

Demographic Insights



CHILDHOOD & FUTURE CHANCES

Early years are crucial for children's future. This message, confirmed by various scientific disciplines, can put parents under considerable pressure to get everything right from the very beginning. But the impact of childhood experiences, like care arrangements or parental separation, is not always as one-dimensional as we might think. Recent research takes a closer look at the links between early years and later life and shows that a lot can be done to make up for a bumpy start – not just by parents.

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Formal care won't damage young kids

Five Questions for Demographer Chiara Pronzato

Can research tell us what is more damaging for children's future: a lack of money or a lack of parents' time in their early childhood?

I cannot answer this from my own research, but for sure there is a tendency to overestimate the impact of income in many respects. What can be really problematic is a very low level of income, which prevents families from "spending" on their children. Parental time is very important and it is not necessarily competing with work time. Research with time use data show, for example, that working women spend almost the same amount of time playing and reading with their children as those who do not work.

Concerning non-parental childcare, what is your most important advice for parents with children under 3?

Early formal care won't damage your children. If any, it will help them to socialise earlier and to develop their own skills. Besides, it can also be beneficiary for parents by allowing them to work. Also, the opportunity to meet parents and teachers who have experience with hundreds of children of the same age can imply a faster identification of problems, for example concerning the ability to speak, and a prompter solution.

What can kindergartens do that grandparents cannot?

I am not aware of any empirical study looking at this, but grandparents for sure provide love and affection. Compared to a teacher, they can dedicate more intensive time to the child. This could explain our findings that children who were cared for by grandparents know more words and are better in naming objects. On the other side, formal care gives the child the possibility to be cared for by a staff who is prepared for this and who has had the opportunity to observe many children in that age range. In

a group of children supervised by a trained teacher, the child can learn basic rules that are essential for feeling secure in any group.

Why are the enrolment rates for formal childcare so different between countries and social groups?

This is something related to culture. Some countries privilege taking care of the children within the family, others are more willing to also support external forms of care. Yet there is a high degree of homogeneity in similar social groups: For example, more educated parents, regardless of the country, are more likely to choose formal childcare.

Why do lower educated parents make less use of formal care?

One reason may be the high price of this kind of service in some countries, which is more difficult to afford for people working in poorly paid jobs, as most lower-educated parents do. A second reason lies in the satisfaction with this work: Typically only an interesting and fulfilling job is an incentive to look for external care. Especially, if staying home with the child is financially feasible or even more attractive than employment. To start trusting and using external forms of care, lower educated parents might need more information about the benefits for the child, as well as "kindergarten-vouchers" or other policies that make it financially attractive to use external care.



Chiara Pronzato

is Assistant Professor at the Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Turin (Italy) and member of the "FamiliesAndSocieties" research project.

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80% of all children aged two are attending formal child-care in Denmark – this is the highest percentage in Europe. In the Czech Republic, on the other end of the spectrum, it is not even 10% - here parents still provide the bulk of care. However, in both countries grandparents are not active as child-carers, whereas in other EU countries like Greece they play an important role in this context: More than 40% of Greek toddlers are looked after by their grandparents according to data from the EU-Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

Early life conditions can make you sick later

Bad health conditions experienced during the first year of life increase the risk of sick leave in adulthood. This link is not mediated by socioeconomic circumstances later in life and is only visible for children of lower educated parents, says a new study by Jonas Helgertz and Mats R. Persson (Lund University, Sweden). The scientists use infant mortality rates as an indicator of early life conditions at any given time and place. This information is linked to the individual data of 9,000 biological siblings from 17 countries of origin and living in Sweden during the time period 1981–1991. Results show that an increase in infant mortality rate by ten per thousand is associated with a four per cent higher probability of experiencing sick leave.

The link between early life conditions and sick leave is only present for children of parents with a primary level education and not for individuals with more educated parents. These findings suggest that families with more abundant resources have the ability to protect their child from exposure to adverse health conditions during early life, or to cancel out these negative influences.



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Good parenting after separation

After a relationship breakdown, the impact of paternal and maternal parenting is equally important to children's self-esteem and satisfaction with their life. Evidence also suggests that supportive and authoritative parenting is more important for children's wellbeing than spending the same amount of time with each parent after divorce. These are key results of a study by Kim Bastiaens and Dimitri Mortelmans (University of Antwerp, Belgium) using data on 363 children and their divorced parents in Belgium.

The authors suggest that fathers, even when non-residential, can contribute in a qualitative way to the wellbeing of their children, and that they are as important as mothers in this regard. Given the findings of this study, fathers should be considered as equal co-parents in divorce legislations. Although joint custody is a step in the right direction, additional public policies emphasising divorced fathers as equal co-parents are needed.



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“Divorce damages” on education

Increasing divorce rates are a long-term trend in most European countries (see graphic) and it is generally agreed that parental separation may have an impact on children's future life chances. In a recent study for the FamiliesAndSocieties project Fabrizio Bernardi (European University Institute, Italy) and Jonas Radl (UNED, Spain) found, that, on average, the chances of receiving a university degree were about seven points lower for children having experienced a divorce than for those who had not. This is about the same disadvantage that men have with respect to women in achieving a university degree. However, regarding socioeconomic background this disadvantage is larger for children from highly educated families. For children from low educated families, the chances of going to a university are rather low to start with, and a divorce does not seem to make a real difference.

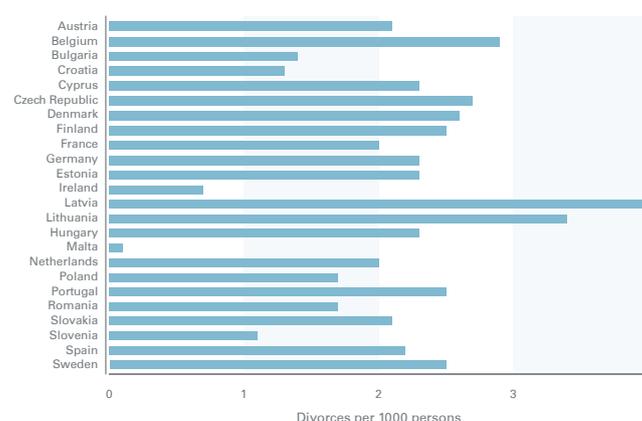


Table 1. Crude divorce rate for the EU-27 countries in 2011 (latest available data)

Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_ndivind)

The study is based on data from the Generations and Gender Survey, covering 14 countries (Australia, Austria, France, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, and Russia).

Previous research has already identified many mechanisms that can explain the lower educational outcome of children from separated families: parental conflict, both before and after the divorce, meaning that it may not be the divorce itself causing the children's lower educational outcome; parents and children's emotional crises linked to parental separation; a decrease in economic and social resources; a reduction in parental time dedicated to children; and a change in parenting practices. However, there is also evidence that a change in family structure or a divorce does not necessarily lead to a child's lower psychological wellbeing.



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