, and poverty had long-term effects on self-esteem, even after accounting for other influences like socioeconomic status and gender. The longitudinal cohort study followed 8,711 participants from birth through age 27. Furthermore, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test both direct and indirect effects of early family variables on self-esteem development, while controlling for potential confounds such as maternal age, education, and the child’s sex and ethnicity (Orth, 2018).

Results showed the following insights:

- Emotional support in early years was the strongest predictor of self-esteem development across all life stages.
- Poverty, maternal depression, and poor parental relationship quality in early childhood had negative long-term effects on self-esteem.
- The early family environment predicted both the initial level and the growth trajectory of self-esteem across the lifespan.

Overall, the quality of the family environment during a child’s earliest years had long-lasting consequences for their sense of self-worth. Following that lead, researchers concluded that self-esteem is deeply rooted in early childhood experiences, challenging the notion that this phenomenon is primarily shaped during adolescence.

### **Human Development and Parental Divorce**

Parental divorce or separation is associated with an increased risk for child and adolescent adjustment problems, including academic difficulties, behavioral problems, and depressed mood (Johnston et al., 2025; D’Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Watkins et al., 2025).

On that note, a study looked at the long-term effects of parental divorce on children’s adult outcomes—namely education, earnings, incarceration, mortality, and teen parenthood—by assessing children’s exposure to divorce. Particularly, researchers explored how divorce timing and family arrangements shaped adult trajectories. Tax and Census Administrative records were matched to track children’s living arrangements post-divorce and later adult outcomes, covering over 5 million American individuals whose families experienced divorce. The combined data allowed researchers to observe objective measures such as college attendance, adult earnings, incarceration, mortality, and teen births, with minimal recall bias. Moreover, a quasi-experimental sibling comparison design was implemented to compare siblings exposed to different lengths of post-divorce childhood (e.g., earlier vs. later exposure) (Johnston et al., 2025).

Results showed that parental divorce led to reduced adult earnings and decreased likelihood of living in a college town (a proxy for higher education). Furthermore, parental divorce increased risks of incarceration, early parenthood during teen years, and mortality later in life. The magnitude of impact correlated with length of childhood exposure to post-divorce family structure. Therefore, siblings with

longer exposure fared worse. In sum, earlier exposure to a divorced household led to worse adult outcomes, even when controlling for shared family background. Thus, researchers emphasized the need for policy interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of family disruption and supporting children through parental divorce (Johnston et al., 2025).

A comprehensive academic review addressed how parental separation or divorce impacts mental health outcomes among children and adolescents. Thus, researchers provided a synthesis of prior research findings, drawing on studies from multiple countries, including some focused on U.S. participants. Moreover, they aggregated findings on mental health implications of divorce or separation in children and adolescents across various contexts (D’Onofrio & Emery, 2019).

The following trends were found:

- Parental divorce/separation is associated with elevated risk for children’s mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, and academic difficulties.
- Children exposed to high interparental conflict post-separation are at especially high risk for emotional and behavioral issues.
- The impact varies by cultural and demographic factors. For instance, in the U.S., research revealed that White children are more likely to show greater socioemotional effects from separation than Black children—highlighting that family diversity and context matter.

These trends support the notion that parental divorce represents a pervasive global mental health concern, not just a family adjustment issue. On that account, researchers emphasized the need for mental health interventions targeting the known pathways of risk, especially family conflict, economic hardship, and parenting challenges (D’Onofrio & Emery, 2019).

Finally, a study explored how experiences of parental divorce during emerging adulthood (ages 18–19) affect depressive symptom trajectories for males and females over time. The study implemented longitudinal research methods with multi-group latent growth curve models to analyze changes in depressive symptoms. The data came from 2,600 U.S. emerging adults participating in Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79-CYA) cohort. Moreover, researchers collected data through repeated self-reports of depressive symptoms and mothers’ reports of marital status changes across multiple waves (Watkins et al., 2025).

The findings showed that parental divorce during this late adolescent period was linked to:

- Higher depressive symptoms at ages 18–19
- Elevated depressive symptoms continuing at ages 20–21
- No significant differences in depressive symptom trajectories between males and females

Researchers concluded that parental divorce during emerging adulthood significantly impacts mental health and called for targeted support during this critical developmental period, regardless of gender (Watkins et al., 2025).

## References

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