

The well-being of youngsters coming from six different family types

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Abstract

Families, or rather parents are in a state of flux: sometimes they row a lot, they divorce, they go and live together again and they die. This is why more and more children grow up in family forms other than the nuclear families with their biological fathers and mothers. What, in the long run, is the effect of this on the well-being of adolescents and young adults between 12–30? We have examined intact families that function well, mediocre or badly, one-parent families and stepfamilies after a divorce and one-parent families after being widowed. The data derive from the Dutch longitudinal panel study “Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development” (USAD). The results of 1772 respondents between 12 and 30 years old are presented from the third wave by the end of 1997. Compared to youngsters of well functioning nuclear families, the youngsters of discordant nuclear families show a worse physical and mental health, their parental fixation is not so strong, they tend to drink more alcohol, smoke more cigarettes and use more soft drugs. Children of divorced families are notable for their relational behaviour: they enter into relations at an early age, usually they are more sexually experienced and they report more relational problems. Children of widowed one-parent families do well. In other family types girls suffer a little more from the burden of life than boys. It appears that the effects are hardly different when the children leave home. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ireland Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Families are not so stable as they used to be half a century ago. They are on the move. To be more precise: parents are on the move and many do not stay with their first married partner “till death does them part”. If the rates of divorce in The Netherlands and several other western countries remain as high as over the last 5 years, then, in the long run, more than a third of all marriages will end in a divorce [1]. Partners who do stay together do not always do so in a state of harmony. There are well functioning and badly functioning marriages. Besides, those who divorce do not always stay alone. Many find a new partner with or without a formal wedding ceremony. In a word, parents are on the move. What effects does this have on the children? Does it make any difference to a child’s well-being what type of family he or she grows up in?

Again and again the following questions arise. Is the classical, well-functioning family nowadays still the best environment for children? Are not rows between the parents much worse for the children than a divorce? Do children of one-parent families really have a harder time than children of two-parent families? Do not stepfamilies have great problems? Is not a parent’s death far more drastic than a divorce? With all these questions it also matters whether the age and sex of the children are important and whether the possible effects decrease in time. The question on which our attention in this article is focussed is: what are the long-term effects on children of growing up in different family types?

Research usually bears out that it is best for children to grow up with their two biological parents [2–7]. It is less clear in what respect children are worse off if their parents do not love each other so much any longer, get divorced or decide to stay together nonetheless. In 1996, Dronkers concluded that secondary school pupils were happier and more content to be raised by one biological parent than those whose parents remain together and quarrel. This conclusion only applies “if it is a matter of (very) regular serious rowing” [8]. Simons and Johnson, though, came to the conclusion that there is a greater chance of inadequate

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parentage through divorce than through marital problems [7]. On the basis of longitudinal data, McLanahan and Sandefur [9] reported that divorce is often followed by a decrease in parental quality. Cherlin and others, on the other hand, reported that a great deal of the divorce effect on children could be explained by unfavourable circumstances (conflicts) before the divorce took place; this particularly goes for girls [10]. In a word, we need a better insight into the question of what is worse for children: rowing parents or divorced parents (sub-question 1).

Many divorced parents meet a new partner. In that context, the question will often come up which is worse for children, living in a one-parent family or in a stepfamily. The social image of both one-parent families and stepfamilies is still negative. One-parent families are often associated with families on social security and the term: “to be treated in a stepmotherly way” is by no means a positive remark. Research shows that stepchildren generally score similar or slightly higher on scales that measure well-being as compared to one-parent children [5,6,11,12]. Research into adjustment and health problems of youngsters of stepfamilies compared to youngsters of intact families, has shown that the educational prospects and also the general well-being of youngsters of stepfamilies are not as good [4,13,14]. Ganong and Coleman [12] concluded that there are differences in the performance of children who grow up in stepfamilies and those growing up in other family types, but most of these differences are slight. Dutch research [15] has shown that adolescents and young adults, particularly those of the so-called *divided* stepfamily type (these are families in which the biological parent and the stepmother or stepfather do not agree on a number of matters) have many problems. In other types of stepfamilies things go reasonably well. In short, there should be more clarity as to the question, which is worse for children: growing up in a one-parent family or in a stepfamily (sub-question 2).

Although in 1996 most one-parent families and stepfamilies came into being by divorce, there are still one-parent families and stepfamilies that arose after the death of a parent—particularly if it concerns older children. Though for children this death is a very drastic incident with the strong emotions that go with it—particularly in the short term—there are obvious differences between the effects of death and those of a divorce. The latter usually has a longer period of domestic problems as a result and also the painful process of rediscovering a new balance after one of the parents has left. Whereas after death the memory of the deceased parent is almost always positive, the memory of, or the contact with the absent parent after the divorce is hardly ever without problems [16]. van Gelder [17] did not find any big differences between divorced families and widowed ones in, for instance, the help one-parent families receive. van Delft and Niphuis-Nell [18] point at differences and agreements between divorced families and widowed ones. They especially emphasise the problems in widowed families in the short term. In the longer term, the negative effects tend to

decrease. Empirical screening for effects of divorce and the formation of stepfamilies shows that the greatest negative effects appear to have diminished after about 2 years. In their study of men, women and children, 10 years after the divorce, Wallerstein et al. [19] conclude, however, that many young people, it is true, finally appear to be able to start ‘stable’ relationships, but that the entry into the phase of young adulthood is a critical threshold for all interviewed children. McLanahan and Bumpass [20] also ascertain for the US that children of divorced families do not enter adulthood light-heartedly. De Graaf [21] reported some long-term effects of divorce for The Netherlands: for many youngsters of one-parent families the entry into adulthood may be accompanied by feelings and memories from the time of their parents’ divorce. With a number of aspiring adults it is conceivable that there is a certain degree of fear to start a relationship. They are afraid to repeat their parents’ mistakes. In short, we would like to have a better understanding as regards the question what the effects are for children of growing up in divorced families or in widowed families (sub-question 3).

In order to answer the question on which attention is focussed and the three sub-questions as to the effects of growing up in different family types, we will, in this paper, compare six family types: well-functioning intact families, mediocre and badly functioning intact families, one-parent families after a divorce, stepfamilies after a divorce and one-parent families after widowhood. In the next section, we will first discuss the theoretical perspectives employed in the literature in order to investigate the effects for adolescents and young adults. After that we will in Section 3 discuss which concrete effects in the literature are usually involved. Subsequently, we will submit our findings and the discussion.

2. Theoretical perspectives

What theoretical interpretations are used to investigate the consequences for children of growing up in a particular family type? Several authors [22] correctly point out that in many studies on the effects of a divorce the two-parent family is implicitly or explicitly the norm. Hereby the Freudian principle is adopted that both a father and a mother are indispensable for the normal development of a child. Many researchers take this principle which is also known as the deficit-comparison hypothesis [12] as a starting point. The result is that attention is almost exclusively focussed on the negative consequences for children of growing up in family types other than the ‘standard’ two-parent family. Glenn and Kramer [23] look in different directions to find an explanation for the effects of marriage instability and thus for growing up in different family types: the absence or failure of the example of the husband role; the inadequate social control by family and neighbourhood; less resistance to a divorce; marriage at a younger age, and growing up

under difficult economic circumstances. This was a first attempt to systematise the effects, and Amato continues in this direction. On the basis of the literature he has distinguished five central concepts or perspectives in order to explain the differences between children who have grown up in different family types: the loss of the non-custodial parent; the psychological adaptation of the custodial parent; the extent of conflicts between the parents; economical problems, and changes causing stress.

The loss of the non-custodial parent means that the socialisation of children may become problematic. Not only, after all, can one educator do less than two and is it a matter of one parent being overburdened, but also does the daily example of one parent of one particular sex fall away. Besides, contact with the absent parent is not always easy [25,26].

In the first period after the divorce, the psychological adaptation of the custodial parent is often problematic [2,24]. The sooner the custodial parent, however, recaptures (read: her) balance, the better it turns out to be for the children. On the basis of a number of studies Furstenberg and Cherlin [13] conclude that the most important policy advice after a divorce could be: support the custodial parent's position in the children's interest.

The extent of conflicts between the parents has been the subject of various studies at home and abroad. In a survey Grych and Fincham [27] emphasise the continuous parental conflict is detrimental to the psychological development of children. Dronkers [8] concludes that violent parental quarrels are harmful to children, even if not followed by a divorce.

The difficult financial situation after a divorce is given a lot of attention as an explanation for the negative effects on children. After a divorce most children live in maternal families and these families usually have very little financial scope. Bosman [3] emphasises that for maternal families it is especially the relative financial decline that counts, even more than the actual financial situation.

The last perspective is mainly about stressful changes after a divorce. Apart from the loss of daily contacts with a parent, children often have to cope with other stressful matters such as: moving house, a change of school and losing contact with their peers, grandparents and other relatives [28].

We would like to add one more perspective to Amato's classification [2]. Bosman and Louwes [29] mention "the mentality in relation to one-parent families which is still characterised by a lack of acceptance and by prejudice". Dronkers and co-workers [4] concludes that "a part of the educational disadvantage of children of one-parent (maternal) families derives from the negative image of maternal families in society, as it is expressed in this case in the (negative) assessment by the teacher on the career prospects of children in maternal families". The negative stereotype in respect to stepchildren is well enough known. Ganong and Coleman [30] have investigated this negative stereotype in

the US in a number of different occupational groups. It was found that teachers, social workers, lawyers and students all had a negative stereotype of stepchildren; only experienced therapists were not prejudiced. It is likely that the continued existence of the negative prejudice in relation to stepchildren has to do with the incomplete institutionalisation of stepfamilies (after a divorce), already observed by Cherlin [31] and still existing. Amato and Keith [2] has examined the existence of negative stereotypes towards children who experienced their parents' divorce. They ascertain that negative images of divorce children are still widespread in (American) society. Moreover, they show that also in this case, as a result of these negative stereotypes the respondents tend to remember negative information about divorce children and to forget positive information about them.

All this means that globally six theoretical perspectives are used to investigate the long-term effects of change in the family by conflicts, divorce or widowhood and the formation of stepfamilies: (a) the loss of the non-custodial parent; (b) the psychological adaptation of the custodial parent; (c) the extent of the conflict between the parents; (d) financial problems; (e) changes leading to stress, and (f) negative stereotyping of divorce and of the formation of a stepfamily.

The different family types and the way in which these are studied have thus been charted. Subsequently, the effects on children will come up for discussion: their well-being.

3. The effects on children and youngsters

What effects on children and youngsters of growing up in different family types are usually distinguished in the literature? It generally concerns their well-being which may be summarised in a number of widely asked questions:

1. How do youngsters feel physically and mentally?
2. What is the relationship with their parents like?
3. How does their relationship develop?
4. Do they have problems with their boyfriends and girlfriends?
5. Do they have problems at school and/or at work?
6. What about their risky habits?
7. How do they think about starting a family?

These questions occur in various studies, although they are not always classified in this manner. Amato and Keith [2] have carried out a meta-analysis of the long-term consequences of parents' divorce for the general well-being of their children. Effects were calculated for 15 variables in 37 studies in which 81,000 people were involved. They concluded that the parents' divorce has significant negative effects on the mental and physical well-being of youngsters. Variables such as teenage pregnancy, teenage marriage, social well-being, the quality of marriage, divorce and physical health have been included. This pessimistic conclusion, however, should be toned down somewhat since the effects are generally significant but slight.

Broadly speaking, research into the development of children and youngsters shows that growing up with a healthy relationship to the parents is positive for the youngsters' well-being [32,33]. Boss [34], too, emphasises the significance of the parents' positive affective commitment to their children's well-being. Minimal parental commitment constitutes a risk factor to an optimum development of children and youngsters [35,36].

De Graaf [21] investigated the influence of the parents' divorce on the demographic behaviour of women in The Netherlands. He states that there is a clear influence, even after verification of a number of background characteristics. What it boils down to is that girls of one-parent families leave the parental home at a younger age, go and live together sooner, break up their relationships more often and have a more negative image of their personal relationships. Spruijt and DeGoede [37] found similar results for girls and boys of one-parent families after a divorce. Characteristically, youngsters of divorced families start going steady and having sex at a younger age.

Bosch et al. [38] made an inquiry into the consequences for children of one-parent families which entered into relations at a later age. They concluded that the negative effects are slight. According to them these cannot be explained by the one-parenthood itself, but by parental conflicts surrounding the divorce. van Gelder [17] has carried a literature study after the long-term effects of a divorce. He stated that children of one-parent families have slightly more doubts about marriage and family life. They are more active and more critical as regards establishing relationships with someone of the opposite sex. van Gelder further ascertains that children of divorced parents have more extramarital children, marry somewhat earlier and separate more often. Moreover, they are also more critical of their marriage.

As regards problems at school and on the job Dronkers and co-workers [4] came to the conclusion that there are significant differences between the school careers of children of divorced parents and those who are not. Divorce, however, does not appear to be the most important predictor of differences in school careers. The level of education of the father and/or the mother, for instance, is far more important. Besides, effects in clinical studies are—logically—significantly stronger than those in studies based on population samples. Clinical research into problematic youngsters [39] often shows that these youngsters come from one-parent and stepfamilies after divorce. However, the conclusion from non-clinical research is that youngsters from families after divorce do almost just as well as those of “normal” intact families [11,12,16].

Nurco and Lerner [40] reported that an intact family with the two biological parents offers a good protection against getting hooked on drugs. Hoffman and Johnson [41] investigated the drug abuse of adolescents originating from nine different family types, ranging from mother–father families to one-parent (father) families and grandmother families. They concluded that youngsters of divorced families stand a

bigger chance to abuse drugs more often and in a larger quantity. McLanahan and Sandefur [9] show comparable results.

Various authors emphasise that after a divorce children of one-parent and stepfamilies start building their own families more hesitantly and more critically [19]. These authors, indeed, also speak of a slumber effect: when they start entering their own relations and building their own families, the memories of their parents' divorce gain extra relief. There have been various reports on the intergenerational transfer of the chance of divorce [20,21,23,42].

These often-posed questions about the effects of growing up in different family types on the children's well-being, are often specified in more detail. Are the effects different for boys and for girls and does the children's age make any difference? As regards the differences in sex: surveys [2,10] show that, particularly in the short run, the effects on boys are most noticeable. This could be explained in two ways. (1) The problematic behaviour of boys (aggression, hooliganism) is more noticeable than the problematic behaviour of girls (withdrawal, feelings of depression); (2) the primary identification figure for the boys (the father) is usually the one to leave, whereas the primary identification figure for the girls (the mother) is usually the one to stay behind. In our study, we shall pay attention to the possible different effects for boys and for girls. In our analyses, we shall also implicate the children's age. This means both the age at which the divorce or the decease and the building of a stepfamily took place and the number of years that has passed since then.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

We made use of the data of the longitudinal panel study “Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development” (USAD; wave 1 in 1991; wave 2 in 1994, and wave 3 in 1997). This is a Dutch project based on a representative random sample of adolescents and young adults. The random selection was based on statistics of households or youngsters living independently, from the National Script Panel and the National Mini Census [43,44]. For each household there was a maximum selection of two persons between 15 and 24. Altogether 3525 households were approached. The percentage of refusals to take part was 26.1 and the total non-response from the households was 35.9%. Correction computations indicate that the random selection deviates slightly from the knowledge about youngsters we have from other sources. There is one significant deviation: immigrant youngsters are hardly represented. In 1991, 3000 youngsters at the age of 12–24 answered a large number of questions, both by a questionnaire and a face-to-face interview, on their development and life style. The questions referred to physical and psychological well-being, breaking away from the parents and standing on one's own legs, relationships,

sex, going steady, leaving home and the relations between the generations. One of the parents was also interviewed. In 1994 and in 1997, the respondents were again interrogated. The youngest group of 12–15 has continually been refreshed, so the oldest were 27 in 1994 and 30 in 1997. In 1997, 1781 adolescents and young adults of 12–30 years old took part in the investigation. The fieldwork was executed by a research bureau.

The age of the interviewed adolescents and young adults ranges from 12 to 30. The girls hold a slight majority: 56%. This has to do with the fact that girls tend to refuse rather less often to take part in a research than boys. Moreover, we shall report upon the third wave. Among the dropouts there are slightly fewer girls than boys. The level of education differs, one-half still lives at home and the other half lives away from home. Almost 200 parents are divorced and 100 parents are deceased. At the time of the third wave the youngsters are on average 21 years old and the divorce, on average, took place 11 years ago.

4.2. Operationalisation

4.2.1. Family type

To measure the independent variable family type the youngsters were asked the following questions: (a) how satisfied are your parents about their relationship according to you? (1 = quite dissatisfied to 7 = quite satisfied) [37]. (b) Have your parents seriously considered splitting up during the past 5 years? (1 = yes, several times to 4 = no, never) [37]. (c) Do your parents—as far as you know—ever have any serious conflicts? (1 = yes, often to 4 = no, never) [45]. Of these three items a scale has been made (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$). Only parents with the lowest scores on the three items (so, according to the youngsters) got the predicate “badly functioning marriage”. The parents with the lowest scores but one on the three items received the predicate “mediocre”, the other parents got the predicate “well-functioning marriage”.

The youngsters in the survey were moreover asked whether and when their parents had got divorced and whether and when their custodial parent (married or not) is living together again with another partner. Finally, we distinguish the category one-parent families after widowhood. The number of stepfamilies after widowhood was too small (17) to implicate in the analysis. This implies the following operationalisation of the concept ‘family type’: well-functioning nuclear families, mediocre functioning nuclear families, badly functioning nuclear families, one-parent families after divorce, stepfamilies after divorce, and one-parent families after widowhood (Table 1).

4.2.2. Well-being

We try to estimate the impact of coming from different family types on various forms of well-being, the central dependent variable in this study. We focused on several broad domains, pertaining to the physical and mental health

Table 1
Overview of the six different family types

	Family type	
	<i>n</i>	%
Well-functioning nuclear family	1323	75
Mediocre functioning nuclear family	100	6
Badly functioning nuclear family	60	3
One-parent family after divorce	144	8
Stepfamily after a divorce	52	3
One-parent family after widowhood	93	5
Total	1772	100

of adolescents and young adults, as well as on their general adaptation and adjustment and their attitude about family life. The indicators of various domains of well-being are comparable with the indicators of children's well-being in one- and two-parent families used by other family researchers [2,6,7]. Of course, these diverse domains can not be equated so we will analyse them separately.

4.2.3. Physical and mental condition

In this research various instruments have been used to establish the physical and mental condition of adolescents and young adults, namely: (a) in the first place, the Cantril-ladder which measures general life satisfaction: we would like to know how do you feel (from 1 = very bad to 10 = very well) [46]. (b) In the second and third place, the Goldberg-scale which measures psychological stress and the degree of depression (e.g. did you, during the past 4 weeks, continuously feel under pressure? or: did you, during the past 4 weeks, feel unhappy or depressed?). Possible answers: 1 = not at all, 2 = not more than usual, 3 = more than usual, 4 = much more than usual. The scale consists of two subscales with four and six items (Cronbach's alphas 0.92 and 0.88). The scores have been converted into 10-point scales, with 1 = bad (a lot of stress or depression) and 10 = good. Strictly spoken, the operationalisation of psychological stress and depression are not the most appropriate measures of state, because the answer categories are about “more or less stress or depression than usual”. Nevertheless, we consider this measures as valid indicators of subjective states of depression and psychological stress. For the instruments have been satisfactorily used elsewhere [47,48]. (c) In the fourth place, the VOG which measures the physical condition: fatigue, headache, backache, etc. [49]. Here, too, the scores have been transported to a scale of 1–10.

4.2.4. The parental bonding

A scale has been developed to measure the relation with the mother and another for the relation with the father [50]. In both the cases a scale with 5 items was used (my mother made me do things that I liked, my father seemed to understand my problems and troubles). The alphas of the two scales (transported to 10-point scales) are 0.85 and 0.88.

4.2.5. Relational development

The relational development has been operationalised by asking the age at which the first sex took place, the age at the beginning of the first steady relation and the number of sex partners during the last year. Respondents who do not have any experience with sex or relationships have been kept outside the calculation. We defined promiscuous as having more than one sex partner during the last year. Finally, there were questions about the frequency of the occurrence of problems in relation to boyfriends and girlfriends (score from 1 to 5).

4.2.6. Problems at school or at work

There were questions about the frequency of the occurrence of problems as regards learning at school or during study (score from 1 to 5) and about the frequency of problems at work.

4.2.7. Risky habits

There were questions about the use of cigarettes, alcohol and soft drugs.

4.2.8. Ideas about family life

Respondents were asked whether they plan to have (more) children later on. They were, moreover, asked about an equal division of roles between men and women in a relationship (three items, e.g. “for a woman, caring for a family is more important than a job outside the home”). Finally, they were asked after their opinions on other family types than the standard family (being a bachelor mother, living together unmarried, gay couples).

4.3. Data analysis

First of all we calculated the frequency distribution of the variable family type in order to find out whether there is sufficient variation in the family types (see Table 1). After that we looked at the associations with a number of background variables. The relation between family type and sex is not significant; there are not more girls in families after a divorce than in other family types. This does not confirm the results of the study by Morgan et al. [51] who found that parents of girls tend to divorce slightly more often than those of boys. After a divorce, adolescents usually remain with the mother: of one-parent families after a divorce 91% consists of families with only a mother and 9% of families with only a father. In stepfamilies, 93% consists of families with a stepfather and 7% of families with a stepmother. Youngsters of widowed one-parent families are on average significantly older than the others (24.9 and 20.9 years, respectively). This is not illogical since one of the parents runs a bigger chance to die as the youngsters grow older. Over-represented among the youngsters living away from home are: youngsters of widowed families (logical, given their age) and youngsters of one-parent families after a divorce (not logical, so these youngsters leave home sooner). There is no significant

difference between the different family types in the number of years that the parents have been divorced (on average 11 years). The age of the children at the time of divorce does differ significantly: youngsters of one-parent families were, on average, 11.5 years old when their parents divorced, the youngsters of stepfamilies were 9 years old. As regards the family income it is quite clear that one-parent families have less money than intact families and stepfamilies.

By means of ONEWAY analyses we tested the differences between family types and the different indicators of the youngsters' well-being.

5. Results

Table 2 shows the average scores for the different aspects of well-being of youngsters of the distinguished family types. The first question in this connection concerns physical and mental health. The top four lines of Table 2 indicate that adolescents and young adults of well-functioning nuclear families do best. They make the most positive scores on all four distinguished variables. Although youngsters of the two family types after a divorce also score lower, the lowest scores of youngsters of badly functioning nuclear families are most conspicuous. As could be expected the youngsters of mediocre families score mediocre indeed: just in between the good and the bad ones. The youngsters of widowed families score slightly lower than those of well functioning nuclear families.

The scores regarding parental bonding are quite unequivocal. Children of well-functioning nuclear families have a strong father and mother bonding. The relation with both parents (including the deceased parent) of widowed one-parent families is not significantly worse. The parental bonding in the other four family types is problematic. What is striking is the relatively weak mother bonding in the badly functioning nuclear families.

The youngsters of both family types after a divorce are conspicuous by their deviating scores as regards the relational career. They start their relations at an early age and have, over the past year, gained more sexual experiences than the others. The score of these youngsters in the field of relational problems is also high. The youngsters of the groups 3, 4, and 5 of Table 2 also show the most smokers, drinkers and soft-drug users. Finally, adolescents and young adults of badly functioning nuclear families and of one-parent families after a divorce clearly indicate that, in future, they would like to see equal relations between men and women, and that they approach family types other than the traditional family in a positive way. The youngsters of the mediocre families do not differ significantly from the good family youngsters as far as future family life is concerned.

If we examine all the scores in the six columns simultaneously, then the well-being of adolescents and young adults of well-functioning nuclear families is unmistakably highest. Youngsters of badly functioning nuclear families

Table 2
Average scores of the youngsters on the well-being variables per family type ($N = 1672$)

Well-being	Family types					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Nuclear good	Nuclear mediocre	Nuclear bad	One-parent divorce	Step divorce	One-parent widowed
1. Condition						
Life satisfaction (1–10)	7.9	7.4*	7.2*	7.6	7.8	7.5
No stress (1–10; higher = better)	5.3	4.0*	3.3*	4.6	4.7	4.9
No depression (1–10)	4.9	4.2*	3.6*	4.7	4.2	4.7
Physical health (1–10)	7.4	6.4*	5.9*	6.7*	6.1*	7.3
2. Parental bonding						
Father bonding	7.4	5.5*	4.8*	4.7*	5.7*	7.3
Mother bonding	8.2	7.1*	6.6*	7.5*	7.5*	7.7
3. Relational development						
Age first sex	17.7	17.4	17.0*	16.5*	16.7*	18.3
Age first courting	16.5	16.2	16.4	16.0*	15.9*	17.5**
Promiscuous (%)	8.0	10.0	10.5	17.5*	18.0*	7.8
4. Problems						
Learning problems	2.1	2.0	2.2	2.2	2.5	2.3
Work problems	1.6	1.9*	2.0*	1.5	1.7	1.8
Relational problems	2.1	2.4*	2.4*	2.4*	2.4*	2.1
5. Risky habits						
Smokers (%)	27	39*	52*	47*	37*	28
Drinkers (%)	68	82	90*	73	71	75
Soft-drug users (%)	9	12	23*	22*	21*	9
6. Future family life						
Would like children later (1–5)	4.0	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.7	3.6*
For equal division of roles (1–10)	5.7	6.3	6.9*	6.6*	5.9	5.9
For alternative family types	4.5	5.0	6.1*	5.3*	5.4*	4.7

* The difference compared to the good nuclear family is *negative* and significant ($P < 0.5$).

** The difference compared to the good nuclear family is *positive* and significant ($P < 0.5$).

(parents with many problems and conflicts, column 3) experience in a broad sense a lower extent of well-being than youngsters of well-functioning nuclear families. Youngsters of mediocre families mostly take a position in between the well-functioning and badly functioning families.

Continual conflicts between the parents obviously have a negative relation with the mental and physical health of the children, with their father and mother bonding, with their relational problems and their problems at work and with their risky habits. Also, the children of divorced families (both one-parent families and stepfamilies) do not do as well as the children of the “traditional” nuclear families, but the scores are just slightly lower than those of the children of bad nuclear families. The columns 4 and 5 of Table 2 show that divorce of the parents is especially connected with the relational behaviour of their children: they start relations at an early age and they are also more experienced in relations. Children of one-parent families after widowhood do not do any worse than children of good nuclear families. So it is clearly important to distinguish one-parent families as to the cause of origin: divorce or decease.

Table 3 shows that—after controlling for the covariates sex, education, individual income and living at home or left

home—all the reported correlations between family type and the indicators of well-being mentioned, remain significant. Apart from the effects of family type, also sex, education, and living home or not, do have a significant effect on the different aspects of well-being. Individual income only has a significant correlation with relational career and attitudes of future family life. The correlations for girls, on average, appear to be slightly stronger than for boys. This seems inconsistent with part of the literature in which chiefly the consequences for boys are reported. This literature, though, appears to deal mainly with more short-term impact than those in our research. Our results are in keeping with Wallerstein et al. [19] who also discuss the medium range and long-term impact. Besides, the choice of our dependent variables might play a role. It is conceivable that with boys some other consequences are more noticeable, such as aggressive behaviour and hooliganism. However, outcomes of externalising problematic behaviour, have not been measured in this study.

The age of the children at the moment of a divorce appears to be of little significance for the long-term outcome. In our study, the relationship between age and outcome is weak. Other studies also found the negative effects of marital conflicts and divorce to be comparable for young children

Table 3

F- and *P*-values of the correlations between family type and the well-being variables controlling for four covariates (*N* = 1672)

Well-being	<i>F</i> - and <i>P</i> -values		Sex	Education	Individual income	Living at home or left home
1. Condition						
Life satisfaction (1–10)	<i>F</i> = 5.07	<i>P</i> = 0.00*	<i>P</i> = 0.11	<i>P</i> = 0.80	<i>P</i> = 0.25	<i>P</i> = 0.03
No stress (1–10; higher = better)	<i>F</i> = 7.43	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.32	<i>P</i> = 0.17	<i>P</i> = 0.05
No depression (1–10)	<i>F</i> = 8.83	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.83	<i>P</i> = 0.05	<i>P</i> = 0.51
Physical health (1–10)	<i>F</i> = 7.84	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.06	<i>P</i> = 0.00
2. Parental bonding						
Father bonding	<i>F</i> = 19.50	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.35	<i>P</i> = 0.00
Mother bonding	<i>F</i> = 6.15	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.05	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.83	<i>P</i> = 0.00
3. Relational development						
Age first sex	<i>F</i> = 16.13	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.45	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.04
Age first courting	<i>F</i> = 14.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.23	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00
Promiscuous (%)	<i>F</i> = 6.24	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.69	<i>P</i> = 0.85	<i>P</i> = 0.00
4. Problems						
Learning problems	<i>F</i> = 1.17	<i>P</i> = 0.13	<i>P</i> = 0.22	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.99	<i>P</i> = 0.20
Work problems	<i>F</i> = 4.32	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.45	<i>P</i> = 0.44	<i>P</i> = 0.13	<i>P</i> = 0.01
Relational problems	<i>F</i> = 7.51	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.52	<i>P</i> = 0.70	<i>P</i> = 0.46
5. Risky habits						
Smokers (%)	<i>F</i> = 4.29	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.17	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.02	<i>P</i> = 0.36
Drinkers (%)	<i>F</i> = 1.92	<i>P</i> = 0.09	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.07	<i>P</i> = 0.99	<i>P</i> = 0.62
Soft-drug users (%)	<i>F</i> = 7.84	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.11	<i>P</i> = 0.10	<i>P</i> = 0.51
6. Future family life						
Would like children later (1–5)	<i>F</i> = 5.51	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.03	<i>P</i> = 0.00
For equal division of roles (1–10)	<i>F</i> = 31.02	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.77
For alternative family types	<i>F</i> = 4.19	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00	<i>P</i> = 0.00

* *P* < 0.05 is significant.

and adolescents [52]. Even negative divorce effects still appear to be apparent in adulthood [2]. There seem to be rather weaker negative effects when the children are still young, between 0–4 years old. When the children are so young, however, most parents do not divorce. In connection with the age the question arises whether it makes any difference if the children still live at home or live away from home. That, of course, is also a question as to the effect of age: the average leaving home age is 20.4. About half of the youngsters still live at home and the other half has left the (parental) home. A striking result of our analyses is that the effects for those living away from home are not much smaller than for those who still live at home. This, combined with the fact that the parental divorce already took place 11 years ago, leads to the conclusion that the effects of parental conflicts and divorce are long-lasting.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Serious parental conflicts and divorce are a bad thing for the long-term well-being of children. Our data show that, on average, 11 years after a divorce different effects are still perceptible. Although the scores on different variables are indeed significant, but not so strong, a number of results is

nevertheless a cause for concern: the mental and physical health, the relatively weak parental bonding, the early start of the relational career, including the stated relational problems, and the use of cigarettes and soft-drugs.

In this article all sorts of questions have been asked and results have been presented. Many questions remain unanswered and research always raises new questions. Yet we have (tentatively?) answered a number of questions in Section 5. Furthermore, we discuss some general issues as to the results of this study. It has to be emphatically stated that the family type has been defined through questioning the youngsters. Parents in badly functioning nuclear families row a lot and according to their children consider a divorce. In accordance with that measurement children of badly functioning nuclear families, on average, score somewhat lower than children of divorced families. That is understandable, for the children notice those conflicts and these obviously bother them. If the parents are asked about the quality of their marriage, then the effects for children of bad nuclear families appear to be somewhat less strong than for children of one-parent families after a divorce. So there should be more attention to the measurement of the quality and the stability of the parental marriage.

Which of Amato's [24] perspectives is empirically most supported by our data? Using the well-functioning nuclear

family as normgroup we counted the number of times each family type on the variables mentioned in Table 2 significantly differs from this normgroup. That results in the following order of the youngsters from high (good) to low (worse): (1) the normgroup: youngsters of well-functioning nuclear families; (2) youngsters of one-parent families after widowhood; (3) youngsters of mediocre functioning nuclear families; (4) youngsters of stepfamilies after divorce; (5) youngsters of one-parent families after divorce, and (6) youngsters of badly functioning nuclear families.

Combination of the data of Table 2 leads to the cautious conclusion that especially Amato's third perspective [24], the significance of the extent of continual parental conflicts, is supported. The first perspective, the loss of the non-custodial parent, in itself does not qualify the strongly negative effects. The youngsters of the widowed families score too high for this. Of course, the combination of the loss of a parent with continual rowing can cause many problems. The second perspective, the psychological adaptation of the non-custodial parent, should be investigated in more detail. In relation to this, we should also look at the significance of the differences in mother and father bonding. For the primacy of the third perspective, the negative consequences of the financial drop after the divorce, children of one-parent families after a divorce (group 4) should score lowest. This group, after all, has the worst financial position. The children of this group 4 of Table 2 do have a low score, but this is not low enough. Continuous parental conflicts obviously offer a more significant explanation than financial problems. For the fifth explanation, stressful changes, the children of stepfamilies score too high. Since youngsters of stepfamilies have probably, on average, had more stressful experiences than youngsters of one-parent families, these youngsters should have lower scores. The sixth and last explanation, the negative stereotyping, cannot be fully rejected; for this, the youngsters of one-parent and stepfamilies score too low. Here, too, further research is necessary.

As our analyses are confined to cross-sectional data, in principal we are not able to draw any conclusions pertaining to causal relationships between the variables we used. Strictly spoken you have to read for the term 'effects' in this the article 'correlations'. Certain characteristics of youngsters, like mental health, possibly have reciprocal relationships with parental marriage. However, it is generally held that the parental marriage has more impact on children's well-being than vice versa.

Families and parents on the move are distinct features of these days. Our question was what long-term effects these "moving" parents have on their children. The question has been split up into three sub-questions: is continuous rowing worse than a divorce, is a one-parent family worse than a stepfamily, and is a divorce worse than the decease of a parent? Although the decease of a parent is an intense and sad experience for a child, its long-term negative effects are not so strong as after a divorce. Both divorces and discordant marriages have negative effects on the well-being of chil-

dren. Which is worse depends on the measurement of the quality of the marriage. If youngsters are interrogated, the discordant parental marriage scores lowest. If parents are interrogated, divorce turns out to be even slightly more negative than a bad marriage. Of course, this is not so surprising since children need not be aware of every parental conflict. If the children themselves, however, call their parental family discordant, then this is certainly the case in their experience. All the literature and also the findings of this research agree on the following: the worst condition for adolescents and young adults (also in the long run) is the "movement": rowing parents, divorcing parents, parents who keep on rowing.

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