

The Long-Term Outcomes of Parental Separation on Children’s Subjective Well-Being: The Role of Conflict and Post-Separation Family Arrangements

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Introduction

A large body of research has consistently documented that children of separated parents tend to face disadvantages across multiple domains, including emotional, behavioral, social, and academic outcomes, compared to children growing up in intact families. These disadvantages may persist into adulthood, with individuals who experienced parental separation reporting, on average, lower educational attainment, weaker relationships with parents, greater relationship instability, and reduced well-being (Amato, 2010; Härkönen et al., 2017). Understanding the long-term consequences of parental separation on children’s subjective well-being (SWB) requires considering the mechanisms through which it may affect children’s lives. This involves distinguishing between the specific effects of separation itself and the broader set of events and circumstances that may precede and follow the family transition, such as interparental conflict, custodial arrangements, and family reconfiguration following parents’ break-up.

While parents’ union dissolution can represent a stressful event, persistent exposure to highly conflictual situations may also have negative implications on children’s SWB in the long term (Musick & Meier, 2010). In line with the “good divorce” argument, separation may be less harmful, or even beneficial, when it ends exposure to a detrimental family environment. Persistent interparental conflict following separation may intensify the negative effects on children’s SWB, whereas cooperative and supportive relations between parents may help substantially reduce the adverse effects on children’s adjustment (Ivanova & Kalmijn, 2020; Lansford, 2009).

Family reconfiguration following parental separation can also have lasting implications for children’s SWB. After a break-up, children may live alternately with each parent (i.e., shared residence or joint physical custody) or reside primarily with one parent (i.e., sole residence), most often the mother. Children generally receive less support and engagement from the non-resident parent, typically the father, which can weaken parent-child bonds and, ultimately, affect their well-being. Research has shown that children in joint physical custody report stronger relationships with both parents and higher well-being than those living mostly with one parent (Nielsen, 2018). However, the benefits of joint physical custody may not be universal and may partly reflect selection effects. For instance, joint custody might more often be chosen when interparental conflict is low (Härkönen et al., 2017). In the case of high interparental conflict, sole custody may provide greater stability and be less detrimental to children’s well-being (Kalil et al., 2011).

Further changes in family structure, such as stepfamily formation and the arrival of half-siblings, may also affect children’s SWB. Evidence on the impact of stepparents is mixed (Sweeney, 2010). From

a multiple-transition perspective, the number of family transitions, rather than separation per se, may be especially detrimental for children (Amato, 2010). In this view, the entry of a stepparent can be disruptive, requiring additional adjustments that may undermine children's emotional and social adaptation, with long-lasting effects on their well-being. At the same time, stepparents can provide extra parental and economic resources, and, when relationships are positive, help offset the absence of a biological parent (Ivanova & Kalmijn, 2020).

In this paper, we focus on the long-term consequences of parental separation on children's SWB during early adulthood, considering the moderating role of family conflict and family reconfiguration following parental separation. We address the following research questions: *How does experiencing parental separation during childhood or adolescence affect young adults' SWB? Does the level of interparental conflict shape the relationship between parental separation and SWB later in life? How do post-separation family arrangements, including child's physical custody and co-residence with stepparents and half-siblings, relate to young adults' SWB?*

The empirical analysis relies on unique data collected through a specifically designed survey on the determinants and consequences of parental separation and family complexity. Although the empirical evidence in the international literature on the negative association between parental divorce and children's outcomes is rich, very few large-scale data simultaneously include the different moderating mechanisms outlined above. This data thus offers an exceptional possibility for disentangling their independent effects. In addition, the survey focuses on Italy, a latecomer of the SDT where the spread of new family behaviors has accelerated only recently, and an interesting case study for which empirical evidence on the matter is scant and outdated, thus potentially overlooking the implications for a growing proportion of younger cohorts of individuals who experienced parental separation.

Data and methods

Data collection

Primary data were collected between June and July 2025 through a self-administered web survey based on opt-in panels. The data collection was conducted in parallel by two Italian survey companies with longstanding expertise in market and public opinion research: SWG Spa and Demetra opinioni.net Srl. Relying on two different companies allowed us to obtain a sufficiently large sample of Italian young adults aged 25-39 (11,542 cases), including 2,537 individuals who had experienced parental separation, with 1,791 respondents before turning 18. The large sample size allows for a detailed analysis of the implications of parental separation on SWB in young adulthood, as well as of the emergence of alternative family types following parental separation.

A quota sampling strategy ensures that the population is properly represented across key socio-demographic characteristics, imposing national quotas by five-year age groups, gender, region of residence, education, employment, and marital status. In addition, the survey includes questions identically included in nationally representative surveys conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which allows to adjust for deviations from the benchmark population statistics using post-stratification weights.

Variables and analysis plan

The dependent variable is respondents' *SWB*, measured through questions on overall life satisfaction (0=extremely dissatisfied, 10=extremely satisfied) and the frequency of feelings of happiness, calmness, worry, depression, and nervousness during the weeks preceding the interview (1=always, 6=never).

The analysis is structured in two phases. In the first phase, we will examine whether, and to what extent, individuals who experienced parental separation report lower SWB compared to those who grew up in intact families. The main independent variable captures *whether parents ever stopped living together* because of divorce (for married parents) or the end of the romantic relationship (for cohabiting parents) and the *age of respondents at parental break-up*, thus making it possible to account for differences related to respondents' age at parents' separation. We will further consider the level of interparental conflict. A unique feature of our data is that we have information on the *frequency of conflicts* within both intact and non-intact families. Children whose parents never separated (or separated after the respondent turned 18) were asked how often their parents had serious fights during their childhood and adolescence (1=never, 5=always). Following other surveys (Kalmijn et al., 2018), children of separated parents were asked a similar question, referring separately to the months preceding and the first years following parental break up. Beyond basic socio-demographic characteristics, we also have information on parental socio-economic background, such as both parents' education and the frequency of severe financial difficulties during respondents' upbringing. These variables will be included as control variables in different types of multivariable, stepwise regression models.

In the second phase, we will restrict the analysis to the subsample of individuals who experienced parental separation during childhood or adolescence (i.e., before age 18), to explore in detail the rich information collected on post-separation custodial arrangements and parental repartnering. At this stage, we will examine differences in SWB according to alternative post-separation family configurations, while also controlling for interparental conflict and socioeconomic background characteristics mentioned above.

Respondents who experienced parental separation were asked *with whom they lived* at different points in time (at ages 7-8, 13-14, 18-19) based on the age at separation: with both parents, equally; with both parents but mostly with the mother; with both parents but mostly with the father; only with the mother; only with the father; without parents (other relatives, institution, alone). In addition, information on the *frequency of contacts* with the non-resident parent(s) is available. Respondents who experienced parental separation were additionally asked whether either *parent ever had a long-term romantic relationship with a new partner* and whether they ever *co-resided with a stepparent* at any of these ages.

All respondents, including those whose parents had never separated, were asked whether their parents ever had children with other partners and whether they ever lived with half-siblings at ages 7-8, 13-14, or 18-19. In addition, the dataset includes measures of the quality of the parent-child relationship

as respondents' self-reported satisfaction with the relationship with the mother and the father during childhood and adolescence.

Expected results

We expect parental separation to be associated with poorer children's SWB in young adulthood. However, we also anticipate observing a moderating role of interparental conflict, such that the negative effects of separation could be weaker when pre-separation conflict is high. Separation may serve a protective function by removing children from a persistently hostile or conflictual family environment. Children raised in intact but highly conflictual families may also report levels of SWB comparable to, or even lower than, those whose parents' separation ended their exposure to conflict. Nevertheless, when separation is followed by high post-separation conflict, children's well-being may be further compromised.

As for post-separation family arrangements, we expect joint physical custody to be linked to more favorable outcomes, although the potential gains from joint custody may depend on the frequency of conflict between parents, especially in the years following separation, as well as on the quality of parent-child relationships. However, the long-term implications of residing mainly with one parent rather than the other are difficult to anticipate. For instance, outcomes may vary based on the frequency of contact and relationship with the non-resident parent. The consequences of parental repartnering and co-residence with half siblings are similarly ambiguous, as they may introduce greater family instability, but also additional parental, emotional, and economic resources enhancing children's well-being in the long run. In addition, evidence for the Italian context is still limited despite significant changes in family behaviors over the past few decades, leaving the joint influence of these processes on children's outcomes largely unexplored and unpredictable. By considering these factors simultaneously, this study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how these family transitions may affect children's SWB in the long term.

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