

Trajectories of Couple Relationship Quality after Childbirth: Does Marriage Matter?

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Considering the consequences of nonmarital childbearing for both individuals and society, along with the well-known benefits of marriage, policymakers now intend to encourage and strengthen marriage among low-income couples with children. The recent reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program included annual expenditures of \$150 million for just such purpose through the Healthy Marriage Initiative. Yet, there remains much to learn about the promise of marriage for low-income couples, particularly given the vast social and economic differences between couples who have children within versus outside of marriage.

Marital relationship quality typically declines following the birth of a child, as parenthood brings new identities and responsibilities for mothers and fathers alike. Without a legal marriage commitment (which both signals prior investment and may have a causal effect on future investment), we might expect even greater declines in relationship quality among unmarried parents overall. At the same time, marriage *after* a nonmarital birth may both reflect and reinforce a more positive relationship trajectory.

In this paper, I use new data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine couple relationship quality subsequent to the birth of a child that occurred in large U.S. cities from 1998 to 2000. I include 1,601 couples with valid reports of relationship quality at four time points over a five-year period – just after the baby’s birth, 1 year later, 3 years later, and 5 years later. Using latent growth curve modeling, I analyze the level and change in relationship quality, including factors associated with improvement or decline. I focus on the role of marital status in two ways. First, I compare trajectories among couples married at birth to those unmarried at birth, controlling for covariates associated with marriage; this analysis sheds light on the selectivity of marriage. Second, among couples who had a nonmarital birth, I compare those who got married subsequent to the birth to those who remained together but did not marry; this analysis points to the potential benefits of marriage following a nonmarital birth.

This research has important implications for policy, to the extent that marriage programs may yield beneficial effects for families with children. This research sheds light on how marriage policy may help promote and sustain healthy and economically self-sufficient marriages and thereby reduce the redistribution of resources that would otherwise be required to support single parents.