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Family Structure, Stability, and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Cohabitation

Using data from the first two waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), I examine the linkages between family structure, stability, and child outcomes. Roughly 14% of 9 month-olds reside in two biological cohabiting parent families. Children living with two biological cohabiting parents tend to fare similarly to their counterparts residing with two biological married parents in terms of mental and motor development, although they perform less well on the NCATS. Two biological cohabiting parent families are considerably less stable than two biological married parent families. Nearly 30% of children in two biological cohabiting parent families experience a change in family structure between the 9-month and 24-month interviews versus fewer than 2% of children in two biological married parent families. Transitions out of a cohabiting family into a married or single-mother family do not appear to be detrimental to mental and motor development. In fact, moving from a cohabiting to a single-mother family is associated with larger gains in mental development than remaining in a stable two biological parent cohabiting family.