



# Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

1313 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20005

OFFICE: (202) 289-7905 • FAX: (202) 289-4203

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Contact Information:

Andrea Browning  
Society for Research in Child Development  
Office for Policy and Communications  
(202) 289-7905  
abrowning@srcd.org

### **Living Arrangements of Low-Income Children May Not Play a Key Role in Their Well-Being**

The living arrangements of low-income children do not significantly predict their well-being, regardless of their race or ethnicity. That's the finding of a new study that has implications for policy and practice.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and the University of Chicago, is published in the November/December 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Using data on approximately 2,000 low-income families, the researchers sought to compare the development of children living only with their mothers with children in other arrangements (those living with their biological fathers, in blended families, and in multigenerational households) to determine the effect of living arrangements on the children's cognitive achievement and emotional adjustment.

Instead of comparing children in different family arrangements at one point in time, the researchers addressed how children and their families change over time. This allowed them to consider whether and how children's emotional and intellectual development changes after there has been a change in family structure.

The study found that in general, children's performance on developmental assessments changed very little after their mothers married. The absence of a relationship between family structure and children's outcomes suggests that there is as much diversity *within* families of a given type as there is *across* families of different types. In other words, some children in families where a father is present fare quite poorly; in many instances, children of single parents do quite well. Comparisons of groups of children at one point in time confuse the effect of poverty and other factors with the effect of family structure.

Given the study's inability to find evidence that living arrangements have a significant effect on the well-being of low-income children, regardless of the children's race or ethnicity, the researchers question whether policies and programs that seek to change low-income children's living arrangements can improve these children's lives.

"The findings do not invalidate the use of living arrangements as a means of identifying at-risk children and youth," noted E. Michael Foster, professor of maternal and child health and of health policy and administration at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and the study's lead author. "The key distinction, however, is that living arrangements may not be an effective target of intervention for very low-income children."

This distinction implies that policies like income support that seek to improve the lives of children regardless of whether their mothers are married may be more effective in improving the well-being of low-income children and youths.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 6, *Living Arrangements and Children's Development in Low-Income White, Black, and Latino Families* by Foster, EM (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill), and Kalil, A (University of Chicago). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

