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Family and hyperactivity among elementary aged children

Good news for parents anxious about their hyperactive pre-school children - their ability to sit still and concentrate is likely to improve as they progress through elementary school, whatever their family circumstances, according to research published recently in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, and produced at the University of Western Ontario's Research Data Centre.

This study contributes to the vast and complex literature on family structure and various child outcomes. In this study, researchers focus on hyperactivity and inattention, and use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth to track its relationship with family structure over a period of six years, among a sample of children aged four and five years in 1994.

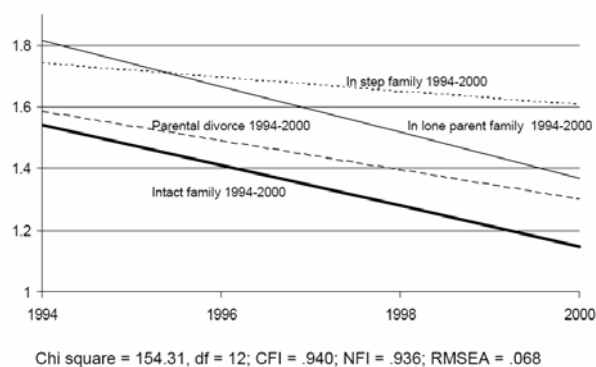
An estimated one in ten Canadian children displays hyperactive or inattentive behaviour. More frequent among boys than girls, this type of behaviour peaks among preschoolers, and then drop during the elementary school years. Although attempts to explain it have tended to emphasize genetic, biological or medical causes, this research identified several environmental factors that are also associated with the frequency of hyperactivity and inattention in preschool children, and with how these difficulties evolved during elementary school.

While initial differences (at 4-5 years) were not large, hyperactivity-inattention was more common among children raised by younger and less-educated parents, and by parents whose description of their family dynamics showed a level of family dysfunction. It was also more frequent among children living with a lone mother or in a stepfamily.

Although pre-school boys were more likely to be hyperactive than girls, their behaviour improved more quickly during the next six years. Interestingly, most of the other factors did not affect the rate at which these problems declined over time. Children raised by young, uneducated parents, or by lone-mothers, improved as rapidly as other children.

These problem behaviours persisted longer among children who lived in a stepfamily throughout the period, and among children whose parents separated between 1994 and 2000. This underlines the difficulties faced by parents and children adapting to the complexity of stepfamily life, or adjusting to parental separation.

Figure 1. Linear Growth Model of Hyperactivity – Inattention for Children Aged 4-5 in 1994, by Child's Family Structure 1994-2000 (n=1920)



In much of the literature, research shows that children whose parents eventually divorced had more “problem” behaviours even before the divorce than children whose parents did not, largely as a result of the conflict between parents prior to their separation.

Interestingly, there was no evidence of this “pre-disruption” effect in this study. Levels of hyperactivity-inattention difficulties were no higher in 1994 among children whose parents eventually separated than among those whose parents stayed together. Is this because hyperactivity is not affected by conflict in the same way as other child outcomes? Is it because children in this sample were too young to be affected by their parents’ conflict, or is it because conflict is less central to the divorce process itself?

Based on the paper: Kerr, Don and Joseph Michalski. 2007. Family Structure and Children’s Hyperactivity Problems: A Longitudinal Analysis. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 32(1).

*Note: *Data for this study came from Cycles 1-4 of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. The analysis was conducted at the UWO Regional Statistics Canada Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, SSHRC, CIHR and university consortia to strengthen Canada’s social research capacity.