



<http://www.bgsu.edu/organizations/cfdr>

Phone: (419) 372-7279 cfdr@bgsu.edu

Bowling Green State University

Working Paper Series 06-11

**FAMILY INSTABILITY IN COHABITING PARENT FAMILIES:
A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

Wendy D. Manning

Gayra D. Ostgaard

Julie D. Downing

Pamela J. Smock

**Family Instability in Cohabiting Parent Families:
A Qualitative Perspective**

Wendy D. Manning¹
Gayra D. Ostgaard²
Julie D. Downing³
Pamela J. Smock⁴

^{1,3}Department of Sociology &

Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, OH 43403

²Department of American Culture Studies &

Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, OH 43403

⁴Department of Sociology & Population Studies Center

Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

734.615.6630 (office); 734.764.2377 (fax); pjsmock@umich.edu (email)

This research was supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R03 HD039835 and R01 HD040910). It was also supported in part by the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan and the Center for Family and Demographic Research at Bowling Green State University, both of which receive core funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24 HD41028 and R21 HD042831, respectively).

Family Instability in Cohabiting Parent Families: A Qualitative Perspective

ABSTRACT

Family instability is often offered as an explanation for the possible disadvantages faced by children with cohabiting parents. However, measures of family stability typically have focused on changes in legal marital status to the exclusion of cohabitation status. Consequently, children's experiences of family instability have been underrepresented (Raley and Wildsmith 2004). To better understand a key mechanism influencing the well-being of children in cohabiting parent families, 66 in-depth interviews of cohabiting parents and/or cohabiting stepparents from the Cohabitation and Marriage in America project are analyzed, with particular focus on changes in residential composition experienced by their children. We use these rich data to examine the nuances of children's experiences of stability and fluidity among those who have been exposed to cohabiting parent families. Based on our analysis two themes emerged that may be important considerations in our understanding of family instability: definitions of family stability and shifting family and household membership.

Family Instability in Cohabiting Parent Families: A Qualitative Perspective

Growing numbers of young Americans are living in cohabiting unions. At the same time cohabitation has become a family form that is increasingly likely to include children. In the 2003 Current Population Survey, 41 percent of cohabiting unions included children while 15 years earlier (in 1988) 34 percent included children (Casper and Bianchi 2002; Fields 2004). Moreover, two-fifths of children will likely spend some time in a cohabiting family (Bumpass and Lu 2000). These trends have led researchers to examine the well-being of children who spend time living with parents who are cohabiting (not legally married). The findings from this literature generally suggest that children who spend time living with cohabiting parents fare worse than their counterparts who lived with two married biological parents, and in many cases living with cohabiting parents is associated with more negative outcomes than living with single mothers or stepparents (e.g., Acs and Nelson 2002; DeLiere and Kalil 2002; Hao and Xie 2001; Manning and Brown 2003; Manning and Lamb 2003; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994).

One potential explanation for these differences is the relatively high rates of family change experienced by children who spend time living with cohabiting parents. Cohabiting unions that include children are relatively more unstable and shorter than marriages (e.g., Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Osborne, Manning, and Smock 2004; Raley and Wildsmith 2004). For example, by age 14 three-fifths of children who lived with two cohabiting biological parents experienced family change in contrast to only one-third of children who lived with two married biological parents (Manning and Bulanda 2006). Moreover, half of children living with cohabiting parents are living in cohabiting stepparent families, a biological mother and her cohabiting partner, indicating that these children have experienced at least one family transition (Fields 2004).

Researchers have focused on the importance of family stability for children's well-being (e.g., Amato 2000; Cherlin et al. 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Videon 2002). However, the traditional measurement of family stability relied on changes in parents' legal marital status. As a result, children's experiences in cohabiting families are often measured incorrectly as either single mother or stepparent family experiences, or they are excluded altogether from accounts of family structure (e.g., Hill, Yeung, and Duncan 2001; Sandefur, McLanahan, and Wojtkiewicz 1992; Wu and Thomson 2001). Indeed, the empirical evidence demonstrates the importance of including cohabiting parent experiences when analyzing family instability (Raley and Wildsmith 2004). They show that exclusion of cohabitation dramatically underrepresents children's experiences with family instability. New efforts have attempted to include a broader array of family types and incorporated cohabitation as part of children's family history (e.g., Brown 2006; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Graefe and Licther 1999; Dunifon and Kowalski-Jones 2002; Hao and Xie 2001; Manning and Bulanda 2006).

Given the substantive and empirical evidence about the importance of family stability, we take an in-depth view into the meaning of family instability among children who have lived in heterosexual cohabiting parent families. In our work family instability refers to changes in the composition of the household and includes short and long term shifts as well as adults and children. This type of analysis is not possible with survey data and qualitative studies are well suited to examinations of the dynamic dimensions of family life (Jarrett and Burton 1999). Our analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 66 cohabiting parents and/or stepparents that involve over 100 children's experiences. Unlike prior studies that focus solely on low income families (e.g., Edin 2000), our sample represents a broader economic spectrum (e.g. the majority of our sample has graduated from high school). We demonstrate the range and types of family

instability experienced by children in cohabiting parent families. Our findings also explore why instability matters. These results provide insights about how secondary data collections may further investigate family instability. Additionally, we believe these findings can be extended to understand children's experiences with family instability in other family types.

BACKGROUND

Family stability is argued to be one of the most important factors associated with children's development. Children need stable, consistent, and supportive family environments for the development of emotionally secure relationships (e.g., Bowlby 1979). Family instability typically refers to changes in a child's resident parents' relationship status (married, single, cohabiting). Considerable attention has focused on family stability because of findings about the effects of parental divorce on child well-being (Amato 1993; Cherlin et al. 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Family change may act as a form of stress and potential conflict that alters the everyday lives of children.

Changes in family structure are disruptive to children's lives on several fronts: emotional, social, and financial. Family change requires that children adjust to the gain or loss of new parental figures and potentially maintain family relationships within and outside the household boundaries. Often family changes require residential moves that may disrupt children's peer groups and supportive networks (e.g., Astone and McLanahan 1994). Family change leads to potentially inconsistent and altering parenting practices (Astone and McLanahan 1991; Baumrind 1991; Freeman and Newland 2002). In addition, family change may represent the loss of income and resources available to children; certainly this is true with parental divorce (Hanson et al. 1997). Overall, family change represents a loss of family social and economic capital. There is also evidence that it is more important for a child to experience family stability than a

specific family structure (Albrecht and Teachman 2003; Hao and Xie 2001; Hill et al. 2001; Wojtkiewicz 1993; Wu and Martinson 1993). Research indicates that family stability is positively related to child and young adult behavior (e.g., Albrecht and Teachman 2003; Hao and Xie 2001; Hill et al. 2001; Keller et al. 2002; Wu and Martinson 1993).

The potential mechanisms specifically linking cohabitation and child well-being include: higher rates of instability in cohabiting families, preexisting socioeconomic differences between cohabiting and married parents, and lack of institutional support for raising children in cohabiting unions. In this paper we focus on family instability, but recognize that the remaining two mechanisms are important. First, research indicates that family stability is positively related to child and young adult behavior and to child development (e.g., Hao and Xie 2001; Hill et al. 2001; Wu and Martinson 1993), and cohabiting parents experience higher levels of instability than married parents (Manning et al. 2004; Osborne et al. 2004; Raley and Wildsmith 2004). Family instability (defined as the formation and/or breaking up of parental unions) is one of the key explanations that has been offered to explain why children living with cohabiting parents may be disadvantaged (Manning 2002; Brown 2006). Second, cohabiting parents have lower educational attainment and lower incomes than married parents (Manning and Brown 2006). Thus, children in cohabiting parent families, on average, experience greater disadvantage that may be related to their well-being. Yet, differences among children in cohabiting and single mother are not explained by economic resources (Brown 2004; Manning and Lamb 2003). Third, cohabitation has not received strong institutional support (Eggebeen 2005; Nock 1995). The lack of consistent social norms surrounding cohabiting parent families results in wide variation in how social institutions (e.g. schools) respond to children who have a cohabiting parent. As a result, cohabiting partners' (particularly those not biologically related to the child)

responsibilities and relationships to children may not be clearly specified, which may negatively influence children's behavior.

Five elements are missing from the family stability literature. First, researchers often account for family stability by counting the number of family change events experienced by children (e.g., Albrecht and Teachman 2003; Carlson and Corcoran 2001; Wu and Martinson 1993; Wu 1996). In fact, in some cases it has been found that the number of transitions is a better explanation for behavior than the type of transitions (e.g., Albrecht and Teachman 2003). As mentioned above, only changes in legal marital status have traditionally been considered. There is growing consensus that family stability measures should be broadened to include changes in cohabitation status. Raley and Wildsmith (2004) demonstrate the importance of including changes in cohabitation status when documenting children's family trajectories. We acknowledge changes in both legal and informal union status.

Second, measurement of instability can be expanded by moving the unit of analysis from the family to the household (e.g. Aquilino 1996; Deliere and Kalil 2002; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002). Children and their parents are influenced by the presence or absence of other adults and children in the household. A strategy employed by some cohabiting parents is to live with their parents to provide economic support (Manning and Smock 2005). Research on three-generation families shows that children's parenting is positively influenced by their maternal grandmother (Coley 1998). It is important to consider the potential influence of the other adults in the household. This paper demonstrates the value of considering the household and not just the family when considering stability.

Third, surveys often do not capture short term changes in residence. Prospective data collections, such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth or Fragile Families, capture

changes that occur at the time of yearly interviews and not inter-interview shifts in living arrangements. Other survey data relies on respondent recall of their own family experiences (e.g. National Survey of Family Growth or National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health) and short term movement in and out of households may be overlooked when recalling marital and cohabitation histories. For example, survey data may not be measuring some children's experience with their parent's separation and reunification (Thornton and Binstock xxxx). In addition, children could live with their grandparents or other relatives for short time periods while parents are in the process of resolving their relationships. Furthermore, surveys often do not inquire about the movement of adults or children in or out of their house for short time periods. There may be an aunt and cousins who live with the family while going through a divorce. Households with frequent inflows and outflows of adults may be less able to provide consistent family environments for children. This paper highlights some of these short term residence changes that could potentially influence child well-being.

Four, most of the work on household change rests on movement of adults in and out of the household and ignores movement of *children* in and out of households. A consequence of multiple partner fertility and high divorce or separation rates is that children spend time in several different households (Stewart, Manning and Smock 2003). Children in cohabiting parent families are more likely to have complex family ties. For example, over half (60%) of cohabiting parents had a child with another partner in contrast to only one-quarter of married parents (Carlson and Furstenberg 2005). The movement of children (siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, and other relatives) in and out of the household may have some influence on a child's well-being as he/she faces competition for parents' time and attention, develops new relationships with half- and step-siblings, as well as deals with a new source of social influence.

Indeed, joint legal and physical custody arrangements may make this more common (Seltzer 2000). Marsiglio (2005) discusses how these new arrangements are tied to some of the complexity in the family life of children in stepfamilies. Our analyses illustrate the importance of considering other children in analysis of family stability.

Fifth, family change may have a positive influence on children. The explicit assumption of prior work is that family change has negative consequences for children. To date, the empirical work focuses solely on negative implications. However, the family circumstances from which children are moving into or out of as well as the characteristics of the other adults and children in the family/household should be considered. The following examples demonstrate the value of considering more than simply whether family change occurs but also the characteristics of the old and new family environments. Children moving from a poor single mother to a wealthy married stepfather family may benefit from the improved economic resources. Similarly, a child moving away from a violent parent will benefit from living in a separate household. Children may experience advantages by living with adults or children who are highly involved in the school and community. At the same time, a child could be negatively influenced by the presence of a relative with a drug or alcohol problem. This paper highlights the positive and negative effects of family change on children.

In this paper, we adopt a family systems approach that recognizes that family ties are not defined simply by a dwelling unit or legal status (Scanzoni et al. 1979). This approach allows us to acknowledge the fluidity of American family life, include cohabitation as a family form, and recognize children and parents' biological and social relationships that exist within and across household boundaries. Existing survey data often focus on family snapshots at one point in time and/or do not include broad definitions of household membership that allow measurement of

fluidity across household boundaries. Our in-depth investigation allows us to tap into the range of family experiences among children who have lived with cohabiting parents. Given the relatively high levels of family change experienced by children who have lived with cohabiting parents, our primary goal is to unpack one of the most critical processes (instability) influencing children's lives. This type of dynamic analysis is not possible with existing survey data. These findings will help to better understand the implications of cohabitation on children's lives, and aid in the development of new measurement strategies devoted to inquiring about family stability.

DATA and METHODS

Our initial sample is based on 115 in-depth interviews with young adults who are currently cohabiting or have recent cohabitation experience. The respondents were interviewed in 2002, primarily between April and October. Our sample is divided such that we have at least 15 interviews with each gender and three race/ethnic group (White, Black, Latino), permitting us to explore possible gender and racial/ethnic variations. Our data include 66 respondents with children and the family-life histories of approximately 100 children who have spent some time living with cohabiting parents. We re-interviewed respondents who were cohabiting at time 1 on average 24 months later. Among the 33 respondents who had children and were cohabiting when first interviewed in 2002, we re-interviewed 32 (97%). The re-interviews allowed us to collect more extensive and up dated child histories.

The respondents all live in the vicinity of Toledo, Ohio. The population of Toledo is quite similar to the distribution of the population in the nation with regard to race, marital status, education, and income. We recruited our sample by means of personal contacts, as well as encounters with potential respondents in the community (for example, in the laundry mat,

grocery store, restaurants, neighborhood). While this sample is not random and is not representative of the population, it has the advantage of reaching working class participants who may be unwilling to respond to phone call or mail solicitations to participate in surveys. Respondents received \$40 for participating in the interview.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample of parents, some who do not live with children as well as those who do. Generally, respondents who have children are Hispanic or Black and have at least 12 years of education and low incomes. These respondents were, on average, quite young when they started cohabiting. These findings echo national census estimates of cohabiting parents. For example, according to 2000 Census data 28 percent of cohabiting parents have less than a high school diploma, and 25 percent of our sample of cohabiting parents do not have a high school diploma or GED.

These interviews are extensive. The time 1 and the re-interviews each lasted, on average, 2 hours. The mean length of transcribed interviews that involved children for time 1 is 42 pages and 78 pages for the re-interviews. We use semi-structured interview techniques. While this technique provides some structure, it also allows the interviewer to probe with follow-up questions and pursue additional lines of inquiry. Generally, in-depth interviews are an excellent method for exploring perceptions, behavioral patterns, and their cognitive justifications; essentially, they provide data at a greater level of detail than closed-ended survey questions, reveal linkages among meanings, decision-making, and behavior, and ultimately help to illuminate the causal processes that quantitative social science seeks to uncover (Weiss 1994). While we did not specifically ask about a detailed family history for each child, we were able to use the interview responses to establish for most children a family-life history that focused on instability.

RESULTS

We present our results around two general themes: relationship duration and shifting family and household membership.

Relationship Duration

The concept of relationship duration is reasonably straightforward. Children who continuously live with their parents can generally be characterized as experiencing a stable family life. The types of family stability among cohabitators include cohabiting parents living together in a long-term union (stable cohabitators) and cohabiting couples who decide to marry one another. From the child's perspective these two types of families may be analogous. However, there are also children living with parents who are serial cohabitators, meaning they have cohabited with multiple partners. These children experience a rather unstable family life.

Stable Cohabitators

Some children who have lived with cohabiting parents experience stable family lives that seem to benefit children while other long-term cohabiting unions do not appear to be positive family environments. For example, Peter, Ofilia, and Vicente are in longer-term committed relationships and their family life appears stable and supportive. We do not have direct assessments of children's development or family home life. Peter began cohabiting with his girlfriend when they were 20 years old in response to their unplanned pregnancy. The couple got engaged about a year after their baby was born and married when their child was two years old. He claims the child was the anchor in their relationship. The child forced them to work out their problems and conflicts that stemmed in large part from being young parents. They wanted to wait to get married until they were sure they loved one another.

Ofilia has two children with her cohabiting partner (a two year old and a five month old)

and is pregnant with their third child. She and her partner have lived together for eight years. Her partner provides for the family, and she is a stay at home mom. She states she feels as though they are married. Nonetheless, she hopes to marry her partner before their children are aware their parents are unmarried. Like Ofilia, Vicente feels as though he is married. He and his partner have been cohabiting for almost ten years and they have a five-year-old daughter.

Although the above narratives demonstrate the stability of long-term relationships, not all relationships of longevity may be positive from the child's perspective. We find that some stable family relationships do not always signify positive family environments. Some long-term relationships can involve conflict, violence, incarceration, and substance abuse. Teresa and Nikki have been in long-term cohabiting relationships that have allowed their children to reside with both biological parents their entire lives. Teresa's partner is verbally abusive toward her. Because of this, she worries that she is teaching her daughters to stay with an abusive partner. In fact, one of her daughters was in a physically abusive relationship and Teresa feels that this was a result of having witnessed such interactions between her and her partner. She longs for not only the commitment of marriage, but also a loving relationship.

Some families may appear to be stable based on traditional survey measurement techniques because they do not capture short periods of interruptions and instability. Nikki began cohabiting with her partner eleven years ago in response to a pregnancy. Due to her alcoholic partner's physical abuse toward her, Nikki and her two daughters have moved out on several occasions. Many surveys would not capture these temporary departures. Each time she returned because she wanted her children "to have their dad." During the first interview Nikki discussed hopes of getting married. Although she was still living with her partner at the second interview she stated: "Before I used to see it [getting married] like, 'let's do it for the kids.' But

now I'm like, no."

Thirty-five year old Matilda has three children, two of whom are parented by her cohabiting partner of almost twenty years. Matilda moved in with her partner when she was sixteen years old. She has left him on several occasions over the years due to his physical abuse. He has also been incarcerated for domestic violence toward her. Although Matilda claims she stays with him to keep her family intact, Matilda's teenage daughter has told her mom to leave her dad because of his behavior. There is no indication that he is abusive toward any of her children.

Leroy and his cohabiting partner of eleven years have four children. Leroy has been incarcerated for drug-related offenses on several occasions, serving a total of two years in jail. His partner told him if it happened again she would not be waiting for him when he is released, and his children told him they were going to get a new daddy if he went to jail again.

Serial Cohabitors

We asked respondents about their cohabiting and marital histories. Most of the respondents have never been married yet some have cohabited with many partners and can be characterized as serial cohabitors. Serial cohabitors are adults who have began and ended several cohabiting relationships. These new cohabiting relationships mean that children must form new relationships with the parent's cohabiting partner as well as sever relationships with the parent's ex-partner. Because cohabiting unions are relatively easy to begin and end, parents are provided opportunities to have a greater number of partners.

Aileen has been married three times and has also cohabited three times. Aileen had her eldest child in a marriage that ended in divorce. She had her second child while cohabiting. She married her cohabiting partner and had her third child, and that marriage ended in divorce. After

cohabiting with another man, she then cohabited with and married her current husband. Some researchers may classify the eldest child as having seven family transitions, but his mother married two of her cohabiting partners so he has only experienced four transitions. Aileen's husband's relationship to the children is one of disciplinarian and this has not changed since they were cohabiting. The children call him 'Papa' rather than Dad.

One of the respondents with the most number of cohabiting partners is Emma, a 31-year-old mother of two children (an 11 year old and a toddler). The family experiences of Emma's daughter, Elizabeth, are displayed in Figure 1. Emma's response to the question about cohabiting history indicates that she has had at least seven cohabiting partners since her eldest child, Elizabeth, was born:

Can I take like a minute to think about that 'cause I'm not... it was right around 18 I stayed with, actually my legal residence was my grandfather's house, but I stayed a lot at my boyfriend's, it was before John so that was a long...then there was John that's 2, Tim was 3, um...let me think who I lived...Chad was 4, where'd I live after that. Several, like I said... I was with John (father of first child) two years almost and lived with him for most of that time. And Tim I was with for two and a half years, lived with him probably after like 4 months of going out with him so two, two years of living with Tim. And Chad was about a year I lived with him. And... oh where'd I go after that? Ok I lived with Mark... for on and off, you know a month here and there. And then it was Steve... I feel like I'm missing somebody...no, no it was Eric. Eric with the five kids – lived with him for a year then it was...

Figure 1 shows that Elizabeth lived with her mom, Emma, and Emma's cohabiting partners. She also lived with her biological father for a short time and again at the time of interview.

In addition to having to form relationships with new partners, children must also sever ties with the parent's ex-partner(s). Marsiglio (2005) describes this issue for stepfathers. This may be hard for children especially when they have formed strong attachments. For example, Latonya had broken up with her partner four times over their three-year cohabiting relationship. Following the break ups she lived with other people. She feels that she and her daughter have,

gone through enough, you know, and, and because I'm unsuccessful with relationships doesn't mean that she should, you know, have to be getting attached to people and moving away or going away. You know? That's just not fair to her.

Petra and her ex-partner cohabited for six years. During this time, her partner became a father-figure to her son, who was four years old when they first moved in together. Petra and her partner recently broke up after she and her son moved out-of-state to be closer to her parents. She has yet to tell her son about the breakup because "...I just, I didn't know how to tell him." She says that her son "...kinda knows, but he doesn't really want to know that it's over."

In some cases, the ex-partner is still involved with the children, but to a lesser degree. While the presence of the ex-partner may provide some stability, the relationship between the ex-partner and the child has shifted. Tim has cohabited with three different women. His last cohabiting relationship lasted only four to five months, but he formed an attachment with his partner's two children: "...her kids loved me." While he is no longer living with them, he still visits and plays with the children. Similarly, Wesley had lived with his ex-partner, who has a three-year old son, for four years. Because Wesley has lived with the child since birth and the child calls him "father," he has been slow on breaking off the relationship. He claims that "...if he wasn't involved I think it would be, it would be a lot more clean cut, cut to the chase, really fast thing."

In other cases the ex-partner wishes to be involved with the children but has no legal grounds to request visitation. Gregory's ex-partner has two children who have different fathers: a two-year-old son and a newborn daughter when they began cohabiting. He became the father-figure in the children's lives, providing for them socially and financially. The children's mother taught them to call Gregory "dad." Gregory left his partner due to her excessive drug and alcohol use; however, he continued to provide financially for her in an effort to take care of the

children. Gregory's ex-partner subsequently lost custody of her children. Because he has no biological relationship to the children, he is unable to visit them in foster care.

Although movement into or out of cohabiting and legal unions is used in traditional measures as an indicator of family instability, the formation or dissolution of a cohabiting union may have a positive, stabilizing influence on children. For example, Brenda and Vivian both left their cohabiting partners due to their partners' violence. Vivian and her partner lived together for five years. After their child was born her partner became physically abusive toward her, violence which included suffering a broken rib and having a knife held to her neck. Vivian left her partner and moved to another city when their son was two years old. The child's father is no longer involved in his life. Similarly, Brenda, who had cohabited with her abusive partner for seven years, left when the violence occurred in front of their three-year-old daughter:

...I was like, well I told you the first time you hit me in front of my daughter would be the last time you hit me in front of my daughter... [Interviewer: Did he hit you before, just not in front of your daughter?] Oh, yeah. He's hit me all the time. But I, but I had told him, I always had told him... the first time my daughter sees it you're done. And sure enough, she sat there and watched him break my nose.

Just as moving away from negative home environments may have a stabilizing effect on children's development, the formation of new cohabiting unions may be a positive influence. For example, Martin's cohabiting partner has a seven-year-old daughter whose biological father is not involved in her life. Martin provides economic resources to his partner and the child: he and his partner purchased a house together and he pays the child's tuition to attend Catholic school. Martin states he already "feels like a dad" to the child and plans to adopt her once he and his partner are married.

Because Heather's husband became terminally ill after their separation, she and her husband decided not to follow through with a divorce. However, she began living with her current

cohabiting partner during the separation, and her partner aided in the caretaking of her dying husband. Her twelve-year-old son remained living with his father in order to have as much time with him as possible before his death. Heather's husband passed away between the two interview waves. Her son, now fourteen, lives with her and her cohabiting partner/fiancé. Heather attributes her partner's ability to provide emotional support to her son as he grieves the loss of his father and her son's ability to see her partner as "step-dad" to the friendship that developed between her partner and husband prior to her husband's death.

Shifting Family and Household Membership

Children sometimes experience family living circumstances that involve continual change in the presence and absence of various people. For example, children may reside with adult relatives other than their parents, non-relative adults, or households including children who are not full siblings. As with relationship duration, this shifting composition of families and households contributes to the children's experiences of family stability or instability.

Other Adults

Some young adults begin their conjugal life in their parents' home (Manning and Smock 2005). Couples who have limited resources live with their parents, and their parents continue to serve as a safety net during difficult financial times. Kerry lived with her cohabiting partner in her mother's home for the first few years of her child's life. She and her partner eventually moved out and married. Calvin has a child with his girlfriend. Prior to getting their own apartment, Calvin and his girlfriend lived with Calvin's father. Leonel has lived with his cohabiting partner in his mother's home for four years because he does not believe he can financially provide for his family. Emma, who has had several cohabiting partners since the birth of her first child, has also resided with extended family and currently lives with a non-

romantic roommate.

Figure 2 illustrates the presence of ‘other adults’ in Flor’s child’s (Ashley) life. While still in high school, Flor’s boyfriend, Steve, moved in with her and her mother. After having a child together, Flor and Steve moved into an apartment with her partner’s sister. They then lived in an apartment on their own (Flor, Steve, and Ashley) for a few months prior to breaking up. Flor and her two-year-old daughter, Ashely, now live in an apartment with her ex-partner’s (Steve’s) sister and another friend. Flor still has contact with Steve, the child’s biological father. Although Flor is not cohabiting with her new boyfriend, he frequently stays overnight. She says, ‘He stays here and goes back to his mom’s and we just leave it at that.’ In Ashley’s short two year old life she has lived with several adults, including extended family members as well as non-relative roommates.

Unlike the above respondents’ experiences, Grace is frustrated by the influence of other adults in the household. Grace and her cohabiting partner have an eleven-month old daughter. They live with her partner’s parents in order to get on their feet financially. Although Grace is grateful for the financial assistance provided by her partner’s parents, she is unhappy in the shared residence since she had previously lived independently. Grace is particularly troubled by her partner’s mother’s interference with her own mothering of her new baby daughter. Grace also has an eight-year-old son from a previous cohabiting relationship that visits regularly. Grace feels that her partner’s parents get annoyed with her son and she worries about the differential treatment of their new grandbaby and their step-grandchild.

Siblings

Children from prior relationships can create family instability. Relationships with siblings can be quite complex for children who may have step, half, and other types of siblings.

Teresa's partner has a son from a previous marriage. He came to live with his father and Teresa to attend high school and then moved out of the home for college. The couple had two other children at the time. Another example is found in Caroline. Her cohabiting partner has two children (12 and 5 years old) with different mothers, and Caroline has a nine-year-old son from a previous relationship. Initially her partner's 12-year-old son was living with them but then that shifted to every other week. The five year old was initially not living with Caroline and her partner, but they now have full custody of the child. To gain custody the family was required to move to a new home so the child could have her own room. Thus, Caroline's son has experienced family change via the movement of stepsiblings in and out of the household.

Erin and Patrick's household exhibits the complex web of sibling relationships (Figure 3). Patrick and Erin have a son who is one and a half years old. Patrick's fourteen-year-old sister lives with them to attend a particular school. Violet is Patrick's daughter who lives with her biological mother and visits every other weekend. Violet, who is four years old, sometimes brings *her* half-sister on weekend visits, a child who is not biologically related to Erin, Patrick, or their son. This 'outside' child does not have a relationship with her own biological father and demonstrates jealousy of her half-sister's, Violet's, relationship with Patrick by sabotaging visits. For example, at bedtime she will say to Violet, her half-sister, "Don't you miss mommy? Don't you want to go home?" in an effort to end the visit early. This 'other' sibling will also ask Patrick for money when he is handing some out to his own daughter, Violet. Violet started out living with both biological parents and then her mom and stepfather and half-sister. She currently lives with just her mom and half-sister. Erin and Patrick's son lives with his parents and his aunt and his half-sister and his half-sister's half-sister visit every other weekend.

Nonresident Parents

Not only do resident parents have new relationships, but so do nonresident parents. Thus, another type of family instability for children is their nonresident parents' new relationships. The marital and cohabitation histories reveal that nonresident parent's new relationships influence children. Candace's partner, who has a child from another relationship, feels Candace should be involved with his son. Candace acts as the intermediary and has made a point of getting along with the child's mother. Candace claims, "She'd rather talk to me than talk to him."

In some cases, this appears to be a positive experience for the child. When Nadine began living with her partner his one-year-old daughter from a previous relationship stayed with them on weekends. Nadine, who loves children and is unable to have her own, immediately took on a caretaking role with the child. Nadine states, "she thinks of me as, you know, her mom away from home." In other cases, the nonresident parent's partner is not open to taking on a stepparenting role. Melany's partner has a son from a previous relationship who occasionally visits them. Although her partner would like to see her become closer to his son, Melany has no desire to develop a relationship with her partner's child: "I'm not married, so why should I treat him like a step child?"

Interactions between half-siblings have the potential to become strained due to the residency status of the parent. Wanda and her cohabiting partner of four years have a nine-month-old daughter. Wanda's partner has three children from prior relationships that visit every other weekend. These step-children began calling Wanda "mom" about two years into the relationship. They enjoy their new little sister when visiting Wanda and her partner but Wanda worries that there may come a time when the other children envy her daughter for "having daddy all the time".

Furthermore, children may start out living with one parent and then move in with another

parent. Grace had a son with her cohabiting partner but they broke up when the child was about five years old. When Grace moved in with another cohabiting partner who became abusive toward her she sent her son to live with his father. She is living with a new partner and her partner's parents but her son still lives with his biological father. She sees him every other weekend, holidays, and in the summer.

Fluid relationships

A feature of cohabitation is that there is not always a clear date that marks the beginning of the union (Manning and Smock 2005). Because of the lack of boundaries and role definitions in the fluidity of cohabitation, children may experience instability as cohabiting unions start and end: when does a parent's partner shift from the role of "mom's boyfriend" or "dad's girlfriend" to step-mom or step-dad. Crystal was not living with her boyfriend when their child was born. She was living with her grandmother but would stay over at her partner's home frequently. She said she got tired of going back and forth, packing things for the baby. She and her partner then got a place of their own. In the case of Edward, his roles went from mom's boyfriend, to babysitter, to step-dad. Edward, whose partner has four sons, describes how his work schedule and her childcare needs influenced their gradual shift to co-residence:

I was working nights, she was working days, I was taking the kids during the day, because it started being their Christmas vacation break, for the kids. So I started taking them during the mornings, and afternoon. She would come and get them after work, then we would hang together until I went to work. And then I started going over there in the mornings after getting off, and sleeping while she was at work.

Some children experience the short-term break up of their parent's union. For example, Caroline has a 9-year-old son that was born out of wedlock. She was concerned about bringing a new man into her son's life. She started dating her cohabiting partner and then moved in and out a few times before settling down together when her son was five years old. Nikki left her partner

several times, sometimes for weeks and/or a month, due to his drinking and violence. Similarly, Vicente's partner moved out with their child for a short time when he became involved in criminal activity. They are engaged now and hope to get married when they have enough money. Matilda was pregnant when she started cohabiting, but that relationship ended and she had another child with a different cohabiting partner. She has reconciled with her first partner so her eldest child is living with her biological father for a second time.

Latonya is a cohabiting parent who has not settled down with one partner. She moves back and forth between the biological father of her child and her boyfriend. Her daughter had experienced the movement so often that it became a part of her life. Latonya's five-year-old daughter took garbage bags and "...went to her room and put all her toys and stuff into it and her clothes. And she comes into the kitchen and said 'I'm leaving my husband. We broke up and I'm moving out. I'm going to move in with you granny.'" Despite this movement in and out of relationships and residences, Latonya insists that her daughter is not negatively affected. Latonya's living situation challenges some of our conceptualizations of family change.

Relationship disruptions may occur more easily within cohabiting parent families because the parents are not legally bound together (Manning and Smock 2005). Cohabiting parents report that marriage affords more security. Kerry who has one child believes that marriage means "they're tied together, and if they weren't [married] it would be a lot easier for just one of them to leave." Peggy, the mother of two children while cohabiting, states that marriage means "100%" commitment and "when we were just living together I was probably 75% committed because in case it didn't work out I didn't want to be solely into him ...". One of the justifications for cohabitation is that it provides an opportunity to easily leave the relationship. Thus, the family instability we observe in cohabiting parent families may be easily justified.

SUMMARY

The analysis of children in cohabiting parent families echoes prior findings that report relatively high levels of instability (Manning et al. 2004; Raley and Wildsmith 2004). This paper does not compare instability across family types but focuses on one family type, cohabiting parent families. Our results suggest six issues are primary in terms of understanding family instability experienced by children. Some of these findings are specific to cohabitation while others can be generalized to other family forms.

First, the disadvantaged economic circumstances of some cohabiting couples may mean they need to double up, live with parents or other adults to make ends meet. This strategy seems to exist among quite young women who have just had a child. In addition, family members serve as a safety net when relationships disrupts, sometimes for quite short spells. Most cohabiting couples prefer to not live with relatives and would rather live independently. These extended family living arrangements expose children to other adults and often additional children. The expected relationships with the children or other relatives of cohabiting partners may not be well defined. If cohabitators had better economic prospects, they may be able to afford their own place rather than relying on family for aid (Stack 1972; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005).

Second, children can experience instability due to the movement of children from prior relationships in and out of the family, whether their parents are married or cohabiting. In fact, single men and women with children more often live with or marry partners or spouses with children (Goldscheider and Sassler 2006). Thus, complex families are formed resulting in a web of family relationships that include residential and non-residential half-siblings, step-siblings, and other children (Seltzer 2000; Stewart et al. 2003). The movement of these children in and

out of the household can generate considerable family instability. To date few studies consider children when examining family change or stability.

Third, the lack of legal ties makes it easier for parents to start and end cohabiting unions resulting in some children experiencing high levels of family change. The lack of a clear starting date may make children's relationships with their parent's cohabiting partners uncertain and ambiguous. At the same time surveys may not be capturing the parents who move in and out of the household for short periods of time. From a child's perspective the lack of legal ties provides opportunities for greater family changes. Our work illustrates some of this volatility and movement across households.

Fourth, cohabitators may have relatively long partnerships or short-lived relationships (one month or so). Thus, researchers focusing on children may want to distinguish short-term versus long-term cohabiting parent families. Stability of cohabiting unions for extremely long periods may mean a family is somewhat dysfunctional or never is able to obtain the resources to make transition into marriage. Longevity or stability cannot always be equated with positive family environments.

Fifth, children of cohabiting couples experience instability via changes in their nonresident parent's relationships. Some children spend quite a bit of time with their nonresident parents. Specifically, it seems the female cohabiting partners of nonresident fathers can support or hinder relationships between their partner and his children. The stability of the nonresident parent's home may influence a child's well-being.

Finally, our work points to some positive implications of family change. Cohabiting parents who marry one another are remaining in the same family with the same parents. Nonetheless, transitions to marriage may involve more solid relationships with stepparents and

relatives that may have positive effects for children. Some cohabiting stepparents take on important parenting roles, such as emotionally investing in the child, providing child care, and paying for their education. Children most likely benefit from having another caretaker who offers emotional and instrumental support. Yet, cohabiting stepfamilies do not always positively influence child well-being (Brown 2006). Family change may also have a positive influence on children because it marks the ending of abusive or highly conflicted relationships.

This paper has a few limitations that prevent broad generalizations. First, the results are based on a small select sample. These findings could be replicated with a larger more representative sample. Second, it would be useful to compare the family experiences of children in cohabiting parent families to children who have lived with single or married parents. We could then identify how cohabiting parent family experiences are unique from other family experiences. Third, the results are based on parents' perspectives. We did not speak to children about their views of their family relationships and experiences. This would provide an important window into the meaning of cohabiting parent family.

Nonetheless, our study has three important implications for research on a core context for child development, family instability. First, conceptualizations and measurement of family instability should consider be expanded to include the fluidity of household relationships and recognize short and long-term household membership. Also, children moving in and out of families and households, even for short time periods, should be considered as contributing to instability. Second, we believe these findings will help us to understand some reasons why children in cohabiting parent families fare worse than children who live in other types of families (e.g. Brown 2004; Manning and Lamb 2003). Further empirical work should explicitly investigate some of the potential explanations linking family instability and child well-being

described in this paper. Finally, this work provides insight and directions for research on family change in all family types, not just cohabitation. This has become an increasingly important issue as diversity of childhood family experiences grows.

REFERENCES

- Acs, G. and S. Nelson. 2002. "The Kids are Alright? Children's Well-being and the Rise in Cohabitation." *New Federalism B-48: National Survey of America's Families*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Amato, P. 2000. "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62:1269-1287.
- Amato, P. 1993. "Children's Adjustment to Divorce: Theories, Hypotheses and Empirical Support." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 55:23-38.
- Aquilino, W. 1996. The Life Course of Children Born to Unmarried Mothers: Childhood Living Arrangements and Young Adult Outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 58:293-310.
- Albrecht, C. and J. Teachman. 2003. "Childhood Living arrangements and the Risk of Premarital Intercourse." *Journal of Family Issues* 24: 867-894.
- Astone, N. M. and S. S. McLanahan. 1991. "Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion." *American Sociological Review* 56:309-320.
- Bowlby, J. 1979. *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. London: Tavistock.
- Braunrind, D. 1991. Parenting styles and adolescent development. In J. Brooks-Gunn, R. Lerner, and A. Peterson (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of adolescence* (pp 746-758). New York: Garland.
- Brown, S. 2006. Family Structure Transitions and Adolescent Well-being. *Demography*, forthcoming.
- Brown, S. 2004. Family Structure and Child Well-Being: The Significance of Parental Cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66:351-367.

- Bumpass, L. and H. H. Lu. 2000. "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts." *Population Studies* 54:29-41.
- Carlson, M. and F. Furstenberg. 2005. The Level and Correlates of Multi-Partnered Fertility in the United States. Center for Child Well-Being Working Paper 3-14. Princeton, University.
- Carlson, M. and M. Corcoran. 2001. Family Structure and Children's Behavioral and Cognitive Outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63:779-792.
- Casper, L. and S. Bianchi. 2002. *Continuity and Change in the American Family*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cherlin, A., F. Furstenbuerg, P. Chase-Lansdale, K. Kiernan, P. Robins, D. Morrison, and J. Teitler. 1991. "Longitudinal Studies of the Effects of Divorce on Children in Great Britain and the United States." *Science* 252:1386-1389.
- Coley, R. L. 1998. "Children's Socialization Experiences and Functioning in Single-Mother Households: The Importance of Fathers and Other Men." *Child Development* 69(1):219-230.
- DeLeire, T. and A. Kalil. 2002. "Good Things Come in Threes: Single-parent Multigenerational Family Structure and Adolescent Adjustment." *Demography* 39:393-342.
- Dunifon, R. and L. Kowalski-Jones. 2002. "Who's in the House? Race Differences in Cohabitation, Single-parenthood, and Child Development." *Child Development* 73:1249-1264.
- Edin, K. 2000. "What do low-income single mothers say about marriage?" *Social Problems*, 47, 112-133.
- Eggebeen, D. 2005. "Cohabitation and Exchanges of Social Support." *Social Forces* 83:1097-

1110.

- Freedman, H. and L. Newland. 2002. Family Transitions During the Adolescent Transition: Implications for Parenting. *Adolescence* 37:457-475.
- Graefe, D. R. and D. Lichter. 1999. "Life Course Transitions of American Children: Parental Cohabitation, Marriage, and Single Parenthood." *Demography* 36:205-217.
- Fields, J. 2004. *American Families and Living Arrangements: 2003*. Current Population Reports P-20 553. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Goldscheider, F. and S. Sassler. 2006. Children and Stepfamily Formation. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68:275-291.
- Hanson, T. L., S. McLanahan, and E. Thomson. 1997. "Economic resources, parental practices, and children's well-being." Pp. 190-238 in *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*, edited by G. J. Duncan and J. Brooks-Gunn. New York: Russell Sage.
- Hao, L. and G. Xie. 2001. "The Complexity and Endogeneity of Family Structure in Explaining Children's Misbehavior." *Social Science Research* 31:1-28.
- Hill, M., W. Yeung, and G. Duncan. 2001. "Childhood Family Structure and Young Adult Behaviors." *Journal of Population Economics* 14:271-299.
- Jarrett, R. L. and L. M. Burton. 1999. "Dynamic Dimensions of Family Structure in Low-income African American Families: Emergent Themes in Qualitative Research." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 30(2):177-187.
- Keller, T. E., R. F. Catalano, K. P. Haggerty, and C. B. Fleming. 2002. "Parent Figure Transitions and Delinquency and Drug Use among Early Adolescent Children of Substance Abusers." *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse* 28(3):399-427.
- Manning, W. D. and R. Bulanda. 2005. "Cohabitation and Family Trajectories." In *Handbook of*

- Measurement Issues in Family Research. S. Hofferth and L. Casper (Eds.) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associations. *Forthcoming*.
- Manning, W.D., and P. J. Smock. 2005. Measuring and Modeling Cohabitation: New Perspectives From Qualitative Data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(4):989-1002.
- Manning, W. D. and S. L. Brown. 2006. "Children's Economic Well-Being in Cohabiting Parent Families: An Update and Extension." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68: 345-362.
- Manning, W. D. and K. Lamb. 2003. "Adolescent Well-being in Cohabiting, Married, and Single Parent Families." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65:876-893.
- Manning, W. D., P. Smock, and D. Majumdar. 2004. "The Relative Stability of Cohabiting and Marital Unions for Children." *Population Research and Policy Review* 23:135-159.
- Marsiglio, W. 2004. *Stepdads: Stories of love, hope and repair*. Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MD.
- Nock, S. L. 1995. "A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships." *Journal of Family Issues* 16:53-76.
- Osborne, C., W. D. Manning, and P. J. Smock. 2004. "Instability in Fragile Families: The Role of Race-Ethnicity, Economics, and Relationship Quality." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August, San Francisco, CA.
- Raley, R. K. and E. Wildsmith. 2004. "Cohabitation and Children's Family Instability." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66:210-219.
- Sandefur, G. D., S. McLanahan, and R. A. Wojtkiewicz. 1992. "The Effects of Parental Marital Status during Adolescence on High School Graduation." *Social Forces* 71:103-121.
- Scanzoni, J., K. Polonko, J. Teachman, J., and L. Thompson. 1989. *The sexual bond: Rethinking*

- families and close relationships*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Seltzer, J. 2000. Families Formed Outside of Marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 1247-1268.
- Sigle-Rushton, W. and S. McLanahan. 2002. The Living Arrangements of New Unmarried Mothers. *Demography* 39: 415-434.
- Stewart, S., W. Manning and P. Smock. 2003. "Union Formation Among Men in the U.S.: Does Having Prior Children Matter?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65:90-104.
- Thomson, E., T. L. Hanson, and S. S. McLanahan. 1994. "Family Structure and Child Well-being: Economic Resources vs. Parental Behavior." *Social Forces* 73:221-242.
- Videon, T. 2002. The Effects of Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Parental Separation on Adolescent Well-Being." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64:489-503.
- Weiss, R. S. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.
- Wojtkiewicz, R. 1993. "Simplicity and Complexity in the Effects of High School Graduation." *Demography* 30:701-717.
- Wu, L. 1996. Effects of family instability income and income instability on the risk of premarital birth. *American Sociological Review* 61:386-406.
- Wu, L. and B. Martinson. 1993. "Family Structure and the Risk of a Premarital Birth." *American Sociological Review* 58:210-232.
- Wu, L. and E. Thomson. 2001. "Race Differences in Family Experience Sexual Initiation: Dynamic Models of Family Structure and Family Change." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63:682-696.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Cohabiters with Children

| | <u>Percent</u> |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Race | |
| Black | 33.8 |
| White | 33.8 |
| Hispanic | 32.3 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 38.5 |
| Female | 61.5 |
| Education | |
| Less than High School | 13.8 |
| High School Graduate or G.E.D | 70.8 |
| College Graduate | 15.4 |
| Personal Income | |
| Less than \$20,000 | 65.5 |
| \$20,000-\$40,000 | 22.4 |
| More than \$40,000 | 12.1 |
| | |
| N | 66 |

FIGURE KEY

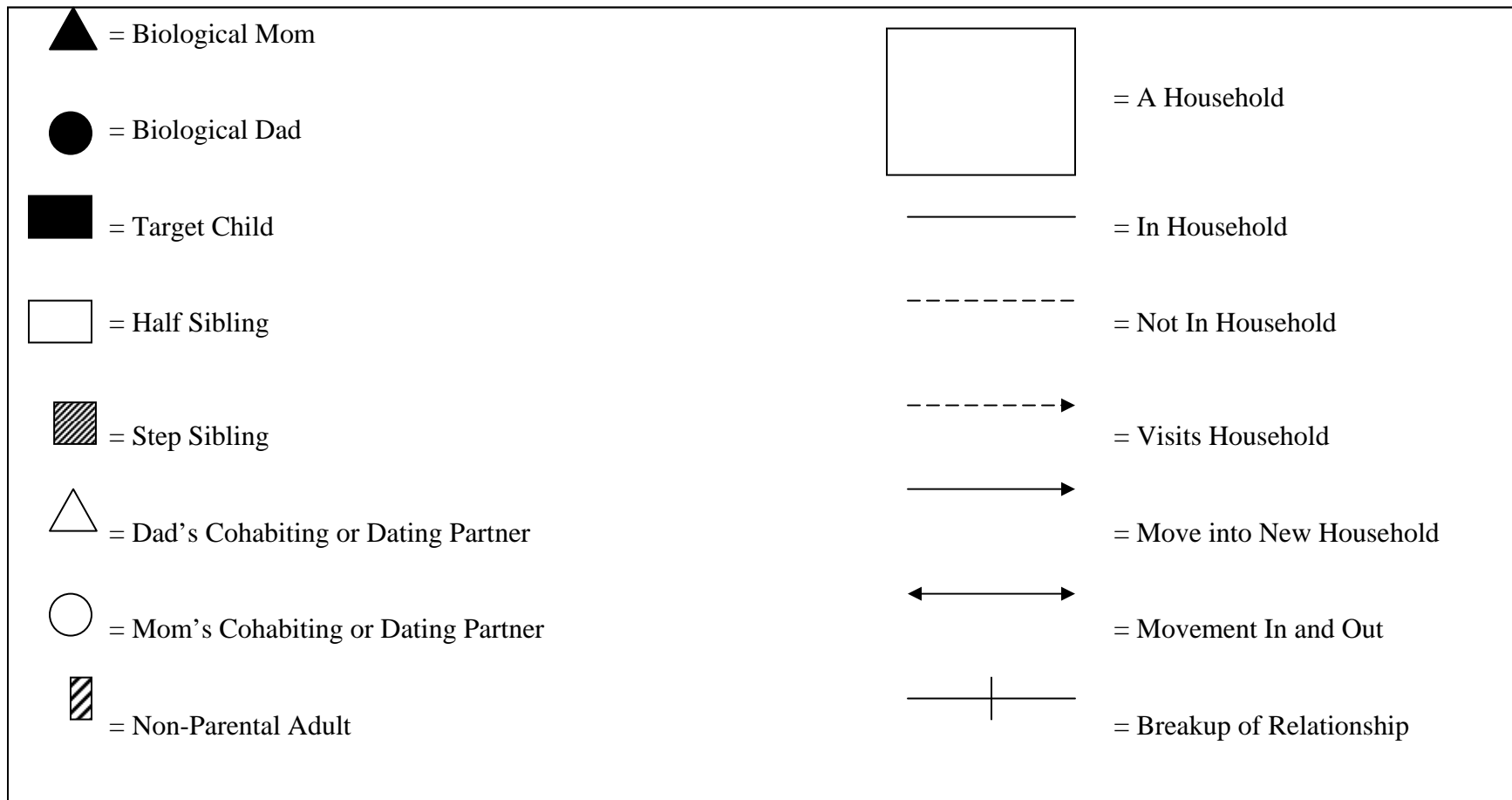


Figure 1

Elizabeth (Emma's First Child)

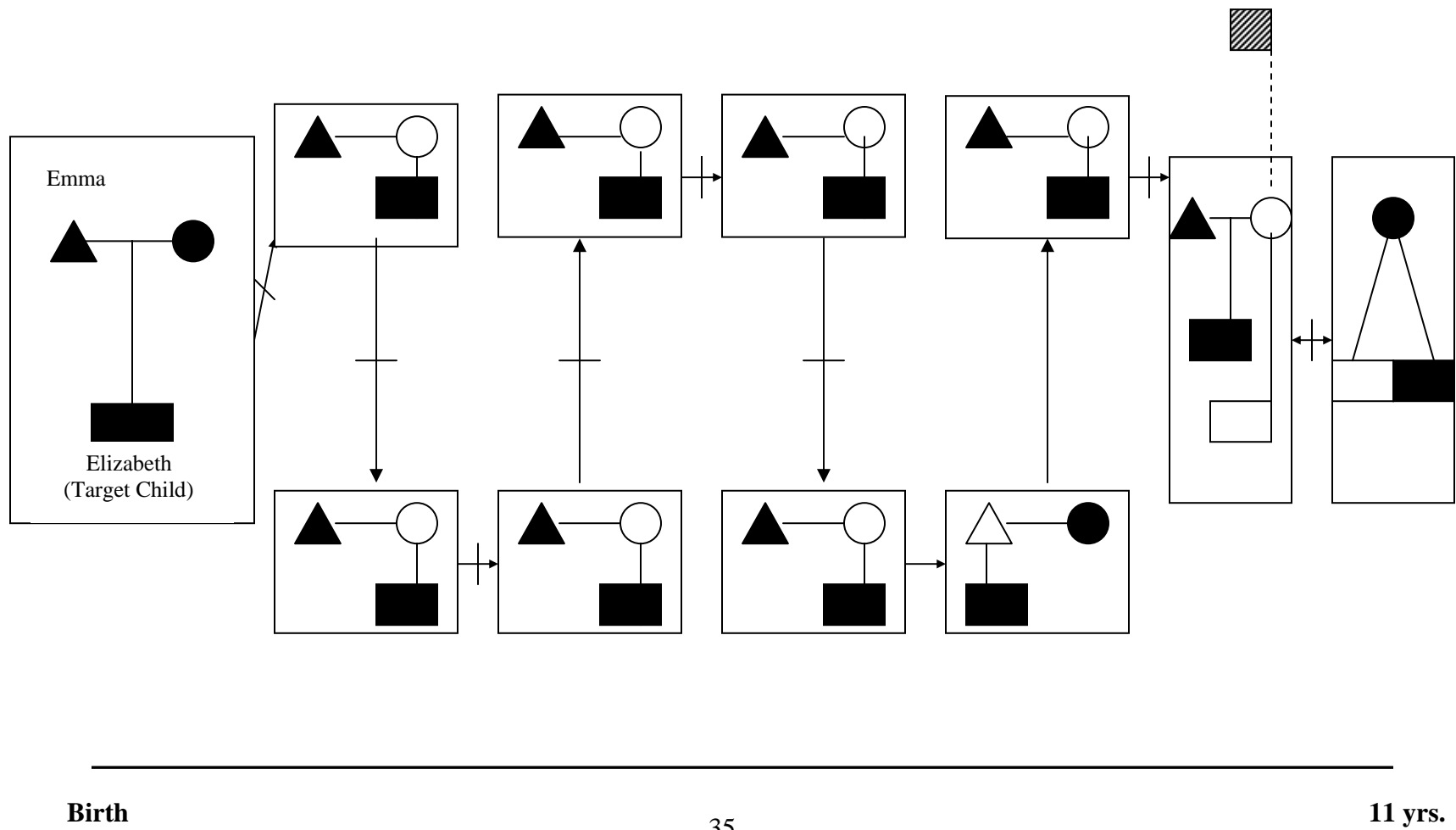
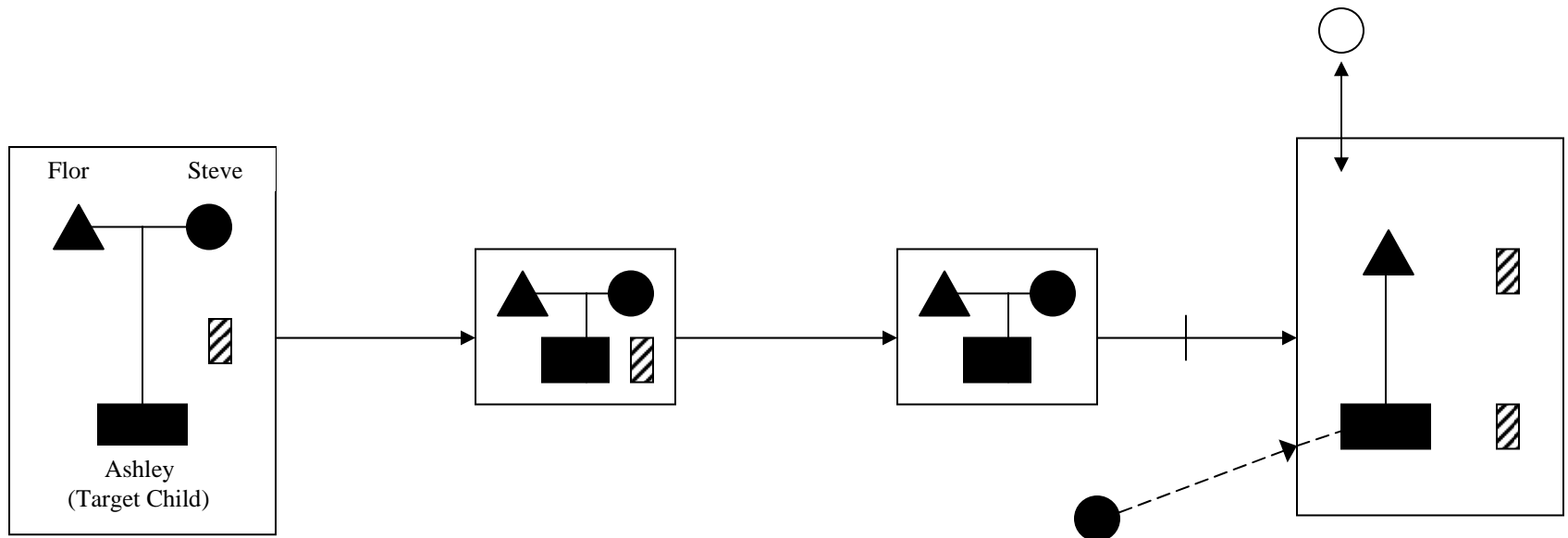


Figure 2

Ashley (Flor's Child)



Birth

~2 yrs.

Figure 3

Violet (Erin's Partner's Youngest Child)

