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Single-parent families double likelihood of child mental illness

David Batty

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Children from single-parent families are twice as likely to suffer from mental health problems as those living with married parents, figures showed today.

Boys whose parents had split up had the highest rate of childhood mental illness in 2004, the office for National Statistics (ONS) said.

The figures, from the ONS annual report on UK social trends, showed one-fifth of those living with a divorced, separated or widowed parent suffered from at least one disorder.

In contrast, only 8% of boys living with married parents suffered from mental disorders.

The figure was 2% lower than the overall rate of mental disorder among all five to 16-year-olds when the previous data was published two years ago.

The data showed a similar gap between the mental wellbeing of girls whose parents had split up and those whose parents lived together.

Around 13% of girls whose parents had split suffered from a disorder, compared with 5% of those whose parents were together.

Boys living with unmarried parents suffered the second highest rate of mental disorder. Just over 15% were affected, compared with just under 15% of those living with an unmarried parent.

Girls living with cohabiting parents fared better, with around 10% suffering from mental disorders. The figure for those living with an unmarried single parent was around 12%.

There was also a higher incidence of mental disorder among children living with stepsiblings - 14% - than those with no stepchildren, where the figure was 9%.

Children were also more likely to suffer from mental health problems as they got older, the ONS found. This was especially the case among girls, with twice as many aged between 11 and 16 suffering from a disorder than those aged between five and 10.

Mental ill health also affected children's school attendance.

In 2004, 17% of those with an emotional disorder such as depression or obsessive compulsive disorder, 14% with conduct disorders and 11% with conditions such as attention deficit disorder were absent from school for more than 15 days.

The equivalent figure for children in good mental health was 4%.

Around one-third of those with conduct disorders had been excluded from school, with

nearly a quarter of those having been excluded more than once.

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