

Nesting

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Two-parent benefit

Staying together for the sake of the children might not be such a bad idea after all, a report suggests.

Children from two-parent families are better off emotionally, socially and economically, according to a review of marriage research released Tuesday in "The Future of Children," a journal published jointly by the non-partisan Brookings Institution and Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School.

Only in recent years has research shown the benefits of couples staying together; long-term studies on the children of divorce were not available earlier. But Census data show that single-parent families have increased while two-parent families have decreased.

"What parents want and what's good for kids isn't always the same," says Kathryn Edin, a University of Pennsylvania sociologist whose research is in the journal.

Sociology professor Paul Amato of Pennsylvania State University, whose work is also in the journal, says researchers now know that while chronic and overt conflict can be harmful, two-parent families usually benefit kids.

"When we were saying it doesn't matter in the '60s and '70s and '80s, we didn't have the experience of enough kids in a culture when families were breaking down. It was just our best guess," says Diane Sollee, a former marriage and family therapist who organizes an annual conference for marriage therapy professionals.

But Amato says the research doesn't mean a single-parent household will doom a child, because so many factors are at play, including economic status.

"Single parenthood is not the single monolithic cause of children's problems," he says. "It's one of the factors. So many things can go wrong in childhood."

Stephanie Coontz, author of "Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy," worries that the journal's review could be taken too far.

"The research shows that a well-functioning two-parent family provides huge benefits, but not all two-parent families are well-functioning."

"I am certain there are situations where people should not get married," Brownback says. "But we know from the overall social data that the best place to raise the child is in the bond of man and woman bonded for life."