

Do separation and divorce affect children's educational achievement in France?

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Divorce and end-of-union rates have risen sharply over the past thirty years, and a growing number of children have to cope with parental separation: one non-adult child in four among recent birth cohorts (box 1). Education, too, has changed radically over recent decades; it has been “democratized”—become accessible to all—and the period of compulsory education is now substantially longer. The cohort-specific proportions of students who passed the *baccalauréat*, the upper secondary school diploma (the university matriculation diploma), more than doubled between 1985 and 1995, from 30% to 63% [1]. How much of a disruptive influence does parental separation have on children's education, and harm their chances of passing exams?

When assessing the impact of parental separation on children's scholastic achievement, social and cultural background must be controlled for, as these affect educational outcomes. For a given social background, children with the most highly-educated mothers stay in education longer and themselves become higher achievers. On the other hand, there is a greater risk of parental separation where the mother is highly educated, since she has the economic independence which enables her to cope better with the financial consequences of separation. Also, women with higher educational qualifications are more likely to form a second union.

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(1) Here meaning voluntary separation (not including death).

◆ Parental separation impairs academic success of children

Regardless of background, there is a link between parental separation (1) and children's academic underachievement (table 2). Parental separation shortens the child's total time in education by an average six months to more than a year. The educational advantage drawn from growing up in a culturally and socially advantaged family seems to be sharply reduced in the event of parental separation. Children from well-off families (“managerial or intermediate” father) with a graduate mother are less likely to fail their *baccalauréat*, but the failure rate doubles in the event of separation: 15% versus 7%. In the same families where the mother had a low qualification level, the failure rate rises by 11 points: 48% versus 37%. The likelihood of continuing to postgraduate studies drops from 45% to 25% where the parents have separated.

The benefits of education are seen differently for the children of blue-collar workers. The main thing for them is to procure the wherewithal for an early entry into working life, often a technical secondary training qualification which the parents generally lack. But this level of education, too, is impaired by parental separation. One in two children (50%) whose mothers have a failed educational background and are separated from the father leave the educational system with no qualifications, compared to just one in three (37%) of those whose parents stay together. The probability of postgraduate study is very low for working-class children (3%) and virtually nil for those from broken homes.

Box 1

A growing number of children are from broken homes

The family has undergone far-reaching changes since the mid-1960s. The steadily-rising divorce rate has led to shorter average marriage durations. And the proportion of children experiencing family transition is rising steadily, as the INED and INSEE surveys show (box 2). For the 1959-1962 birth cohort, family break-up before the age of 18 was in nearly half of all cases the result of the death of a parent (table 1). A combination of lengthening lifespans and the rise in voluntary separations means that the death of a parent accounts for only one end-of-union in six in the most recent cohort (1974-1978). Overall, the growth in voluntary separations more than outweighs the decline in parental deaths: at the age of 18, 85% of children in the earlier cohort (1959-1962) had parents living together, against only 76% of those in the most recent cohort (1974-1978).

With the spread of divorce, family recomposition is gaining in social acceptance: forming a new relationship after marriage breakdown is now quite common, even with children. Young people's family trajectories are thus marked by a higher incidence of parental separation leading to a period living in a single-parent family and, more and more often in the long term, a blended family. As a result, children's family trajectories are becoming increasingly complex [2].

Table 1 – Children's family circumstances at 18 years of age (%)

	Cohorts			
	1959-1962	1963-1967	1968-1973	1974-1978
Parents living together	85	82	81	76
Parents living but separated	8	11	13	20
One or both parents dead, without prior separation	7	7	6	4
Total	100	100	100	100

Sources: INED, "Passage à l'âge adulte" survey, 1993; INSEE, "Jeunes" survey 1992, and "Jeunes et Carrières" survey, 1997.

The children of white-collar workers also fare less well academically where their parents are divorced. The share of youngsters who have educationally-qualified mothers and leave school with no qualifications is 22% in broken homes, but only 11% where the parents are together. Among the same children, the *baccalauréat* success rate falls by 23 points in the event of parental separation (30% versus 53%). Parental separation is associated with a decrease in educational achievement among white-collar children to the same level of educational attainment as children from blue-collar families. So, where the mother has no qualifications, the child of a blue-collar father with both parents living together will be a little more likely to pass the university

Box 2

Sources

INED's "Passage à l'âge adulte" (Transition to adulthood) survey is a retrospective biographical survey, carried out in 1993 among 2,988 young adults aged from 25 to 34, with financial support from the national family allowances fund (CNAF) [3].

To supplement the "Emploi" (Employment) survey, INSEE carried out the "Jeunes" (Youth) survey (1992) and the "Jeunes et Carrières" (Youth and Careers) survey (1997) of young people aged 18 to 29 in the third and final wave of the "Emploi" survey. 9,344 interviews were carried out in 1992 and 8,373 in 1997.

matriculation diploma (20%) than a white-collar child whose parents are separated (16%). Likewise, the advantage of having an educationally-qualified mother may be cancelled-out for the children of white-collar workers by parental disunion: the proportion of secondary school graduates is higher where the mother has no qualifications and lives with the father (35%) than when the mother is educationally-qualified but separated (30%).

Stability of the family unit is as highly correlated with successful secondary school completion as is the benefit of having an educationally-qualified mother. And for blue-collar children, the university matriculation diploma is now an essential (though not the only) prerequisite for proceeding up the social ladder. Likewise, the social status of white-collar workers is uncertain, and many children from broken white-collar homes may experience academic failure and slide back to blue-collar status.

◆ Family-related education gaps still remain

The growth in divorces and separations has produced a rise in the number of children from broken homes, which may lead to widening education gaps. At the same time, however, being the child of divorced parents has become more common, and doubtless more socially acceptable, raising the possibility that divorce may now have a less educationally disruptive effect. The democratization of education should also have blurred differences related to social and family background. In this scenario, there would be more children of divorced parents, but, on average, less affected by the divorce.

This is far from being the case. Notwithstanding rising *baccalauréat* success rates, especially among working class children, the educational achievement gaps between children whose parents separated before they were 18 and those whose did not, have not narrowed (figure 1). The proportions achieving the *baccalauréat* by family circumstances are as unequal as ever:

Table 2 – Educational achievement of young people by social background and mother's educational level, by whether the parents were together or separated on the child's 18th birthday

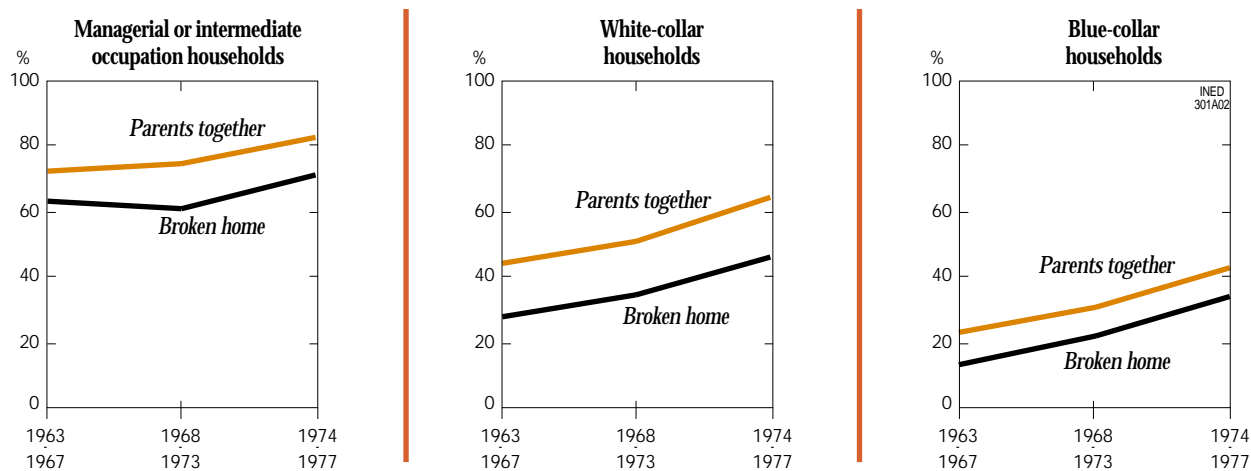
Background (father's occupational category)	Mother's educational level	No. of young respondents (1)	Proportion whose parents were separated (%)	Proportion of young people with qualifications (%)						Average age on leaving school (3)	
				All qualifications (1)		At least <i>baccalauréat</i> (2)		At least three years higher education (3)			
				Together	Separated	Together	Separated	Together	Separated	Together	Separated
Managerial/intermediate occupation	No qualifications or secondary school	1 920	12	88	84	63	52	18	8	21.1	20.3
	Higher education diploma	548	19	96	91	93	85	45	25	22.8	21.1
Blue-collar	No qualifications	2 712	10	63	50	20	14	3	0	18.6	18.1
	Qualifications	752	12	75	71	33	28	6	3	19.5	19.0
White-collar	No qualifications	699	21	75	66	35	16	5	4	19.4	18.8
	Qualifications	475	26	89	78	53	30	16	5	20.5	19.4
Self-employed	No qualifications	1 429	11	73	64	33	16	4	0	19.2	18.3
	Qualifications	809	10	88	82	59	52	18	11	20.6	20.3

(1) Coverage: total sample, N = 9,344. – (2) Coverage: respondents over 20 years of age at the survey date, N = 6,938.

(3) Coverage: respondents over 23 years of age at the survey date, N = 4,660.

Source: INSEE, *Enquête Jeunes*, 1992.

Figure 1 – Trend in *baccalauréat* achievement rates by social background and family circumstances



Note: a "broken home" is one where the child's parents separated before his/her 18th birthday.

Coverage: young people over 20 years of age at the survey date, excluding those where one parent died before their 18th birthday.

Source: INSEE surveys *Enquête Jeunes* 1992 and *Enquête Jeunes et Carrières* 1997.

however common divorce may have become, it continues to affect children's educational attainments.

◆ What is to blame: divorce or troubles at home?

But exactly how does family break-up harm educational achievement? Is it due to parents neglecting their children's education when in the throes of separation? Continuing post-separation acrimony and the

possible forming of new unions? The straitened financial circumstances of the broken home? Little is known about what role each of these various factors plays. But some clues can be gleaned from what young people themselves have to say.

They see home-leaving as a pivotal stage, bridging the gap between the family past, continuing or completion of education and first union formation. Family recomposition may add inter-generational conflicts to the normal family rows. Acrimony within an ill-defined

step-family relationship may accelerate home-leaving by more than a year on average [4], which may have a bearing on early school-leaving.

What is unclear is whether it is parental separation and divorce, or the circumstances leading up to the divorce, that are the causes of children's educational under-achievement. The divorce would then simply be a symptom revealing of a home environment which was already unfavourable to educational performance. If

so, this would make divorced couples a specific subgroup of couples generally from the outset, with divorce simply the manifestation of their defining feature. The most vulnerable parents would be most exposed to divorce, and it is they who would have most problems in keeping their children's education in hand. How to separate the specific effects of divorce from those due to an adverse home environment is a major challenge for future research into the family [5].

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Trends

Weekend births on the wane

Half a century ago, births were almost equally distributed across all days of the week (figure). In 1950, there was a slight surplus of Sunday (1% above daily average) and Monday (2% above) births, attributable to Sunday being a rest day [1], [2]. Labour has a natural tendency to onset when the body is at rest, and at one time, was more commonly a night-time occurrence.

The medicalization of childbirth has radically changed the day-of-the-week distribution of births. Nearly 25% fewer children are now born on Sundays and public holidays, and 15% fewer on Saturdays (i.e., 30% and 20% fewer compared to weekdays). The week-end deficit has gradually deepened over the past fifty years. The new, very unequal pattern of birth distribution is due to the proportion of births induced (8% in 1972, 20% in 1998) and the proportion carried out by arranged Caesarean section (3% in 1972, 9% in 1998) [3]. Dates are scheduled in both cases, and the medical staff and mothers-to-be choose a weekday rather than the week-end for personal convenience. Among weekday births, there are fewer on Mondays (immediately post-weekend) and Wednesdays (less convenient for medical staff and mothers with children at school). Up to the

1970s, Thursday rather than Wednesday was the mid-week school break, and there was also an observable dip in Thursday births.

It is also worth pointing out that the weekend deficit, which rose steadily throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, levelled off a decade ago, and the proportion of induced births seems to have peaked at around 30% [3].

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Daily births in France by day of the week

