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## Introduction

**A**bout half of all children born today are expected to spend some time in a single parent family before reaching age 18. For the first time in history, children are more apt to live in a single parent family for reasons other than the death of a spouse. About one-fourth of all children are born to an unmarried mother; half of the children born to teenagers are born outside of marriage (Cherlin, 1992), although some of these do marry later. Furthermore, it is estimated that about 40 percent of all children under 18 will experience the break-up of their parents' marriage, and 15 percent will witness divorce twice. Increasingly, children experience a kaleidoscope of family forms single parenthood, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and a subsequent divorce (Cherlin, 1992).

Today's children have been caught up in "a tidal wave of family change" (Cherlin, 1992). The main questions this paper will address are what consequences these changes have for children's well-being, and what are the policy implications. About a decade ago, the conventional wisdom was that single parenthood had no long-lasting disadvantages for children. The consequences of divorce, in particular, could be compared to that of a common cold an initial period of acute discomfort followed by a rapid recovery (Whitehead, 1993). In the year following divorce, preschoolers exhibited emotional distress, behavioral problems, and disrupted peer relations; two years after the divorce, however, boys had improved dramatically and girls were showing no more problems than girls in non-divorced families (Hetherington, 1989, 1991; Zill, 1983).

Recent evidence suggests, however, that children from single parent families do less well, on average, than children who grow up with both of their parents. Children who grow up with only one parent are more likely to drop out of school, bear a child out-of-wedlock, and have trouble keeping a steady job as young adults.

Findings such as these are often misinterpreted to mean that two parents are always good for children and that every child growing up with a single parent will be less successful. Statistically, significant findings do not mean that every child growing up in a single parent family will do worse than a similarly-situated child in a two-parent family. Quite to the contrary, some children who grow up in single parent families do better than children who grow up in two-parent families. What these findings do mean is that single parenthood increases the odds or the risk that children's well-being will suffer.