

## Unmarried Parenting F.A.Q.

- What are the legal implications of having children as an unmarried couple?
- What do children think about having parents who aren't married? Do they get teased?
- How do children of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents do? Don't kids need a mother and a father?
- Is marriage good for children? Do children with married parents fare better than children with unmarried parents?

### Answers

What are the legal implications of having children as an unmarried couple?

Parents and children have the same legal rights and responsibilities regardless of whether or not the parents are married (the category of "legitimacy" has essentially no legal meaning), so legally a couple's marital status makes little difference when they have children.

Lawyers recommend that unmarried couples sign an "acknowledgment of parenthood" or a paternity statement for additional legal protection in the case of one parent's death or breakup. Most of the fears about the legal status of "out-of-wedlock" children are groundless.

One of the biggest concerns that marriage advocates often express is that unmarried couples are at higher risk of breaking up, which can be traumatic to children. Statistically, this higher breakup risk is accurate, and we share the belief that children deserve stable, nurturing parents (regardless of the number, marital status, or sexes of those parents). We know that marriage is no guarantee of stability, and that unmarried families can be every bit as committed and stable as married ones. These issues are of equal importance to anyone considering children.

For more information, see the Parenting section of our Resources page, and the "Parenting Without a Marriage License" chapter of *Unmarried to Each Other: The Essential Guide to Living Together as an Unmarried Partner*. For information on Adoption click [here](#).

**Note: We are not attorneys! The information above**

represents our best understanding, but we encourage you to seek the advice of a lawyer on important matters.

What do children think about having parents who aren't married? Do they get teased?

Our interviews with the adult children of unmarried parents, and with dozens of unmarried couples with children, suggest that fears about the children being teased or being upset about their parents' marital status are mostly groundless.

Children of unmarried parents told us that at their schools, families come in such diverse forms (single parents, gay/lesbian parents, stepfamilies) that having a mom and dad who live together without being married isn't much of a big deal. Of course, this varies somewhat by geographical region and urban versus rural areas. Most children said their friends generally didn't know or care that their parents weren't married. Children generally don't check for wedding rings, and these days, lots of parents have different last names.

Some kids told us that they urged their parents to have a wedding -- not, they said, because they cared about marriage, but because they wanted to get dressed up and be a flower girl or ring bearer. Since children love ritual and rites of passage, some unmarried families and stepfamilies find they are strengthened by having a commitment ceremony of some kind, where parents and children formally pledge to love and care for one another. This kind of ceremony can be a public event like a wedding, or a private family ritual.

How do children of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents do? Don't kids need a mother and a father?

There's no question there are some differences to growing up with two moms and two dads, and within the GLBT community. But all the research that has been done comparing the children of GLBT families with those of married couples find they do just as well (and in some cases, better). There's enough evidence that the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists, and the American Association of Family Physicians, American Psychiatric Association, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children have all issued formal statements in support of GLBT parenting.

Perhaps the best sources of information about what it's like to have GLBT parents are the kids themselves. COLAGE and Families Like Mine are great resources for both children and parents, as is the Family Pride Coalition.

Is marriage good for children? Do children with married parents fare better than children with unmarried parents?

The marriage-only movement states that marriage is good for children, implying that unmarried parenting must be bad. Solid social science research undermines this statement; it is simply too broad to be true. Typically, researchers find that poverty, illness, parents' fighting and other stresses are the real reasons that some children fare better than others.

For example, the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University surveyed 1,370 parents who were either married or cohabiting when their child was born and were still married or cohabiting when the child was three years old. They found very similar levels of behavior problems among three-year-olds whose parents - whether married or unmarried - had comparable levels of income, health, education and other background characteristics. They write: "Moreover, the children of cohabiting parents who marry after birth are no better off than the children of cohabiting parents who remain unmarried." You can read a 4-page summary of this study here: <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/briefs/ResearchBrief33.pdf>.