Household Family Structure and Children's Aggressive Behavior: A Longitudinal Study of Urban Elementary School Children

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The relationship between contemporary household family structures at fourth-grade and sixth-grade parent- and teacher-rated aggression was examined in an epidemiologically defined population of urban school children. The relationship between family structure and aggression varied by child gender and by parent and teacher ratings in the home and school, respectively. After taking into account family income, urban area, and fourth-grade aggressive behavior, boys in both mother-father and mother-male partner families were significantly less likely than boys in mother-alone families to be rated as aggressive by teachers. No significant relations between family structure and teacher- or parent-rated aggression were found for girls.

Significant attention in the media and the research community is being focussed on the growing rate of single-mother families in the U.S. (Bumpass, 1990; McLanahan & Garfinkel, 1989; Whitehead, 1993). In 1990, over 23 percent of U.S. families with children under the age of 18 were headed by single mothers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Moreover, approximately half of American children will spend some of their lives in a sin-
gle-parent family (Bumpass, 1984). The focus on the growing rate of single-mother families appears to be justified given evidence that children in single-mother families, compared to children in "intact" mother–father families, are at greater risk for antisocial behavior (Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Conners, 1991; Dawson, 1991; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Haurin, 1992; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Kellam, Ensminger, & Turner, 1977; Peterson & Zill, 1986; also see Demo & Acock, 1988, for a review). In turn, early antisocial behavior has been strongly linked to later violence, drug use, and criminality in adolescence and adulthood (Block, Block, & Keyes, 1988; Ensminger, Kellam, & Rubin, 1983; Farrington & Gunn, 1985; Kellam, Brown, Rubin, & Ensminger, 1983; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walden, & Huesmann, 1977; Shedler & Block, 1990).

In contrast to "intact" mother–father families, children in single-mother families have been considered more at risk for behavior problems because their mothers often face greater financial stresses (Acock & Kiocolt, 1989; Blechman, 1982; Takeuchi, Williams, & Adair, 1991). The economic hardship is thought to result in maternal psychological distress, which may serve to disrupt the mother's parenting practices (McLoyd, 1990). Relatedly, single mothers may be less able to provide the amount of child supervision and monitoring that the two adults in mother–father families can (McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Some children may also be at risk for aggression because they are born to mothers who themselves were ill-tempered as children and later were more likely to divorce and be ill-tempered mothers (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987).

Recently, some have questioned whether the protective effects of mother–father families, relative to single-mother families, may also be present in mother–other adult families. For example, dual-parent families may have greater financial resources and consequently less psychological distress that may serve to disrupt parenting. In addition, as pointed out above, two caregivers in families may be able to provide more adequate adult supervision of their children than one caregiver can provide. Indeed, Kellam et al. (1977) found children in mother–grandmother families to be as well adapted as their counterparts in mother–father families.

Despite the documentation of increasing rates of cohabitation and that nearly seven million children under 18 years of age live in extended families (Beck & Beck, 1989; Bumpass, 1990; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Farley & Allen, 1987; Hofferth, 1985; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992; Williams, 1980), there are few studies like those by Kellam and colleagues (Ensminger et al., 1983; Kellam et al., 1977) that have examined whether households that are comprised of a mother plus another adult are more protective for children, compared to single-parent households. In one such study, Hawkins and Eggebeen (1991) used the National Longitudinal Sur-