

Divorce can hit children under age five especially hard

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(Medical Xpress)—Divorce is difficult for any family, but for young children it can lead to long-term behavioral problems not experienced by older children or by children of unwed parents who separate, according to a new study co-authored by Amy Claessens, assistant professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy.

In their study, "[Associations Between Family Structure Changes and Children's Behavior: The Moderating Effects of Timing and Marital Birth](#)," forthcoming in [Developmental Psychology](#), Claessens and co-author Rebecca M. Ryan of Georgetown University examined the short- and long-term behavior impact of divorce, remarriage or the separation of unwed parents on children 12 years and younger.

"We found that not only does an early divorce, before the age of five, relate to short-run behavior problems, but that those increased behavior problems last into pre-adolescence, through age 12," said Claessens, whose study also noted that remarriage in early or [middle childhood](#) does not compound the negative divorce effects. "We just don't see the same patterns with kids born to unmarried parents."

When it comes to the differing impacts of [parental divorce](#) versus unwed separation, the authors suggest that the upheaval caused by the separation of unwed parents may be more normative, and therefore less stressful for young children than for those experiencing divorce.

"Children of unwed parents, on average, have more behavior problems than children born to married parents, even those who experience divorce," said Claessens. "In disadvantaged households, children experience a lot of different forms of instability and a change in family structure doesn't seem to relate to children's [behavior problems](#), above and beyond the other forms of instability these kids experience."

Claessens and Ryan used data from the Maternal and Child Supplement of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. It has regularly surveyed a sample of 3,492 youth, whose ages were 14 to 21 in 1979; in 1986, it also began surveying the children of female NLSY respondents.

"Our results point to the importance of [family structure](#) change in the first five years for [children](#)'s behavior trajectories throughout

childhood," the authors conclude. "[It suggests] that public and policy concern about family instability should focus on instability in the years following childbirth rather than instability more generally."

Provided by University of Chicago

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