

Do children benefit if their unmarried parents marry?

A focus on young children's behavior

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Abstract

Marriage has long been associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for children. In response, policies are aimed at promoting marriage among unmarried parents. It is unknown, however, whether marriage in response to a child is associated with the same benefits for children as marriage prior to conception. We use data from the Fragile Families Study (N=3,068) to examine the association between children's behavioral problems at age three and the timing of their biological parent's marriage relative to conception. We examine the extent to which maternal background characteristics, economic resources, and relationship quality and commitment mediate the association between parents' marriage timing and child behavior. Results show that marrying in direct response to pregnancy is associated with similar outcomes as marriage prior to conception, yet marriages that occur after the child's first birthday are not associated with any benefits for children.

Extended Abstract

Research has repeatedly shown that marriage is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for children. Why marriage matters for children and whether it is equally beneficial for all children is less clear. Specifically, we do not know whether marriage in response to a child is associated with the same benefits for children as marriage that occurs prior to conception.

Marriage prior to childbearing may be more beneficial for children because these couples have higher level of resources and commitment compared to unmarried parents; advantages associated with positive child outcomes. It is likely that these advantages are driven both by positive selection into marriage and the accrual of benefits from the marriage per se. Because these advantages also predict marriage among unmarried parents, then in the short-term, children whose parents have the necessary resources to marry quickly in response to the child may be more advantaged than children whose parents have to acquire these resources prior to marriage and spend more time in an unmarried environment.

We use data from the first 3 waves of the Fragile Families Study (N=3,068) to examine aggressive and anxious/depressive behavioral subscales (Achenbach, 2000) of 6 groups of 3-year-old children based on their parents' marital status and timing relative to conception: (1) married prior to conception, (2) married during pregnancy, (3) married within 1 year following birth, (4) married between 1 and 3 years following birth, (5) married to a social father, (6) not yet married.

We estimate five ordinary least squares regression models for each behavior. The first model examines the bivariate relationship between relationship status and behavior. The second model controls for maternal age and race/ethnicity. The third model adds in economic resources

(maternal education and household income). The fourth model accounts for differences in relationship commitment and quality, and the fifth model is the full model.

Results show that children whose parents marry directly in response to their birth have slightly more aggressive behavior than children whose parents married prior to childbearing. These differences are largely explained by maternal age, and fully explained by the higher level of income and education among parents married prior to childbearing. Children whose parents marry after their first birthday or who marry a social father have levels of aggression similar to children whose parents do not marry by age 3. These differences are not fully explained by resources or commitment. Children whose parents do not marry prior to their birth have more anxious/depressive symptoms, net of all controls. The findings are robust to controls for maternal health and depression.

The findings imply that unless unmarried parents' resources and commitment increase so that they are similar to parents married prior to childbearing, their children will have more behavioral problems, despite marriage. For many who marry after their child's birth, even if levels of resources and commitment are similar, the marriages are not as beneficial to their children. These findings have important implications for policies aimed at promoting marriage among unmarried parents.

Table 1. Aggressive Behavior: Results from Ordinary Least Squares Regression.

Aggressive	Marriage	Marriage + Background	Marriage + Background + Resources	Marriage + Background + Commitment	Full Model
during pregnancy	0.234+	0.17	0.175	0.171	0.18
birth to year1	0.267**	0.189*	0.141	0.176*	0.146+
year1 to year3	0.442**	0.358**	0.303**	0.311**	0.275**
married other	0.638**	0.552**	0.471**	0.382**	0.330*
never married	0.375**	0.284**	0.197**	0.186**	0.126*
momage		-0.013**	-0.009*	-0.014**	-0.010**
Mother Black		0.049	0.011	0.029	0
Mother Hispanic		0.05	-0.017	0.017	-0.032
Mother Other		0.12	0.11	0.102	0.095
Relationship quality				-0.399**	-0.386**
Marriage better for kids				0.051	0.044
Marriage same as cohabit				0.100**	0.080*
Household income			-0.018+		-0.014
Mother HS/GED			-0.085+		-0.076+
Mother some college			-0.194**		-0.179**
Mother college plus			-0.212**		-0.170*
Constant	-0.290**	0.072	0.230+	1.152**	1.251**
Observations	3068	3068	3068	3068	3068

+ significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Table 2. Anxious/Depressive Behavior: Results from Ordinary Least Squares Regression.

Anxious/Depressive	Marriage	Marriage + Background	Marriage + Background + Resources	Marriage + Background + Commitment	Full Model
during pregnancy	0.083	-0.002	0.008	-0.003	0.011
birth to year1	0.364**	0.255**	0.156+	0.231**	0.154+
year1 to year3	0.482**	0.362**	0.247**	0.313**	0.224*
married other	0.522**	0.428**	0.269+	0.282+	0.161
never married	0.467**	0.352**	0.178**	0.264**	0.124*
momage		-0.011**	-0.001	-0.012**	-0.003
Mother Black		0.169**	0.092+	0.152**	0.083+
Mother Hispanic		0.276**	0.137*	0.236**	0.117*
Mother Other		0.381**	0.364**	0.368**	0.352**
Relationship quality				-0.322**	-0.293**
Marriage better for kids				0.090*	0.074+
Marriage same as cohabit				0.141**	0.095*
Household income			-0.030**		-0.026**
Mother HS/GED			-0.185**		-0.177**
Mother some college			-0.402**		-0.385**
Mother college plus			-0.492**		-0.454**
Constant	-0.350**	-0.146	0.148	0.681**	0.885**
Observations	3068	3068	3068	3068	3068
R-squared	0.04	0.05	0.09	0.07	0.1

+ significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%