

The Cinderella Effect: Non-Genetic Romantic Partners as a Risk Factor For Child Abuse

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INTRODUCTION

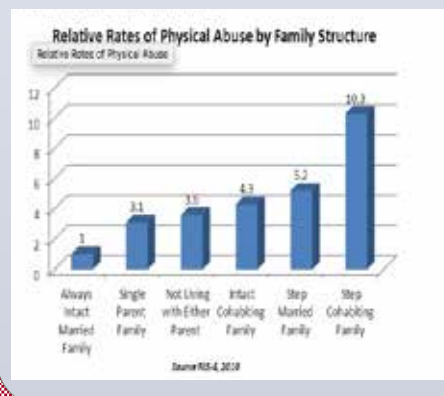
- ❖ According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022), approximately 618,000 children were the victims of child abuse and neglect and 1,750 children died from abuse and neglect in 2020.
- ❖ Although data shows that biological parents are the main perpetrators of child abuse and neglect, a family structure composed of a single parent and nonbiological partner are also associated with increased risk.
- ❖ In 2020, there were 17,768 (3.8 percent) cases of abuse and neglect where the perpetrator was identified as the unmarried partner of a parent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

DEFINITIONS

- ❖ Non-genetic romantic partner = parent's romantic partner who is not genetically related to the child
- ❖ Non-genetic caretaker = child's caregiver who is not genetically related to the child
- ❖ Father surrogate = a non-genetic caretaker who takes on a father role (typically, mom's partner)

Family Structure & Child Abuse

- ❖ Past studies have shown that non-genetic caretakers are at increased risk of committing child abuse and maltreatment (Tooley et al., 2006).
- ❖ Stepchildren are especially at risk of being abused by the mother's male romantic partners (Hilton et al., 2015; Margolin, 1992).
- ❖ Research has demonstrated that boyfriends of mothers committed 64% of non-parental abuse in single-parent families (Margolin, 1992).
- ❖ Children in homes with a father surrogate are twice as likely to be the victim of maltreatment than in female-headed households with no male partners (Radhakrishna et al., 2001).



Research Findings

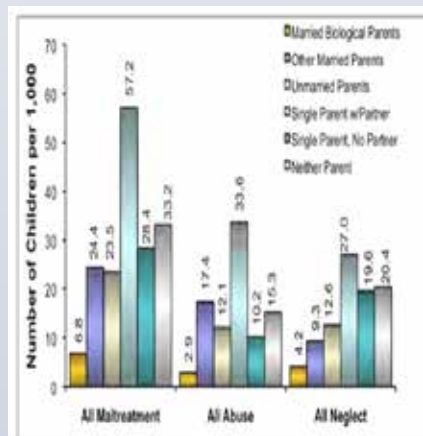
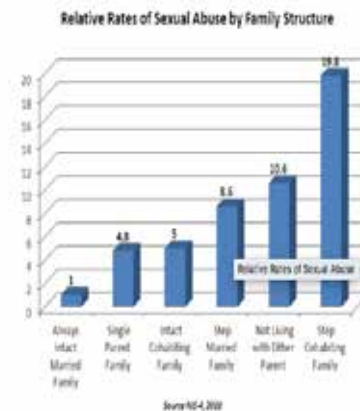


Figure S-1. Incidence of Harm Standard Maltreatment by Family Structure and Living Arrangement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ The legal system could focus more on the role of surrogate parents in social services cases. The focus may only be on the biological parent when there is also a surrogate parent in the home who may be abusing a child.
- ❖ Interventions such as parenting classes should be developed for surrogate parents.
- ❖ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services could develop strategies to ensure that states have a standard way of reporting data on perpetrators. For example, there was a note that one state did not report any perpetrator data and there was a category of perpetrators labeled as unknown that do not capture the perpetrator characteristics.

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