

Negative effects on children when their parents split up are cancelled if their mother has close friends and relations, research says

Embargoed until 0001 Friday 17 April 2015

The negative effects on children when their parents split up are cancelled if their mother has close friends and relations for support, new research says.

Even children in the poorest one-parent families show less than average evidence of challenging behaviour or emotional problems if their mother has close social ties, the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow heard today [Friday 17 April 2015].

Dr Morag Treanor, of the University of Edinburgh, told the conference that she analysed over 3,800 responses to surveys from parents of children aged four and five. The surveys asked parents about their marital history, their closeness to family and friends and the behavioural and emotional problems of their children, which it rated as an overall score.

Dr Treanor found that:

- On average children in stable two-parent families had the least behaviour problems. Those in families where the parents had split up recently, or the mother had recently begun living with a new partner, had more difficulties.
- The poorer the family, the more behavioural and emotional problems the children had on average.
- However, single mothers who had strong emotional links with family and friends, no matter how poor they were, had children with fewer problems than the average for all one-parent and two-parent families studied.

“For mothers in the lowest income, having strong social ties moderates the negative effect of living in persistently low income,” Dr Treanor said.

“Those with persistently low income and good social ties have children whose wellbeing extends beyond the average for all children.”

Dr Treanor suggested that the reason that a mother's good social ties helped her children could be that friends and family made her feel emotionally more secure.

Dr Treanor analysed data from the Growing Up in Scotland study, recorded from 2005-2010. In 98% of single-parent families studied the mother was the main carer.

Notes

1. The surveys asked parents about their marital history, their closeness to family and friends, and the behavioural and emotional problems of their children using a standardised tool, the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire.
2. The social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing of the children was measured by asking the children about any conduct problems, emotional symptoms and hyperactivity, and about their relationships with peers and altruistic (pro-social) behaviour. Mothers provided the answers on behalf of children aged four and five. The answers were coded into an overall score.

3. The parents' social ties were measured by asking how many people they were close to, whether they were close to most of their family, whether their friends took notice of their opinions, and how much support they received from their friends and family.

4. The British Sociological Association's annual conference takes place at Glasgow Caledonian University from 15 to 17 April 2015. Around 800 research presentations are given. The British Sociological Association's charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk

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