

# The effects of family structure and parental style throughout childhood on young adults' mental health and social competence

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## Introduction

In children, past research suggested marked effects of family structure (i.e. the family members a person grew up with) on children's mental health:

- Children which were being raised in single parent and parent/stepparent families reportedly showed poorer psychological wellbeing and increased behavioural and emotional problems [1,2,3].
- However, another study found that parental style (i.e. how one was parented, determined by parent's care and protectiveness), rather than family structure, was the most important determinant of an adolescent's psychological wellbeing [4].

While these studies explored the effects of family structure on children, much less research has attempted to assess the effects of childhood family structure on young adults, making it unclear how family factors influence people after leaving their parents' home.

## Research Questions

1. Does childhood family structure affect mental health in young adults?
2. Is parental style more influential than family structure in affecting young adults' mental health?
3. How is social competence influenced by family structure and parental style?

## References

- [1] Kellam, S. G., Ensminger, M. E., & Turner, R. J. (1977). Family Structure and the Mental Health of Children: Concurrent and Longitudinal Community-Wide Studies. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 34(9), 1012-1022.
- [2] Dawson, D. A. (1991). Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53(3), 573-584.
- [3] Paclikova, K., Veselska, Z. D., Bobakova, D. F., Palfiova, M., & Geckova, A. M. (2019). What role do family composition and functioning play in emotional and behavioural problems among adolescent boys and girls? *International Journal of Public Health*, 64, 209-217.
- [4] McFarlane, A. H., Bellissimo, A., & Norman, G. R. (1995). Family Structure, Family Functioning and Adolescent Well-Being: the Transcendent Influence of Parental Style. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36(5), 847-864.

## Methods

### Participants:

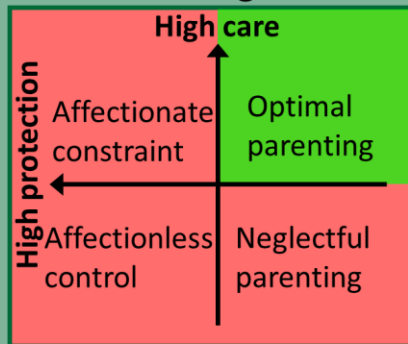
- There were 62 participants, two of which were excluded from the final analysis for fathers
- Participant had to be 18-25 years old (mean=21.67, SD=1.83) and could not live in their parents' home anymore; there were 46 female and 16 male participants

### Design and Procedure:

- The variables were measured through a set of questionnaires which participants completed online

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Covariates
Family structure (see "Family Structure Types")	Total difficulties score (a measure of mental health)	Age, Gender, Socio-economic background
Sibling number	Social competence score	
Care score mother/father (component of parental style; see "Parental Bonding Instrument")		
Protection score mother/father (component of parental style; see "Parental Bonding Instrument")		

### Parental Bonding Instrument



- Measured along the two dimensions, *care* and *protection*
- Different combinations of low/high care and protection scores differentiate between four *parental styles* (i.e. four Parental Bonding Quadrants)

### Family Structure Types

Predominantly grew up with <i>both</i> biological parents
Predominantly grew up with <i>one</i> biological parent (i.e. a single parent)
Predominantly grew up with one biological parent <i>and one non-biological</i> parent (e.g. a stepparent)
Predominantly grew up with <i>neither</i> biological parent

- The four family structure types which were differentiated for this study

## Results

Four hierarchical multiple regressions were used to analyse the data, one for each dependent variable and separately for mothers' and fathers' results (see "Full Model Results" tables below).

Both *mothers' care* ( $\beta = -.235$ ,  $p = .045$ ) and *protection scores* ( $\beta = .243$ ,  $p = .025$ ) significantly predicted young adults' *total difficulties* scores.

In addition, *fathers' protection scores* significantly predicted *social competence* ( $\beta = -.040$ ,  $p = .018$ ).

However, *family structure* had a *non-significant* influence on young adults' total difficulties and social competence scores in all four models.

### Full Model Results of the Independent Variables and Covariates for Mothers

Dependent variables	Total difficulties	Social competence
R <sup>2</sup>	.290	.220
F	3.144	2.170
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>adj</sub>	.197	.118
p	.007	.051

### Full Model Results of the Independent Variables and Covariates for Fathers

Dependent variables	Total difficulties	Social competence
R <sup>2</sup>	.137	.253
F	1.180	2.520
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>adj</sub>	.021	.153
p	.330	.026

## Discussion

While this study found no significant influence of childhood family structure on young adults' mental health, childhood parental style had a significant effect on mental health, which matches McFarlane et al. findings [4].

Specifically, mothers' care and protection scores proved to significantly influence young adults' mental health, but fathers' parental style did not have the same influence. Social competence also was not significantly influenced by family structure, but was only significantly influenced by fathers' protection scores.

This project supports the hypothesis of longer term impacts of familial influences on the psycho-social wellbeing of adults beyond childhood. It would be worth exploring the effects of childhood parental style on older adults in a future study. Further, why mothers' and fathers' care and protection scores show different levels of significance for different variables is also of interest.