


 Science Says

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## Unplanned Pregnancy and Family Turmoil

**Parents who have a birth resulting from an unplanned pregnancy are less likely to be in a committed relationship, less likely to move into a more formal union, and more likely to have high levels of relationship conflict and unhappiness.**

Half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned<sup>a</sup>, and the majority of them are to unmarried young women in their 20s.<sup>1</sup> While the consequences of unplanned pregnancy are not as well defined as those for teen pregnancy, a growing body of research confirms that there are a number of reasons to be concerned about unplanned pregnancy among young adults. Some of the risks are direct—such as late entry into prenatal care—and some appear to amplify and exacerbate a variety of risks to child and family well-being that may exist before an unplanned pregnancy itself.

- Unplanned pregnancy is linked to late entry into prenatal care, infant mortality, and low birthweight. In addition, it can impede adequate child spacing, which in turn can lead to less favorable health outcomes for mother and child.<sup>2</sup>
- Children born from unplanned (and especially unwanted) pregnancies are also at greater risk of child abuse and neglect, poor mother-child attachment, cognitive and physical deficits, and more.<sup>2</sup>

- Unplanned pregnancies are at the root of virtually all abortions in the United States, which totaled 1.2 million in 2005, a figure that has been declining, but only slowly.<sup>3</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies are concentrated among unmarried women in their 20s and account for the majority of births to unmarried women. The risks to children being born into such circumstances have been well documented and include economic hardship, behavioral and cognitive deficits, and engagement in risky behavior during adolescence.<sup>4</sup>
- Similarly, births resulting from unplanned pregnancies lead to higher levels of chaos and turmoil between the parents and within the family. Such relationship turmoil creates troubling environments for children, especially young children.<sup>5</sup>

It is this last finding—the link between unplanned births and relationship turmoil and conflict within the family—that this *Science Says* issue brief explores in greater depth. Existing research confirms that children do best when their parents are in a stable relationship. But mere parental presence is not enough—parents also need to be in a *low-conflict* relationship.<sup>4</sup> *The new findings presented here build on this research, showing that parents having a birth following an unplanned pregnancy are significantly less likely to be in a stable relationship and have significantly greater odds of experiencing conflict. This increased likelihood of turmoil and instability poses important risks to the well-being of their children.*

<sup>a</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, unplanned pregnancies refer to those that are unintended and include both those reported as unwanted and those reported as mistimed. Pregnancy intentions are based on the mother's reports of the timing and wantedness of the pregnancy.

Research for this brief was completed by Child Trends ([www.ChildTrends.org](http://www.ChildTrends.org)) based on a review of existing research and an analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). Note that these data and the related findings presented in this brief are limited to those pregnancies resulting in a live birth and apply to women and men of all ages. Births are characterized below as being either planned (that is, resulting from a planned pregnancy), or unplanned (that is, resulting from an unplanned pregnancy). All results presented control for background characteristics and are statistically significant unless otherwise noted.

**Highlights:**

- When compared to similar women who have a planned birth, women who have an unplanned birth are more likely to be outside a committed relationship (that is, neither married nor cohabiting) at the time of conception and more likely to remain outside a committed relationship after the unplanned birth.
- The majority of unmarried women having an unplanned birth do not move to a more formal union after the birth—that is, most single mothers having an unplanned birth remain single and most cohabiting mothers having an unplanned birth either continue cohabiting or break up with their partner.
- Both mothers and fathers who have an unplanned birth report less happiness and more conflict in their relationship compared to similar women and men who have a planned birth.
- Both mothers and fathers who have an unplanned birth are more likely to experience depressive symptoms compared to similar mothers and fathers who have a planned birth.

**Unplanned Pregnancy in the United States**

Nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned. More specifically, of the 6.4 million pregnancies in 2001 (the most recent year for which data are available), more than 3 million were unplanned.<sup>1</sup> Of these, over 2 million were to women age 29 and younger—accounting for nearly three-quarters of unplanned pregnancies overall.<sup>6</sup>

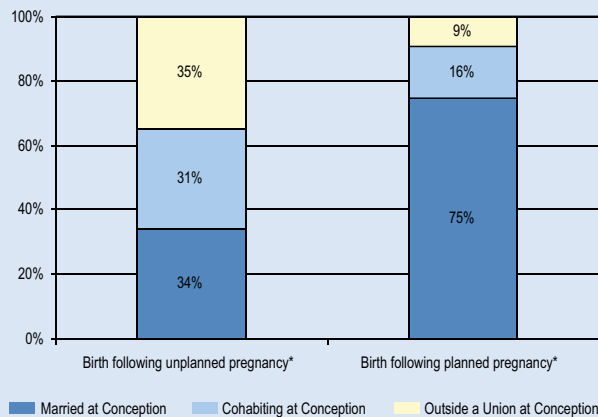
There has been virtually no progress made in reducing unplanned pregnancy since the mid-1990s. In fact, the rate of unplanned pregnancy in the United States remained steady at 51 unplanned pregnancies per 1,000 women between 1994 and 2001.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the rate of *unwanted* pregnancy (a subset of unplanned pregnancy) increased slightly between 1994 and 2001.<sup>1</sup>

**Family Turmoil Following an Unplanned Birth**

**Parental Unions and Relationship Stability.** Most children born following an unplanned pregnancy are conceived outside of marriage. And, while it is often thought that an unplanned birth among unmarried parents may lead to a more formal union (marriage, in particular), the results below show this is usually not the case.

- Women having an unplanned birth are significantly less likely to have been either married or cohabiting at the time of conception compared to women with a planned birth. In fact, over one-third (35 percent) of women having an unplanned birth are outside any union (i.e. neither married nor cohabiting) when they got pregnant, compared to only 9 percent of women having a planned birth (Figure 1). By contrast, three-quarters of women having a planned birth are married at conception, compared with 34 percent of those with an unplanned birth.

**FIGURE 1.** Relationship Status of Mothers at Conception, by Whether Birth Resulted from Unplanned or Planned Pregnancy



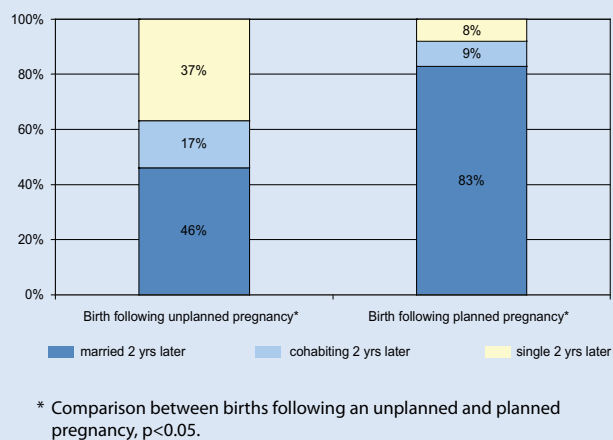
\* Comparison between births following an unplanned and planned pregnancy, p<0.05.

- Furthermore, the majority of unmarried women having an unplanned birth do not move into a more formal union following the birth and many experience relationship turbulence during the first 2 years after the birth. Among mothers having an unplanned birth who are single when they become pregnant, more than half (54 percent) remain single by the time their child is 2 years old. Among mothers

having an unplanned birth who are cohabiting when they become pregnant, nearly one-quarter break up within the 2 years following the birth, while 42 percent remain cohabiting and only one-third get married. All else being equal, mothers having an unplanned birth experience significantly less subsequent union formation and greater union dissolution by 2 years after the birth compared to mothers having a planned birth. See Table A for more detailed comparisons of relationship transitions among parents having planned versus unplanned births.

- Given that most women having an unplanned birth are unmarried when they get pregnant and relatively few of them subsequently get married, it is not surprising that less than half (46 percent) of all women having an unplanned birth are married at the time their child is 2 years old. An additional 17 percent are cohabiting and over one-third (37 percent) are single. In contrast, 83 percent of women who have a planned birth are married 2 years after the birth, 9 percent are cohabiting, and 8 percent are single (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2.** Relationship Status of Mothers 2 Years after Birth, by Whether Birth Resulted from Unplanned or Planned Pregnancy

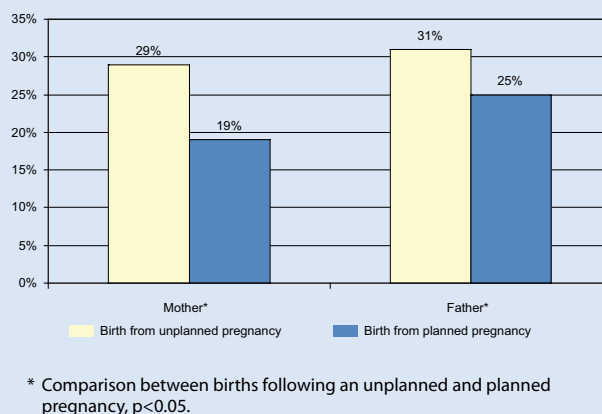


**Relationship Quality.** Even in cases where parents are married or cohabiting, families face greater risk of turmoil when the birth of their child follows an unplanned pregnancy as compared to a planned pregnancy. Mothers and fathers who are married or cohabiting report greater relationship conflict

and less relationship happiness following an unplanned birth compared to a planned birth.<sup>b</sup>

- More than one-quarter (29 percent) of mothers having an unplanned birth report frequent conflict with the child's father at 9 months after the child's birth (measured in households with both mother and father residing, either married or cohabiting). This compares to less than one-fifth (19 percent) reporting frequent conflict among similar mothers having a planned birth (Figure 3).

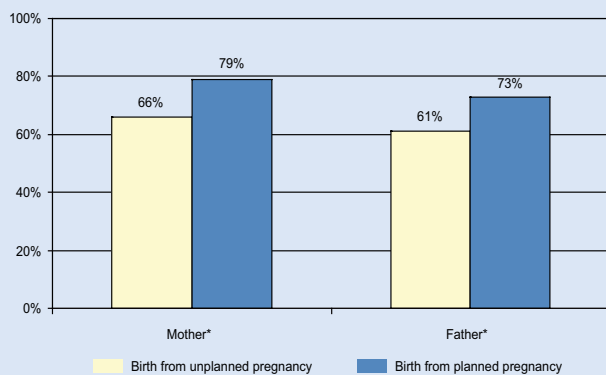
**FIGURE 3.** Percent of Parents Reporting Relationship Conflict at 9 Months Following the Birth, when Both Parents Reside in the Household



- Figure 3 shows that fathers also report significantly more relationship conflict when the birth of their child resulted from an unplanned pregnancy. Among fathers who had an unplanned birth and were still living with the child's mother after nine months (married or cohabiting), nearly one-third (31 percent) reported frequent conflict, compared to 25 percent of similar fathers whose child was born following a planned pregnancy.
- Similarly, relationship happiness was significantly lower among parents having an unplanned birth compared to a planned birth, when measured among parents still living together 9 months after the child's birth (Figure 4). While roughly three-quarters of parents having a planned birth reported relationship happiness (79 percent of mothers and 73 percent of fathers), two-thirds or less of parents having an unplanned birth reported relationship happiness (66 percent of mothers and 61 percent of fathers).

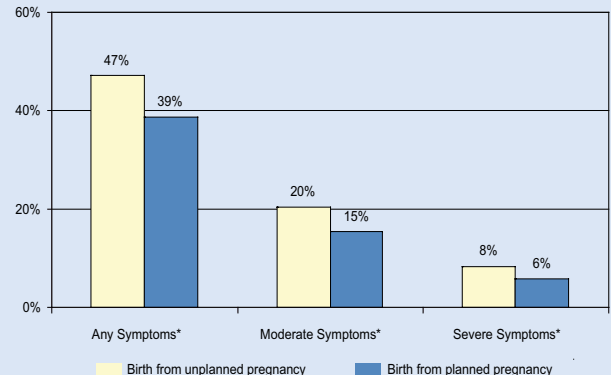
<sup>b</sup> Relationship conflict is defined as a mother or father reporting that she/he "very often" reports arguing with her/his partner about any of the following items: drinking, other men/women, chores and responsibilities, their children, money, not showing love and affection, sex, religion, leisure time, or in-laws.

**FIGURE 4.** Percent of Parents Reporting Relationship Happiness at 9 Months Following the Birth, when Both Parents Reside in the Household



\* Comparison between births following an unplanned and planned pregnancy,  $p < 0.05$ .

**FIGURE 5.** Percent of Mothers Reporting Depressive Symptoms 9 Months Following the Birth



\* Comparison between births following an unplanned and planned pregnancy,  $p < 0.05$ .

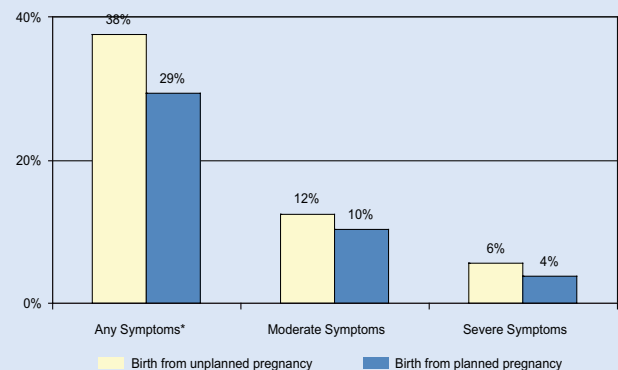
- Even among parents who remain together at least 24 months after an unplanned birth, there is a significantly higher likelihood of both relationship conflict and relationship unhappiness. For more detailed comparisons of relationship quality at 24 months for parents having planned and unplanned births, see Table B.

**Mental Health.** The findings presented below show that parental depression (measured among all parents answering the survey regardless of whether single, cohabiting, or married) is another factor associated with unplanned pregnancy. This link between unplanned pregnancy and mental health is important because parental depression not only directly affects mothers' and fathers' well-being, but also diminishes their ability to be effective parents. Existing research clearly documents the link between parental depression and a greater risk of behavioral problems<sup>8</sup> as well as cognitive deficits (poor problem-solving skills, impaired school performance, and intellectual acuity)<sup>9</sup> among their children when compared to children of non-depressed parents (net of controls).

- Among mothers who had an unplanned birth, nearly half (47 percent) report some symptoms of depression 9 months following the birth of their child, 20 percent report moderate symptoms, and 8 percent report severe symptoms. These levels of depression are significantly higher among mothers having an unplanned birth compared to mothers having a planned birth, whose incidence of any, moderate, or severe depressive symptoms are 39 percent, 15 percent, and 6 percent respectively (Figure 5).
- Overall, the percentage of fathers reporting *any* symptoms of depression 9 months following the birth is significantly

higher if the birth was unplanned rather than planned—38 percent vs. 29 percent (measured among both married and cohabiting as well as non-residential fathers). Moderate and severe depressive symptoms reported by fathers are also more common if the birth resulted from an unplanned pregnancy, but the differences are not significant (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6.** Percent of Fathers Reporting Depressive Symptoms 9 Months Following the Birth



\* Comparison between births following an unplanned and planned pregnancy,  $p < 0.05$ .

**What It All Means**

A growing body of evidence suggests that unplanned pregnancies result in serious consequences for both children and their parents. In particular, families having an unplanned birth are at increased risk for a number of hardships and

these risks persist even after accounting for a number of socio-demographic differences that predate the pregnancies being studied.

**Unplanned pregnancy is not a reliable path to stronger parental union.** The new analyses presented in this research brief clearly show that parents who have an unplanned birth are more likely to be outside of a committed relationship, less likely to move into to a more formal union with the other parent, and more likely to experience unstable relationships during the first 24 months after their child is born, compared to parents having a planned birth. In fact, the majority of single and cohabiting parents having an unplanned birth do not move into closer parental unions (marriage in particular) and a large share of cohabiting parents' relationships dissolve.

**Unplanned pregnancy may lead to a more troubling environment for children.** Parents who have a birth resulting from an unplanned pregnancy are more likely to experience high levels of relationship conflict, are less likely to report relationship happiness, and are more likely to report symptoms of depression compared to parents who have a child as the result of a planned pregnancy. These serious consequences not only have a detrimental effect on parents' mental and physical health — they are also linked to decreased child well-being.

## Methods

The original analyses presented here are based on data from the first 2 waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), a nationally representative longitudinal study of about 11,000 children born in 2001. The ECLS-B, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, collected information when the children were aged approximately 9 months (Wave 1) and 24 months (Wave 2); and some racial/ethnic subgroups, children born at low birth weight, and twins were over-sampled. ECLS-B data includes numerous child and family characteristics, including measures of child development collected from parent interviews, birth certificates, child care providers, schools, and direct and indirect child assessments.

All data were analyzed using Stata and the analyses controlled for child, mother, and grandparent characteristics. Child-level controls included gender, age, race/ethnicity, parity, and whether it was a multiple birth (twins). Maternal controls included age, education, marital/cohabitation status and history at the time of the birth, household socioeconomic status (SES), whether the mother worked in the year prior to pregnancy, whether the mother lived with both biological parents until age 16, and language status. Grandparent controls included the highest grade completed by the maternal grandparent. Father estimates of relationship conflict and happiness were only included for households in which both the biological mother and father lived.

## Detailed Tables

**TABLE A.** Parental Relationship Transitions Between Conception and 24-months, by Relationship Type at Conception, with Controls, ECLS-B

Relationship Status at Conception and Subsequent Transition	Birth Following an Unplanned Pregnancy	Birth Following a Planned Pregnancy	
<i>Outside Union at Conception</i>			
• Transitioned to Cohabiting or Married	44%	57%	*
• Remained Single	56%	43%	*
<i>Cohabiting at Conception</i>			
• Transitioned to Married	33%	44%	*
• Transitioned to Single	24%	13%	*
• Remained Cohabiting	42%	47%	
<i>Married at Conception</i>			
• Transitioned to Cohabiting or Single	11%	6%	*
• Remained Married	89%	94%	*

\* Comparison between births following an unplanned and planned pregnancy,  $p < 0.05$

**Detailed Tables (continued)**

**TABLE B.** Parental Report of Relationship Quality at 24-months following the Birth when Both Parents Reside in the Household, ECLS-B

Measure of Relationship Quality	Birth Following an Unplanned Pregnancy	Birth Following a Planned Pregnancy	
Percent of mothers reporting relationship happiness	63%	76%	*
Percent of fathers reporting relationship happiness	60%	72%	*
Percent of mothers reporting relationship conflict	32%	26%	*
Percent of fathers reporting relationship conflict	30%	24%	*

\* Comparison between births following an unplanned and planned pregnancy, p<0.05

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