

## **THE WELL-BEING OF MARYLAND PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN: DIFFERENCES BY INCOME STATUS AND FAMILY STRUCTURE**

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### **OVERVIEW**

*When compared with their higher-income counterparts, on average, parents in low-income Maryland families (that is, those with incomes that are less than twice the official poverty threshold)<sup>1</sup> have less advantageous environments for raising children, and both the parents and their children experience fewer positive outcomes. Similarly, when compared with their counterparts in families headed by two biological or adoptive parents, families headed by single mothers are associated with less advantageous environments for raising children and fewer positive outcomes for both parents and children. When family structure and income are jointly taken into account, family circumstances and child outcomes are often dramatically different.*

### **BACKGROUND**

Research studies based on statistics for the United States as a whole have documented differences in child and family well-being between children in low-income families and children in more affluent families<sup>2</sup> and between children in single-parent families and children in two-parent families.<sup>3</sup> However, researchers have not explored differences in well-being in these families at the state level because of a lack of state-level data. The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) provides representative data at both the national and state levels on several important areas (or *domains*) of parental and family functioning and well-being. Child Trends drew on these data for 2003 to analyze differences in well-being by family income and family structure in Maryland, thus illustrating the richness of this new source of statistical information. This *Research Brief* presents our findings.

Our analyses focused on child and family well-being in five different domains:

- Parent characteristics<sup>4</sup> and well-being;
- Parenting and family processes;
- Child's environment;
- Child's activities; and
- Child's health and well-being

Although we found that most children and their parents in Maryland are functioning well in most domains, *significant differences exist in many important measures of child and family well-being between children and their parents in low-income families and their counterparts in higher-income families.*<sup>5</sup> Similarly, *significant differences exist in many measures of child and family well-being between children and their parents in families headed by single mothers and families headed by two biological or adoptive parents.* In particular, the often-substantial contrasts between low-income single-parent and higher-income two-parent families serve as a telling reminder of the difficulties faced by children in households with both of these family risk factors.

### ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE USED FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) is a national telephone survey involving 102,353 interviews completed between January 2003 and July 2004. One child under the age of 18 was randomly selected in each household as the subject of the survey. The parent or guardian of the child served as the respondent. Data were collected by the Maternal Child and Health Bureau in collaboration with the National Center for Health Statistics. For additional information about children and family health and well-being for every state (including Maryland), please visit the National Survey of Children's Health Data Resource Center at <http://www.nschdata.org/Content/Default.aspx>.

The results of Child Trends' analyses, as presented below, are statistically significant, after taking account of the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment. However, the percentages and the differences themselves have *not* been adjusted for these factors. (It should be noted that, prior to imposing these basic demographic controls, many of these differences were statistically significant.) Comprehensive results are presented in Table 1 at the end of this brief.

### PARENT CHARACTERISTICS AND WELL-BEING IN MARYLAND: KEY FINDINGS

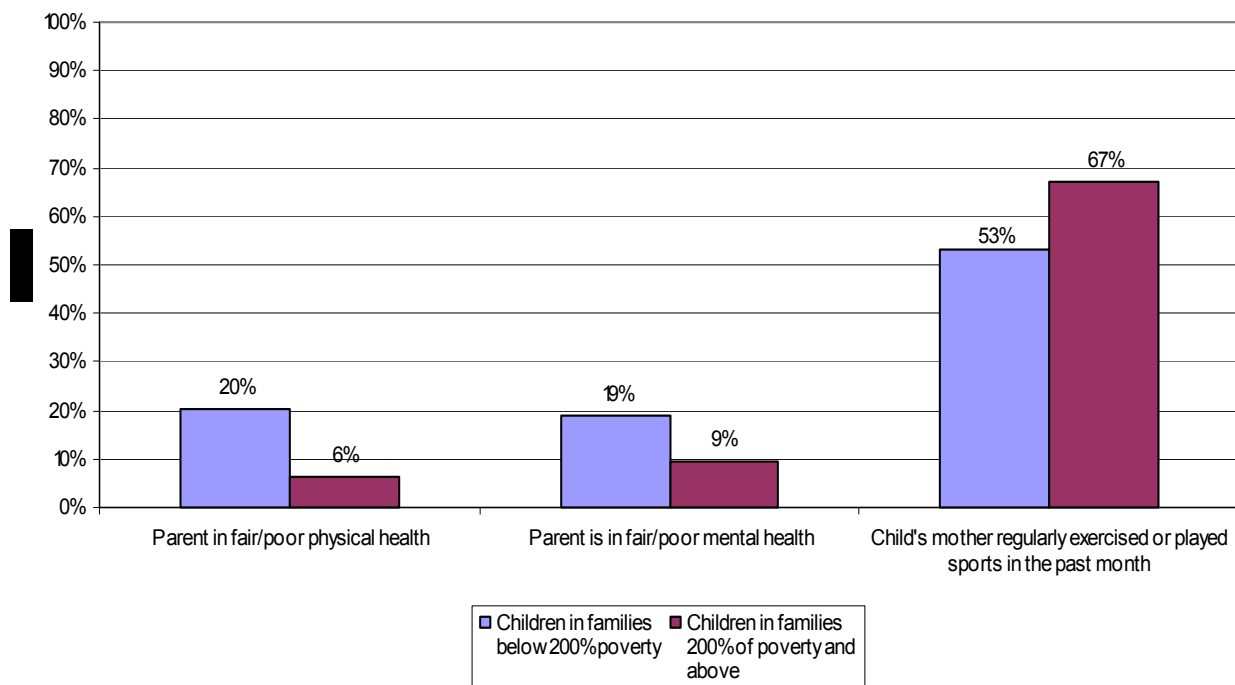
We examined four measures in this domain: the level of aggravation the parent experienced in parenting; the status of the parent's physical health; the status of the parent's mental health; and the frequency with which the parent exercised regularly or played sports.

**Low-income vs. higher-income families.** Among *single-mother families*, mothers in low-income families were at a disadvantage in three of the four measures of parental well-being, when compared with their higher-income counterparts (see Figure 1) and after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

- Among single-mother families, 20 percent of mothers in low-income families were in fair or poor physical health, compared with 6 percent of mothers in higher-income families.
- Similarly, among single-mother families, 19 percent of mothers in low-income families were in fair or poor mental health, compared with 9 percent of mothers in higher-income families.
- About 53 percent of mothers in low-income single-mother families regularly exercised or played sports in the past month, compared with 67 percent of mothers in higher-income single-mother families.

However, among *two-parent biological or adoptive families*, parents in low-income families were not at a statistically significant disadvantage in any of the four measures, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment (see Table 1).

**Figure 1. Parent Characteristics and Well-Being of Maryland Single-Mother Families by Family Income, 2003**



**Single-mother vs. two-parent biological or adoptive families.** Among *low-income families*, mothers in single-mother families were at a disadvantage on two of the four measures of parental well-being, when compared with parents in two-parent families (see Table 1), after controlling for the child’s gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent’s educational attainment. However, among *higher-income families*, mothers in single-mother families were at an advantage in one of the four measures, when compared with the most knowledgeable parent in two-parent families, after controlling for the child’s gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent’s educational attainment.

- Among low-income families, single mothers were more than three times as likely (20 percent) to be in fair or poor physical health than was the parent in two-parent families (7 percent).
- Among low-income families, 19 percent of single mothers were in fair or poor mental health, compared with 7 percent for the parent in two-parent families.
- However, among higher-income families, 67 percent of single mothers exercised or played sports in the past month, compared with 60 percent of the parents in two-parent families.

### **PARENTING AND FAMILY PROCESSES: KEY FINDINGS**

We examined four measures in this domain: the parent meeting the child’s friends; the setting of rules in the family about what television programs the child can watch; the child ever having been breastfed or fed breast milk; and the child being read to six-to-seven days a week at a very young age.

When we did not take demographic factors into account, our comparisons of several of these measures

showed low-income families to be at a disadvantage relative to higher-income families, and single-mother families to be at a disadvantage relative to two-parent biological or adoptive families. However, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment, we found that these differences were no longer statistically significant (see Table 1).

### **CHILD'S ENVIRONMENT (AS REPORTED BY PARENT): KEY FINDINGS**

We examined three measures in this domain: the parent's feeling about the child's safety at home; the parent's feeling about the child's safety in the neighborhood; and the presence or absence of tobacco smoking in the household.

**Low-income vs. higher-income families.** Among *single-mother families*, children in low-income households were at an advantage in one of the three measures of the child's environment, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

- As shown in Table 1, among single-mother families, tobacco smoking was less likely to occur in low-income households (59 percent) than in higher-income households (77 percent).

However, among *two-parent biological or adoptive families*, we found no statistically significant differences in the three measures of the child's environment between low-income and higher-income two-parent biological or adoptive families, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment.

**Single-mother vs. two-parent biological or adoptive families.** Among *low-income families*, we found no statistically significant differences in the three measures of the child's environment between single-mother and two-parent biological or adoptive families, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment. However, among *higher-income families*, we found that children in single-mother families were at a disadvantage in one of the three measures of the child's environment, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment.

- As shown in Table 1, among higher-income families, parents in two-parent households were somewhat more likely (90 percent) to feel that their child was always safe at home than were single mothers (83 percent).

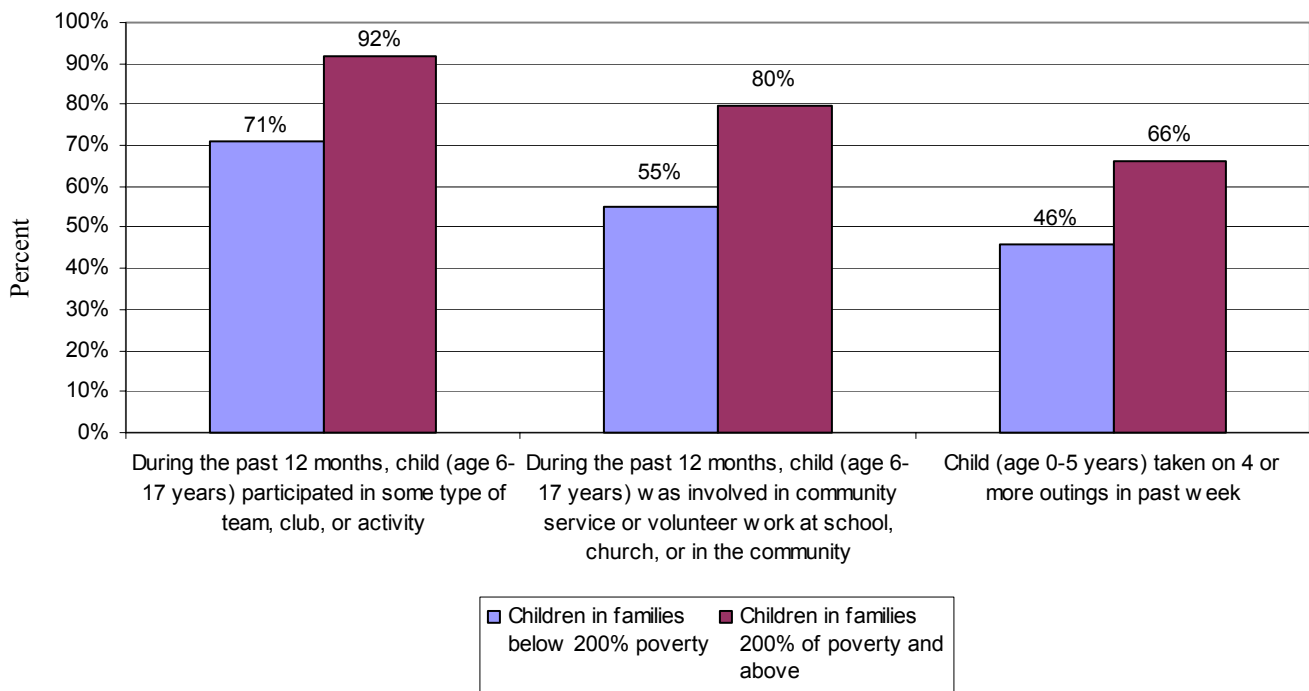
### **CHILD'S ACTIVITIES (AS REPORTED BY PARENT): KEY FINDINGS**

We examined five measures in this domain: the participation of the school-age child in some type of team, club, or activity during the past year; the involvement of the school-age child in community service or volunteer work during the past year; the number of outings the very young child was taken on in the past week; the time that the school-age child spent caring for himself or herself without supervision from an adult or older child during the past week; and the number of hours on an average school day the school-age child spent on the computer, watching TV, or playing video games.

**Low-income vs. higher-income families.** As shown in Figure 2, among *two-parent biological or adoptive families*, children in low-income families were at a disadvantage in three of the five measures of the child's activities, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment.

- Among two-parent biological or adoptive families, 71 percent of children ages 6-17 in low-income families participated in some type of team, club, or activity, compared with 92 percent of children in higher-income families.<sup>6</sup>
- Similarly, among two-parent families, only 55 percent of children ages 6-17 in low-income families were involved in community service or volunteer work at school, church, or in the community, compared with 80 percent of children in higher-income families.

**Figure 2. Child Activities in Two-Parent Biological or Adoptive Maryland Families by Family Income, 2003**



- Finally, among two-parent families, 46 percent of children ages 0-5 in low-income families participated in four or more family outings a week, compared with 66 percent of children in higher-income families.

However, among *single-mother families*, we found no statistically significant differences between low-income and higher-income families in the five measures of the child’s activities, after controlling for the child’s gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

**Single-mother vs. two-parent biological or adoptive families.** Among *low-income families*, we found no statistically significant differences between single-mother and two-parent biological or adopted families in the five measures of the child’s activities, after controlling for the child’s gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent’s educational attainment. However, among *higher-income families*, we found that children in single-mother families were at a disadvantage in one of the five measures of the

child's activities, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment.

- As shown in Table 1, among higher-income families, children in two-parent families were substantially more likely (80 percent) to be involved in community service or volunteer work at school, church, or in the community than were children in single-mother families (62 percent).

### **CHILD'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING (AS REPORTED BY PARENT): KEY FINDINGS**

We examined eight measures, the largest number, in this domain: the parent's rating of the child's emotional and behavioral problems; the child's overall health; the child's weight status; the child's risk for developmental delay; the assessment of a doctor or health professional about the child's behavioral or conduct problems; the child's repetition of a grade; the adequacy of the sleep the child gets; and the condition of the child's teeth.

**Low-income vs. higher-income families.** As shown in Table 1, among *single-mother families*, children in low-income families were worse off than were children in higher-income families for one of the eight measures of child health and well-being, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

- Among single-mother families, 60 percent of children in low-income families had teeth that were in excellent or very good condition, compared with 79 percent of children in higher-income families.

Among *two-parent biological or adoptive families*, children in low-income families were worse off for two of the eight measures of child health and well-being than were children in higher-income families, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment.

- Among low-income two-parent biological or adoptive families, 82 percent of parents reported that the physical of health of their child was excellent or very good, compared with 92 percent for parents in higher-income families.
- Similarly, among two-parent biological or adoptive families, 17 percent of children in low-income families had repeated a grade, compared with only 5 percent of children in higher-income families.

**Single-mother vs. two-parent biological or adoptive families.** We found no statistically significant differences in the eight measures of the child's health and well-being between single-mother and two-parent biological or adoptive families within either family income group, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the better educated parent's educational attainment.

### **CONCLUSION**

Results of the analysis Child Trends conducted to produce this *Research Brief* show that both family income and family structure make a difference for various measures of parental well-being, the child's environment, and child health and well-being, after controlling for the child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and parental education. However, many apparent differences associated with income or family structure are not statistically significant when confounding factors are controlled. We summarize our statistically significant findings here:

- Compared with higher-income single-mother families, low-income single-mother families are at a disadvantage in the following measures: (1) parental physical health; (2) parental mental health; (3) parental exercise; and (4) children’s dental health. However, children in low-income single-mother families are *less likely* to be living in a household where someone smokes tobacco.
- Compared with higher-income two-parent biological families, low-income two-parent biological families are at a disadvantage in the following measures: (1) older child’s participation in some type of team, club, or activity; (2) older child’s involvement in community service or volunteer work; (3) young child’s outings; (4) child’s physical health; and (5) older child’s repeating a grade.
- Compared with low-income two-parent biological or adoptive families, low-income single-mother families are at a disadvantage in the following measures: (1) parent’s physical health; and (2) parent’s mental health.
- Compared with higher-income two-parent biological or adoptive families, low-income two-parent biological or adoptive families are at a disadvantage in the following measures: (1) older child’s involvement in community service or volunteer work; and (2) child safety at home. However, mothers in low-income two-parent biological or adoptive families are more likely to exercise regularly than are mothers in higher-income two-parent biological or adoptive families

It has also been illuminating to explore the joint advantages of being in a higher-income two-parent biological or adoptive family, when compared with being in a low-income single-mother family. For example, as shown in Table 1, 20 percent of poor single mothers are in fair or poor physical health, compared with only 4 percent of the most knowledgeable parents<sup>3</sup> in higher-income two-parent families. Similarly, 19 percent of poor single mothers are in fair or poor mental health, compared with only 3 percent of the most knowledgeable parents in higher-income two-parent families. Since these disadvantages often occur together, these contrasts highlight the importance of both family income and family structure, even when other confounding factors—such as parent education and race/ethnicity—are taken into account.

Thus, our analysis of recently released data on the well-being of the nation’s children and parents provides support for the hypothesis that family income and family structure jointly influence both the environment in which a child is raised and child health and well-being.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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**Table 1. Well-Being of Maryland Single-Mother and Two-Parent Families and Their Children: Differences by Income Status and Family Structure, 2003**

	Maryland Children in Single-Mother Families		Maryland Children in Two-Parent Families				
	Children in Families below 200% poverty	Significance	Children in Families 200% of poverty and above	Significance	Children in Families below 200% poverty	Significance	Children in Families 200% of poverty and above
<b>CHILD'S ACTIVITIES</b>							
During the past 12 months, child (age 6-17 years) participates in some type of team, club, or activity	69.3%		87.5%		71.0%	D	91.8%
During the past 12 months, child (age 6-17 years) was involved in community service or volunteer work at school, church, or in the community	54.9%		61.6%	C	55.1%	D	79.7%
Number of outings in past week, such as to the park, library, zoo, shopping, church, restaurants, or family gatherings (child age 0-5 years)							
4-6 outings	19.0%		31.3%		22.6%	D	43.4%
7 or more outings	16.9%		15.9%		23.3%		22.9%
Child (age 6-11 years) spends time caring for him/herself, either at home or somewhere else, without an adult or older child responsible for him/her	17.1%		24.0%		14.3%		17.5%
Number of hours child (age 6-17 years) spends on the computer, watching TV, and playing video games							
5 hours or more	25.1%		18.1%		7.0%		9.6%
<b>PARENT CHARACTERISTICS/WELL-BEING</b>							
Parent experiences high level of aggravation in parenting	12.2%		6.6%		5.3%		5.2%
Parent in fair/poor physical health	20.4%	AB	6.5%		6.6%		3.7%
Parent is in fair/poor mental health	18.9%	AB	9.3%		7.3%		3.0%
Child's mother regularly exercised or played sports in the past month	53.4%	A	67.3%	C	55.5%		59.5%
<b>PARENTING/FAMILY PROCESSES</b>							
Parent has met all or most of the child's friends (vs. some or none) (child age 6-17 years)	74.5%		84.8%		80.7%		87.9%
Family has rules about what television programs child is allowed to watch (child age 6-17 years)	81.3%		82.4%		86.0%		86.5%
Child was ever breastfed or fed breast milk	51.9%		73.7%		76.3%		84.7%
Stories are read aloud to the child 6-7 days per week (child age 0-5 years)	35.4%		52.1%		51.6%		59.6%
<b>CHILD'S ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT</b>							
Parent feels child is always safe at home (vs. never, sometimes, usually)	87.8%		82.9%	C	93.6%		89.8%
Parent feels child is always safe in neighborhood (vs. never, sometimes, usually)	35.3%		42.1%		51.0%		49.6%
Someone in the household uses cigarettes, cigars, or pipe tobacco	59.1%	A	77.2%		68.1%		78.9%
<b>CHILD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING</b>							
Parent's rating of child's emotional, concentration, behavioral, or social problems							
Moderate/severe emotional problems	15.5%		8.3%		8.1%		7.7%
Child's overall health							
Excellent/Very Good	77.9%		87.2%		82.2%	D	92.1%
Child is overweight <sup>A</sup> (child age 10-17 years)	23.2%		16.6%		15.3%		9.3%
Child's risk for developmental delay (child age < 6 years) <sup>B</sup>							
High risk	14.6%		6.1%		12.5%		5.9%
Doctor or health professional has told parent that child has behavioral or conduct problems (child age ≥ 22 months)	9.8%		5.5%		4.9%		2.6%
Since starting kindergarten, child (age 6-17 years) has repeated a grade	16.2%		8.6%		17.1%	D	4.5%
Child (age 6-17 years) gets enough sleep 7 nights per week	75.6%		60.8%		76.4%		65.4%
Condition of the child's teeth (child age > 12 months)							
Excellent/Very good	60.1%	A	78.8%		69.8%		82.1%
<b>Number of Survey Respondents</b>	190		239		146		1,063

A. The difference in the percentage of children with a given characteristic in single-mother families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line and those in single-mother families with incomes at or above 200% of the poverty line is statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

B. The difference in the percentage of children with a given characteristic in single-mother families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line and those in two-parent families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line is statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

C. The difference in the percentage of children with a given characteristic in single-mother families with incomes at or above 200% of the poverty line and those in two-parent families with incomes at or above 200% of the poverty line is statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

D. The difference in the percentage of children with a given characteristic in two-parent families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line and those in two-parent families with incomes at or above 200% of the poverty is statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

Source: Child Trends tabulations of 2003 National Survey of Children's Health

Note. Percentages are unadjusted. Statistical significance is adjusted for confounding factors including child's gender, age, and race/ethnicity and the educational attainment of the better educated parent.



## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> In 2003, 200 percent of the poverty line was \$35,320 for a single-mother family of three.

<sup>2</sup> Wertheimer, R., Moore, K.A., Burkhauser, M., & Collins, A. (2008). The well-being of children in working poor and other families: 1997 and 2004. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Susan L. (2004). Family structure and child well-being: The significance of parental cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 66(2), 351-67; The Urban Institute. (2006). Parents and children facing a world of risk: Next steps towards a working families agenda. [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311288\\_parents\\_and\\_children.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311288_parents_and_children.pdf); Manning, W. D., & Lamb, K. A. (2003). Adolescent well-being in cohabiting, married, and single-parent families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65(4) 876-893; Moore, K.A., Jekielek, S. M., & Emig, C. (2002, June). Marriage from a child's perspective: How does family structure affect children, and what can we do about it? (*Research Brief*). Washington DC: Child Trends. <http://www.childtrends.org/files/MarriageRB602.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> In single-mother families, this parent is, of course, always the mother. In two-parent families, we analyzed the characteristics of the parent who is most knowledgeable about the child's health and well-being—usually the mother.

<sup>5</sup> These differences have been calculated after controlling for differences in the child's gender and race/ethnicity, plus the educational attainment of the child's better-educated parent.

<sup>6</sup> Involvement in activities outside of school has been associated with a reduced risk of children being involved in delinquent activities, as well as greater academic success, higher self-esteem, and greater community involvement as adults {see Eccles, J.S., & Barber, B.L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of extracurricular involvement matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 14 (1) 10-43; also Mahoney, J., Larson, R., and Eccles, J. (Eds.). (2005). Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, afterschool and community programs. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.} Children who participate in organized out-of-school programs also become more socially developed than their non-participating counterparts (see Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles).

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