

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### Family structure and child well-being in Uruguay:

### The role of family structure, family stability and father involvement

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#### 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, most societies have experienced an unprecedented acceleration in the pace of family change—including increases in cohabitation, single motherhood, separation, and stepfamily formation. The pluralization of family forms and the shift away from the traditional two-biological parent family has led to an increasing academic and policy interest in understanding how these family dynamics affect children's lives (McLanahan 2004).

There is a vast literature on the influence of family structure and dynamics on child well-being (Härkönen, Bernardi and Boertien 2017). Most studies have found that children who are not raised by both biological parents tend to have fewer parental resources, a higher risk of family instability, and poorer outcomes in terms of school performance, psychological wellbeing, behavior or health. Whether it is family structure itself or the failure of the society to support alternative family forms which are responsible for the observed differences in children's outcomes is part of the debate.

Parenting in single-parent families—when the child's biological mother is single and/or when there is a non-resident parent, often the father, after a union breakup—means the custodial parent is left with less time to spend with the children (she must be both provider and carer). Consequently, female-headed families may place children at a disadvantage. However, is this disadvantage persistent or, in the case of parental breakup, can it be lessened if the non-resident father is involved in childrearing? The past literature on how children's wellbeing differs according to family structure and family stability has devoted little attention to the issue

of post-separation paternal involvement (Kiernan 2006). Given this existing research gap, we aim to examine a) how children's wellbeing differs according to family structure (including the involvement of the non-resident father) and family stability.

We, therefore, make three contributions. First, when talking about family structure and child outcomes, we refer not only to at-birth and current family structure, but also to how the effects on child outcomes may be significantly altered by stability of the family structure over time. An increasing number of studies have indeed examined whether the parent(s) with whom a child lives changed throughout the child's life course (see, for instance, Kiernan and Mensah 2010; Craigie, Brooks-Gunn and Waldfogel 2012). Secondly, we also focus on father involvement to examine whether the link between the family structure into which a child is born and raised and his/her wellbeing may be mediated by post-separation paternal involvement. Social norms about post-separation fatherhood have changed, increasingly favouring not only economic support, but also participation in childrearing.

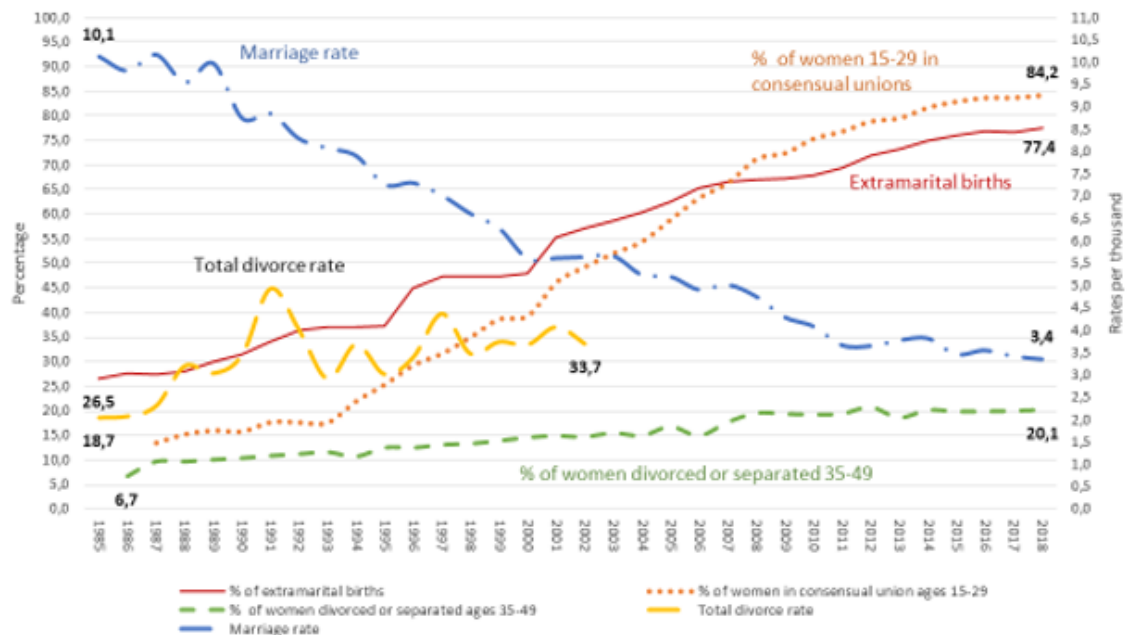
Thirdly, while studies have shown overwhelming evidence of the association between family structure, family stability and children's outcomes in the US and Europe, there is a paucity of studies on the subject in other contexts. Our study seeks to fill this gap by comparing several indicators of child wellbeing in different family forms in Uruguay. Uruguay is an interesting case on which to focus, as a country with high levels of cohabitation, divorce and separations and female-headed households. Previous studies have found that cohabitation is practically indistinguishable from marriage in terms of father involvement with children before and after union break-up (Bucheli 2003; Bucheli and Vigorito 2019). Less is known about how children fare in other family forms.

## **2. Family change in Uruguay**

During the last three decades, family indicators in Uruguay have undergone radical changes. Until the 1980s only a small number of couples opted for starting their conjugal lives outside of marriage. In 2019, 84% of young couples were cohabiting, and an increasing number of couples never formalize their unions. Several studies have also documented the systematic

increase of separations and divorces, the increase of out-of-wedlock births, and the steep fall of fertility rates (Cabella, Nathan and Pardo 2019; Cabella and Fernández 2017) (Figure 1)

**Figure 1. Evolution of family change indicators in Uruguay (1985-2020)**



**TFR 1985=2.5**  
**TFR 2020=1.4**

Source: Ministry of Public Health and National Statistical Institute, Uruguay

Because of the increase in marital dissolutions, a significant number of children and adolescents do not live with both parents throughout their childhood. According to data from the last national census in 2011, 25% of children aged 0-4 were living alone with their mother, and 42% of children aged 12-17. The growing instability of unions generated debates around the proper interpretation (e.g., economic uncertainty and social disintegration vs. changes in value orientations) but there is consensus on the need to study changes in the well-being of children following separations. Since the early 2000s several surveys collected information on the level of compliance with child support and on the loss of contact with the non co-resident parent (ESF 2001 and 2007; ENDIS 2013, 2015 and 2018; ELBU several waves). The results showed little change over time with respect to pension payments, with around 60% of fathers making no transfers after divorce and 30% losing contact with their children altogether after the break-up. These longitudinal studies have also shown that the more involved fathers are in

parenting before the break-up, the more likely they are to maintain a high frequency of contact with their children and a leading role in their upbringing (Pardo et al 2020). A recent study analysing the links between mothers' return to work and children's development shows that one of the most common causes of child labour is the lack of a mother's return to work. The results suggest that while the intensity of maternal employment does not influence child development, paternal involvement contributes as much to child development as maternal work resources (Perazzo et al. 2020).

### 3. Research Questions

It is a well-stylized fact that, besides family structure, family stability matters for children's well-being (Fomby and Cherlin 2007, Kiernan and Mensah 2010). In general, family life instability entails residential changes, the loss of social networks and emotional adjustments to new family roles, which provoke stress on families and potential adverse child outcomes. From this viewpoint, it is plausible that children born to unpartnered mothers who do not experience any family transition have better outcomes relative to children born in a two-parent family but who experience parental separation, or to children living in step-families. Reconstituted families have higher average economic resources, but the adverse effects of instability may outweigh this potential advantage.

Family stability is therefore assumed to be in children's best interests. Frequent father-child contact after union dissolution, too. However, parental separation generally entails changes in economic, time and parental resources and the weakening of father-child interactions, all likely to affect early child wellbeing (Poortman 2018). There is noteworthy heterogeneity in post-separation father-child ties and the causes of such heterogeneity are not consistent (Grätz, 2017). In many cases, the parent who leaves the household after separation –most often the father– reduces or even loses contact with his child(ren), but in other cases, they remain fully involved in their child's life.

Drawing on the arguments about instability and the stress associated with the turmoil of family structure, we follow the study design of Craige, Brooks-Gunn and Waldfogel (2012) to examine whether the educational, behavioral and health outcomes of children differ according to their

family structure at birth, their current family structure, and the (in)stability of their family structure over time. There are a variety of possible mechanisms that could explain the association between family structure and child educational, behavioral and health outcomes. Moreover, family structure does not fully explain inequalities in children's outcomes. Educational stratification may be an alternative perspective that emphasises how the separation penalty differs by social background. Recently, a wide range of empirical studies has focused on how the effects of parental breakdown on children's outcomes (e.g. children's educational attainment) vary across different social backgrounds, without reaching unambiguous conclusions (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). On the one hand, parents with higher levels of education might have more resources that prevent adverse events such as separation from affecting their children's outcomes (Grätz 2015). On the other hand, children from more advantaged social backgrounds might have more to lose from parental separation due to weakened contact with their father or changes in parental supervision (Bernardi and Radl 2014).

Based on this theory, we will test the following hypotheses:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Two-parent families (regardless of whether the parents are married or cohabiting) will provide the best child outcomes relative to all other family structures.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Family instability will have adverse effects on child outcomes.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Post-separation paternal involvement will be a mediator in the association between family structure, family stability and child outcomes: non-resident fathers are usually less involved than resident fathers but the higher the non-resident father involvement, the lower the detrimental effect of the union breakup on child wellbeing.

#### **4. Data and Variables**

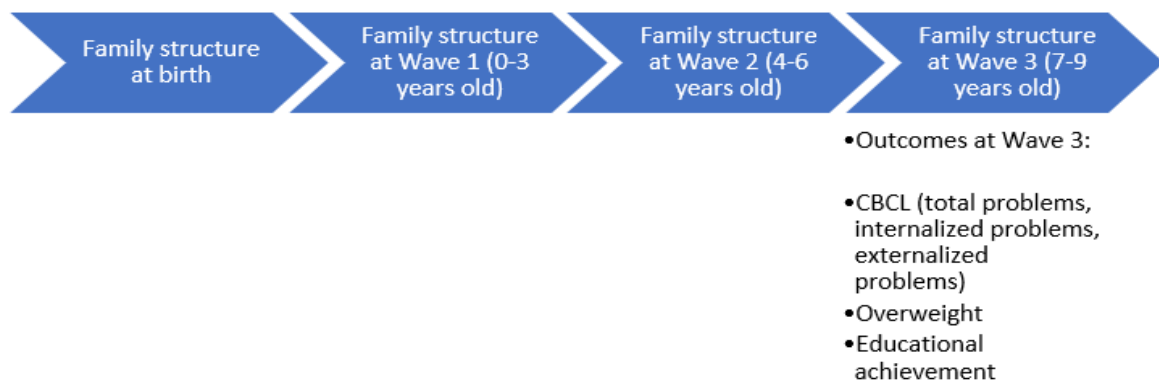
The data used in our empirical analyses come from the ongoing longitudinal survey on early childhood, the National Survey on Early Childhood Health, Nutrition, and Development – *Encuesta de Nutrición, Desarrollo Infantil y Salud [ENDIS]*. This survey is being carried out by academic and government institutions and headed by the National Statistics Institute of Uruguay. So far, the survey consists of three waves. The first one was conducted in 2013 and

consisted of a sample of 3,077 children aged 0 to 3. In 2016, the second wave collected data from 2,455 children aged 4 to 6 (sample attrition was 20.2 percent). In 2019, the third wave collected data from 1615 children aged 7 to 9 years old.

As noted above, we examine the focal child's (a) family structure at birth, (b) current family structure, and (c) (in)stability of family structure over time. We distinguish families with mother and father, with a single mother, or with a mother and a new partner. In the last two cases, we distinguish between households with and without an involved non-resident father. We define involved non-resident fathers as those who see the child at least one day per week.

Our longitudinal approach allows us to measure the impact of family instability, i.e., transitions between different structures on three sets of outcomes (Figure 1). The first outcome variable measures child behavioural problems, as reported by the main carer (mostly the mother). They were measured using the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), which includes sub-scales identifying aggressive behaviour (externalized problems) and anxious/depressive symptoms (internalized problems) (Achenbach 1991). The CBCL has been validated in Uruguay (Viola, Garrido, and Rescorla 2011). The second outcome variable measures school achievement and the third overweight problems. The analysis will include OLS regression models with control variables (e.g. sex of the child, race and educational level of the mother, household income).

**Figure 2. Indicators and waves of measurement**



Source: Own elaboration

## 5. Preliminary Results

Living arrangements changed between waves for 26% of children (385 out of 1513), a relevant proportion of the total population in the sample (Table 1). Thus, it will be possible to measure the influence of a changing living arrangement on child's development from a longitudinal perspective, considering that transitions matter as much as the arrangement itself.

*Table 1. Child's living arrangement in Wave 3 by living arrangement in Wave 1 (%)*

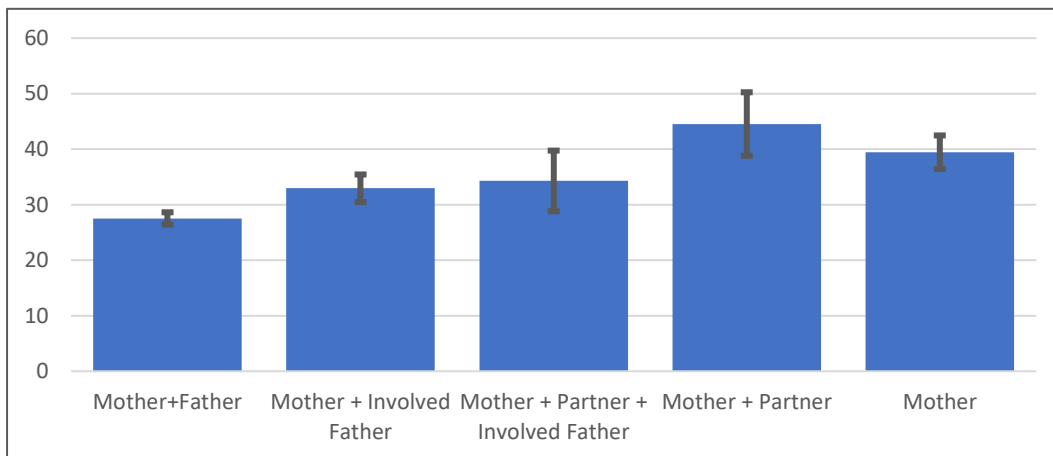
<i>Wave 3</i>	<i>Wave 1</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Mother+ Father</i>	<i>Mother+ Involved Father</i>	<i>Mother+ Partner+ Involved Father</i>	<i>Mother+ Partner</i>	<i>Mother</i>	
<i>Mother+Father</i>	80.13	24.81	40	20.83	5.56	67.02
<i>Mother + Involved Father</i>	8.86	40.6	20	4.17	6.25	11.39
<i>Mother + Partner + Involved Father</i>	2.65	4.51	20	8.33	2.78	3.03
<i>Mother + Partner</i>	2.4	8.27	10	45.83	26.39	5.92
<i>Mother</i>	5.96	21.8	10	20.83	59.03	12.64
<i>Total</i>	100	100	100	100	100	100

N=1,513

Source: ENDIS

We start exploring data through a cross-sectional approach at the last wave. It shows that the in the child's CBCL score varies considerably by type of family arrangement (Figure 3). The main result is the statistically significant difference between a mother and father household and arrangements in which the mother is the sole parent in the household, even if accompanied by another partner, or even if the non-coresident parent has frequent contact with the child. Also, although no statistically significant differences are found between all categories, it is suggestive that the highest level of problems as measured by the CBCL does not correspond to single-mother arrangements, but to those of mother and non-father partner.

**Figure 3. Child's CBCL scores by living arrangements at Wave 3**

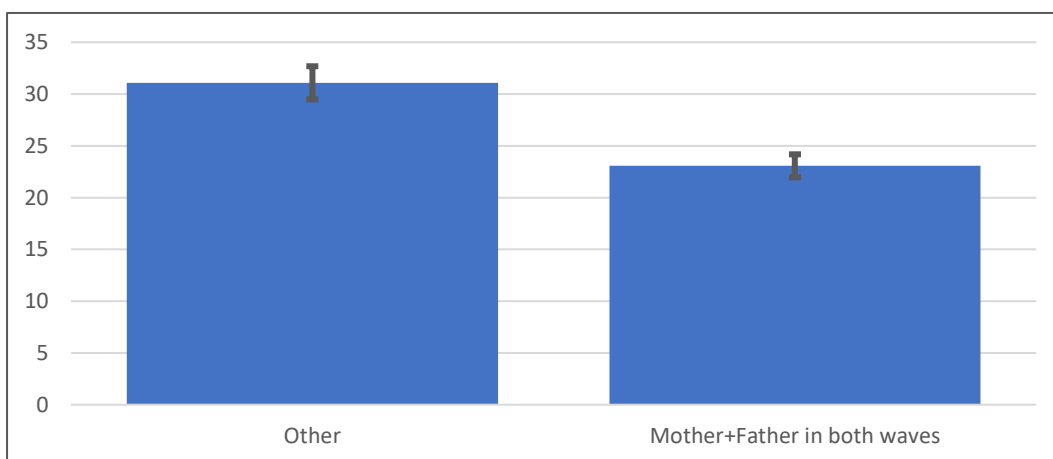


N=1,513

Source: ENDIS

Through a longitudinal approach, we can also compare households with a father and mother who remained at home over time, with those in which other arrangements emerged. The results show an important gap in the child's CBCL score (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Child's CBCL scores by living arrangements through both waves**



N=1,636

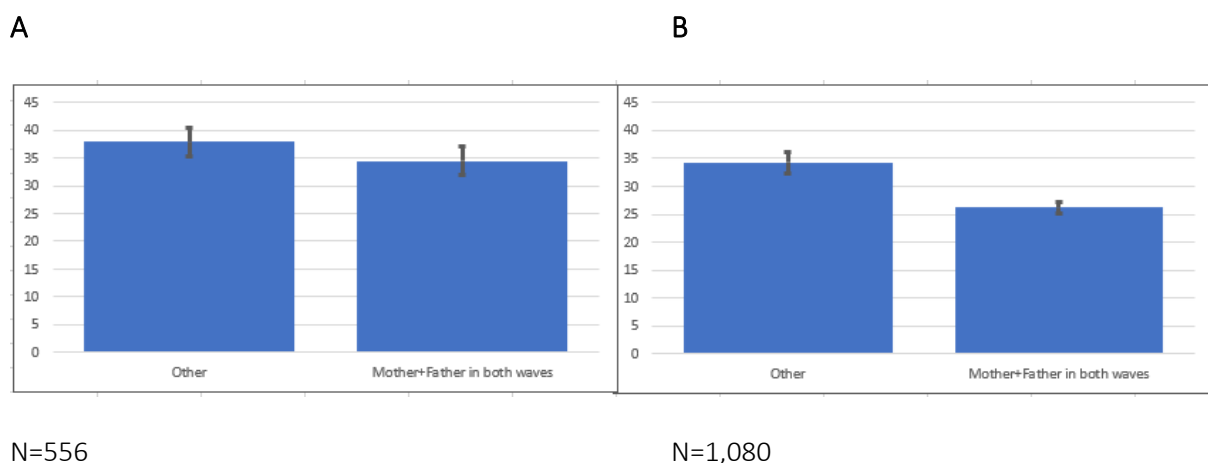
Source: ENDIS

To further explore the processes that might underlie this finding, we explore the same link between family arrangements and CBCL test scores (Figure 5), but in two separate



subpopulations: the stratum in which the child's mother has 8 years of education or less (panel A), and the one in which she has 9 years of education or more (panel B). The result indicates that for the former the statistically significant differences disappear, while for the latter they are particularly relevant. The results suggest that some of the hypotheses present in the literature, such as the greater negative consequence of parental separation on child outcomes for socio-economically advantaged children, could be supported by the data in our sample. On the other hand, children from more advantaged social backgrounds might have more to lose from parental separation due to weakened contact with their father or changes in parental supervision.

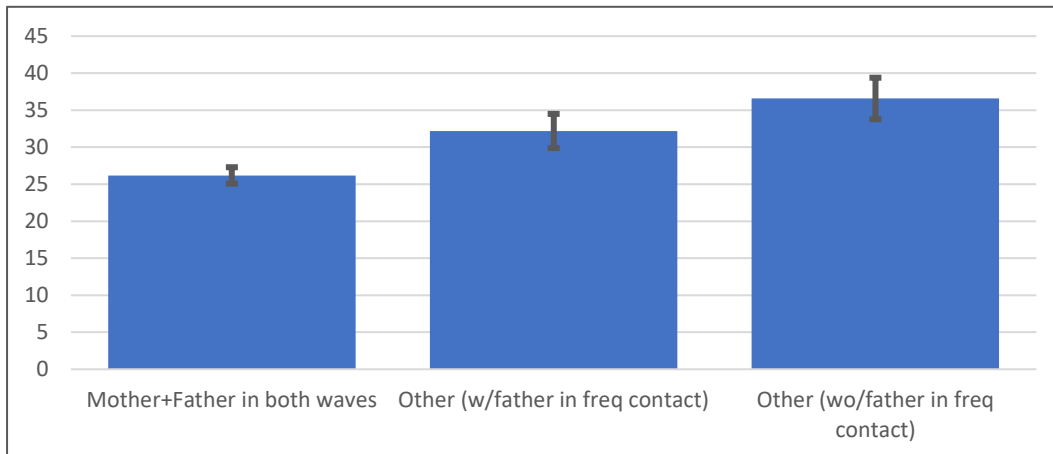
**Figure 5. Child's CBCL scores by living arrangements through both waves**



Source: ENDIS

We also explored a different use of data from both waves, comparing the results for those children in households with a mother and father at both points in time with those in other arrangements or transitions, but distinguishing two alternative situations among the *other* arrangements: those with a non-coresident father who is in frequent contact with the child and those who are not (Figure 6). In that specification, the population with the highest number of reported problems measured by the CBCL score is the latter, although the only statistically significant difference is between households with both mother and father over time and the remaining categories.

Figure 6. Child's CBCL scores by living arrangements through both waves (version 2)



Source: ENDIS

N=1,495

Considering that the effect of living arrangements on child well-being is correlated with the effect of other variables, particularly those related to household resources, we explore a linear regression model in which we include control variables as the mother's educational level -a proxy for the social stratum of the household- and the child's sex, as we know that it can influence the child's CBCL score. The results (Table 2) allow us to further explore the hypothesis of the influence of family structure, as significant differences are found, even with these control variables within the model.

*Table 2. Lineal regression model. Child's CBCL score*

	Coef.	P> t
<b>Family change</b>		
Mother + Father in both waves (omitted)		
Other (w/father in frequent contact)	3.7309	0.003
Other (wo/father in frequent contact)	6.6517	0.000
<b>Sex of the child</b>		
Male (omitted)		
Female	-2.2297	0.017
<b>Education of the mother (years)</b>		
	-1.1079	0.000
<b>Constant</b>	41.8729	0.000
N	1,547	
Prob> F	0.0000	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0914	

Source: ENDIS

*Later versions of this abstract will also explore the rest of the outcomes mentioned in section 4*

## 6. Discussion

Family structure and family stability play a central role in child wellbeing in Uruguay, where there is an increasing share of children being raised in unstable families and father-absent households, especially after the 1990s when separations from cohabiting couples grew considerably. Unlike other contexts, children of cohabiting families do not have worse outcomes compared to children of married parents since marriage and cohabitation have converged in the Uruguayan society and there are not compositional differences between both union types that may influence child outcomes adversely.

Children born to two-parent families have indeed better outcomes relative to children born to single- or re-partnered mothers. A further exploration of the data in our sample might refine the results shown in this abstract. But can already state that policies aimed at improving the wellbeing of the family and the child do not need to promote marriage –as it occurs in the US,

for instance, where marriage entails a *premium* on income, education, and other child investments—, but rather stability within the family setting and above all, more nurturing fathering and co-parenting practices.

A legislative initiative promoting prescriptive joint physical custody in the absence of parental agreement is currently under discussion in parliament. Although this is a hotly debated issue among social organisations and political forces, the contribution of academia to this debate is still very limited. We believe that future versions of our study will also allow us to contribute to describing the role of post-dissolution male involvement in the development of children.

## 7. References

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