

# Family disruptions and childhood happiness

by *Cara Williams*

**M**ost adults believe that childhood should be a care-free time. Studies in the United States and Europe generally attribute happiness to family life and social support;<sup>1</sup> that is, it may be closely associated with satisfying family relationships. Indeed, the stability of our family life during childhood affects our early years perhaps more than anything else. Disruptions in this stability such as divorce, remarriage, the death of a parent, or someone taking a parent's place can influence how happy we were as children and the type of relationships we had with our parents.

1. See Lane, Robert E. 2000. "Diminishing returns to income, companionship and happiness." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1: 103-119.



This article is based on data from the 1995 General Social Survey on the family. The group studied began life living with both parents (adopted or birth); some remained in intact families until they were at least 15 years old, while others experienced a parental structure change before age 15. These changes consist of separation or divorce of parents, death of a parent, remarriage of a parent, or other changes in living arrangements for a child — such as living with other relatives, living in a foster home, or living with someone else. “Other changes” may be the result of parental break-up or death. The data do not indicate what precipitated these changes.

**Respondents are considered to have had a very happy childhood or have been very close emotionally to father/mother if they answered that they agreed or strongly agreed with such a statement.**

In the World Database of Happiness,<sup>2</sup> happiness is defined as “the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole positively.” When adults who experienced change in their parental structure look back at their childhood, do they see themselves as happy? Were they less close to their parents than children whose families remained intact? This paper uses data from the 1995 General Social Survey (GSS) to investigate these questions.

### 13% of Canadian adults experienced change in parental structure as children

According to the 1995 GSS, 96% (22.5 million) of Canadians 15 and older were born into two-parent families and most (87%) continued to live with both their parents until they were at least 15.<sup>3</sup> Before age 15, about 1.9 million adult Canadians (8%) experienced one change in the parental structure of their family. Just over 800,000 experienced two and another 200,000 went through three or more. Most of these disruptions in family life are caused by death or divorce; for example, more than one-half of first changes a child

experienced resulted from separation or divorce, one-third from the death of a parent and the remainder were due to some other type of parental change.

### Children of divorce have higher chance of marital instability

Many factors influence our happiness and how close we were to our parents in childhood. Although the consequences of divorce, separation or death of a parent on a child’s psychological health are complex and not easy to measure, many of the social and economic effects have been well documented. For example, children of divorce are more likely to live in low income and have emotional, behavioral, social and academic problems.<sup>4</sup> Children who experience a parent’s death or divorce are more likely to leave home earlier, are less likely to finish high school and are more likely to rely on Income Assistance as adults. However, while the death of a parent does not seem to affect the likelihood of a child marrying or experiencing marital instability, adult children of divorce are more likely to put off marriage and have a higher chance of marital instability.<sup>5</sup> Many of these

consequences might be considered markers of emotional upset that can influence a child’s long-term life prospects.

### The more instability children experience, the less happy they are

Overall, almost 89% of adult Canadians said in 1995 that they had had a very happy childhood. But the rates vary with different family experiences. Among those who lived with both parents from birth until age 15, 92% felt that they had a very happy childhood. On the other hand, far fewer (72%) respondents who had experienced change in parental structure before age 15 believed they had been very happy children. This finding supports the notion that children find disruptions in the family’s stability disturbing.<sup>6</sup>

2. More information on the World Database of Happiness can be found at [www.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness/hapintro.htm](http://www.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness/hapintro.htm).
3. This includes birth parents and adopted parents.
4. Ambert, Dr. Anne-Marie. 1998. *Divorce: Facts, Figures and Consequences*. Vanier Institute of the Family.
5. Corak, Miles. 1999. *Death and Divorce: The Long Term Consequences of Parental Loss on Adolescents*. Statistics Canada catalogue 11F0019MPE, no. 135; Gruber, Jonathan. 2000. *Is Making Divorce Easier Bad for Children? The Long-run Implications of Unilateral Divorce*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper no. 7968; Boyd, M. and D. Norris. Autumn 1995. “Leaving the nest? The impact of family structure.” *Canadian Social Trends*, and Frederick, J. and M. Boyd. Spring 1998. “The impact of family structure on high school completion.” *Canadian Social Trends*.
6. It is important to note that the perception of childhood happiness is affected by numerous things in addition to structural change. For example, children of divorce may find themselves living in low income, or living in a new neighbourhood without old friendship and family ties.



## Changes in parental structure are associated with childhood happiness

Respondent had a very happy childhood	Number of changes in parental structure			
	None	One	Two	Three or more
Adults aged 15 and over	19,435,000	1,916,000	819,000	245,000
	%			
Strongly agree/agree	92	76	70	50
Disagree/strongly disagree	8	23	27	49
No opinion/not stated	0	1	3	1

Note: Includes all individuals who began life with two parents (biological or adoptive).  
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

up, compared with 79% of those that had some parental structure change. The real disparity, not surprisingly — because mothers more often get custody — occurs in the case of fathers; 74% of respondents from intact families agreed or strongly agreed that they had felt close to their father versus 52% of those who had experienced a change.

### Adult sons are closer to their mothers than are daughters

In the general population, men and women have somewhat different perceptions of childhood happiness and the emotional closeness they felt to their parents as children. Almost 90% of men and 87% of women said they had had a very happy childhood. While the likelihood that sons and daughters felt close to their fathers was similar at about 70%, sons were more likely to feel close to their mothers than were daughters: 90% versus 85%, respectively. However, men and women who did not come from an intact family reported virtually the same levels of childhood happiness, suggesting that these changes affected both sexes equally.



## Both men and women who experienced parental structure changes are less likely to remember their childhood as very happy

	Men		%	Women	
	No change	Change		No change	Change
Very happy childhood	93	74		91	71
Very close emotionally to mother	92	83		87	76
Very close emotionally to father	73	53		75	49

Note: Includes all individuals who began life with two parents (biological or adoptive).  
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

GSS data indicate that the more often children experience change in parental structure, the less likely they are to reflect upon their childhood as happy. The proportion of respondents who remembered their childhood as very happy declined from 76% of those who had only one change, to 70% for those with two changes and to 50% for those who reported three or more changes before age 15.

The likelihood they felt that their childhood was very happy was significantly different for children of divorce than for those who experienced the death of a parent. Among those whose parents separated or divorced, 71% felt that they had had a very happy childhood; among those who experienced the death of a parent, the proportion rose significantly to 87%. This finding

suggests that the effects of divorce on childhood happiness may be more pronounced than the effects of death and may have deeper consequences on quality of life or emotional health.

### Children from intact families feel closer to parents

Changes in parental structure during childhood may influence whether or not we remember being emotionally close to our parents when we were children. After a divorce or separation, a child may not have as much contact with the parent who left since that parent is probably not as active in the child's day-to-day activities. In 1995, 89% of respondents who lived with both parents from birth to at least age 15 stated that they felt very close to their mother when they were growing

### Summary

When adult children who experienced family disruptions during childhood look back on these years, they are less likely to recall their childhood as happy than those whose families were intact. Furthermore, the greater the number of parenting changes these individuals experienced, the less likely they are to believe they were happy. It also appears that adult children who experienced a structural change do not recall being as close to their parents as those who did not experience a change.



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