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Parental separation and well-being of youths: Evidence from Germany

Rainer Winkelmann [a,b,*]

[a] *University of Zurich, Switzerland*
[b] *IZA Bonn, Germany*

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Abstract

This paper employs recent data for Germany and a new outcome variable to assess the consequences of parental separation on the well-being of youths. In particular, it is considered how *subjective well-being*, elicited from an ordinal 11-point general life satisfaction question, differs between youths living in intact and non-intact families, holding many other potential determinants of well-being constant using ordered probit regressions. The main finding of this study is that living in a non-intact family has not the hypothesised large negative effect on child well-being.
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1. Introduction

One of the most important issues of social and family policy relates to the long-term consequences of disadvantaged socio-economic background for the development of a child. What are the conseqences of exposure to child poverty, low parental education – and parental separation in particular – for the success of a child in later life? And, if causal effects exist, are they large enough to justify any policy intervention, presuming that an appropriate instrument can be identified?

* Present address: Socioeconomic Institute, University of Zurich, Zürichbergstr. 14, CH-8032 Zürich, Switzerland. Tel.: +41 44 634 2292.

E-mail address: winkelmann@sts.unizh.ch.

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Recent examples for economic studies on the effect of parental separation on the successful development of children include Ginther and Pollak (2000), Ermisch and Francesconi (2001) and Jenkins and Schluter (2002) who all consider the educational attainment of youth. Haveman and Wolfe (1995) survey earlier research in this area. Without going into too much detail, it seems fair to say that the conventional wisdom espoused by most of these studies is that parental separation matters, and that it matters quite a lot. However, there is also recent evidence challenging this conventional wisdom. First, on methodological grounds, studies that do not control for family specific effects tend to produce larger estimates than studies using siblings data. In other words, the observed correlation between divorce and child outcome may be attributable, partially or in full, to selection, which means that it is not causal, Björklund and Sundström (2002).

Second, there is the general issue how "success" should be measured. It is typically defined by schooling attainment (including level finished, school grades or test scores), earnings, health, or the choice of certain "unhealthy" behaviour during adolescence or adulthood (such as drug use, smoking, or teenage pregnancy). Moreover, some studies are concerned with immediate outcomes for children or adolescents, while others look at outcomes for adults later in life. Again, there is some evidence that definition and time horizon matter. For example, for Sweden, a negative effect of divorce on educational attainment has been established when considering grade point average at age 16 by Jonsson and Gähler (1997) but not when considering educational attainment in adulthood by Björklund and Sundström (2002).

More importantly, the previous research seems to have overlooked an alternative measure of child welfare, the most direct measure conceivable, namely a person's self-assessment of one's own well-being. The present paper attempts to fill that gap, by reconsidering the child welfare debate using recent progress in the analysis of subjective well-being responses from household surveys. This literature has produced fruitful insights in many areas, as surveys by Frey and Stutzer (2002), Easterlin (2001) and Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) amply demonstrate. In this literature, the response to a question such as "On a scale from 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with your life at present?" is taken as an indicator of personal subjective well-being. Based on this premise, one can then quantify the effect of external circumstances on individual well-being, usually relying on regression analysis.

While dozens if not hundreds of studies of this type have been conducted by now, to the best of my knowledge, none of them specifically addresses the effect of parental separation on the well-being of youth. The primary goal of the paper is then to provide such evidence, using a sample of 16–18 year olds in Germany. In the estimated models the dependent variable, subjective well-being, is explained by variables such as household income, number of siblings, school track and grades in school, in addition to an indicator whether or not the youth lives together with both of his/her parents. Since the dependent variable is measured on an ordinal scale, simple linear regression is inappropriate, and ordered probit models are used instead.

2. Data and basic hypotheses

The empirical analysis in this paper is based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel, GSOEP (see SOEP Group (2001), and Haisken-DeNew and Frick (2003), for a general description of the data). The GSOEP, an annual household survey, was initiated in 1984 and has been used frequently in past research on well-being. Examples include Clark et al. (2001, 2003) and Winkelmann and Winkelmann (1995, 1998), to name but a few. All of this research, however, targets adult samples. The GSOEP randomly samples households and then obtains personal in-

formation for all members of that household aged 16 and over, in addition to general household information provided usually by the household head. In principle, therefore, it was always possible to analyse well-being responses of young people, for example those aged 16–18.

However, since the questions were the same for all respondents and not specifically targeted at youth, important information was missing. Therefore, it was decided in 2000 to introduce an additional youth questionnaire. This questionnaire includes detailed questions on schooling, life at home, and parents (who need not live in the same household and therefore be part of the GSOEP sample). The youth questionnaire was distributed in 2000 in a pre-test version, and from 2001 onwards in its final form. In future, it will be administered to adolescents who participate in the full interviewing round for the first time. This typically happens during the year of their 17th birthday. Since interviews are generally held in the first-half of the year, most of these persons are 16-year-old at the time of the interview. The 2000 and 2001 youth surveys also included somewhat older persons, up to those born in 1981, and for about 30% of respondents it was their second year of participation in the regular GSOEP survey.

After merging the data from the youth questionnaire with data from the personal and household files, from where the information on subjective well-being and socio-economic variables is obtained, and dropping all records with missing values on any of the relevant variables, I obtain a sample of 640 valid observations. Of these, 189 are for the year 2000 and 451 for the year 2001. For a number of reasons, this sample is not necessarily representative for the population of 16–18 year olds in Germany. The missing values are most predominant among the school related information (school type visited and grades), and the resultant sample after dropping records with missings has on average a more "favorable" family background: the proportion of adolescents living in non-intact families is lower, and household income and parental education are higher, than in the full sample. Moreover, the GSOEP sample is composed of several random sub-samples with significant differences in sampling probabilities; this is most evident in the explicit over-sampling of foreigners (in the starting year 1984) and immigrants (in 1994/1995). While the descriptive statistics have to be read with this caveat in mind, the regression analysis is not affected as long as the selection is on exogenous variables – such as for instance nationality – and not on the endogenous variable – here subjective well-being. The assumption of exogenous sampling is then not problematic as long as the regression coefficients are constant in the population.

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the well-being response among the 640 youth. On display are the relative frequencies of the responses to the question: "On a scale from 0 (=completely unhappy) to 10 (=completely happy), where would you put your current happiness?" The modal answer is eight but there is substantial variation in responses. About 11% of all youth give responses of five or below, indicating that they are quite unhappy with their lives. The arithmetic mean is 7.6, although strictly speaking, treating such information as cardinal is not admissible, and techniques for ordered data will be used later on.

The question is then: how can we explain the variation in subjective well-being among youth, and, specifically, how large is the adverse effect of a non-intact family structure on well-being, if any, without and with controlling for other factors? To answer these questions, I consider a number of potential explanatory factors that can be grouped together under four broad items:

- General socio-economic factors.
- Scholastic aptitude.
- Material well-being.
- Family structure.

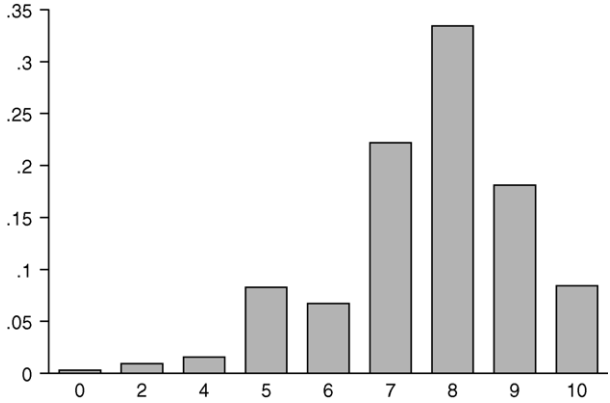

Fig. 1. Relative frequencies of well-being responses on the 0–10 scale. $N = 640$. Source: German socio-economic panel, 2000 and 2001.

2.1. General socio-economic factors

The sample is about evenly split between males and females (*male*). Ninety percent of all persons have German nationality (*German*); at the time of the interview, 68% live in the territory of former West Germany (*west*). Most youths in the sample are still in school (69%). Twenty-three percent are engaged in vocational training (typically apprenticeship programs), 3% work (either full-time or part-time), whereas 6% are neither engaged in education/training nor in the labor market. These percentages, as well as means of all other variables, are listed in Table 1.

In principle, young persons in the age range considered here, 16–18, do not need to live at home. However, the age of legal maturity is 18 in Germany, and almost all persons in the sample, 99.4%, indeed still live with their parent(s) at the time of the interview. This high proportion may somewhat overstate the true percentage in the population since household members leaving and forming new households, though being followed-up in principle, frequently drop out of the survey in practice, because they cannot be located or refuse further participation. No clear prediction exists, whether *at home* should affect well-being positively or negatively. The same holds for a further variable, *region of childhood*, indicating whether the childhood was mostly spent in a big city, a mid-sized city, a small city or in a rural area.

2.2. Scholastic aptitude

Success in school can be expected to have a considerable influence on personal development and well-being, for instance by building up self-esteem. This factor is captured in a number of different ways. First, there is the type of general school a young person has completed, visits currently, or plans to visit and complete in the future. The German school system features a clear hierarchy. The least ambitious curriculum is offered by *Hauptschule* which can be left after 9 or 10 years of schooling, followed by *Realschule*, a 10 year program, and *Gymnasium*, a 13 year program (which was recently cut to 12 years). In the sample, 34% of youth opted for the Gymnasium, 37% for Realschule and 19% for Hauptschule. The remaining 10% leave school with no degree at all.

The GSOEP youth survey also contains information on grades (either current ones for those still at school or the latest available ones for those who have already left school). Grades are

Table 1
Descriptive statistics ($N = 640$)

	Mean	Standard deviation
Happy	7.601	1.545
Non-intact family	0.210	0.408
Non-intact years (in %)	49.9	27.6
Log income	8.504	0.419
Own room	0.850	0.357
Single child	0.118	0.323
Male	0.493	0.500
German	0.904	0.293
West	0.684	0.465
Lives at home	0.993	0.078
Current status (reference: inactive)		
School	0.689	0.463
Vocational training	0.226	0.418
Work	0.028	0.165
Region of childhood (reference: large city)		
Mid-sized city	0.190	0.393
Small city	0.257	0.437
Rural area	0.337	0.473
School degree (reference: none)		
Hauptschule	0.190	0.393
Realschule	0.368	0.482
Gymnasium	0.340	0.474
Good student	0.318	0.466
Repeat	0.189	0.391
Father gymnasium	0.146	0.354
Mother gymnasium	0.092	0.289
Log number of books	4.719	1.372

provided for three separate subjects, German, Mathematics, and a foreign language. I define an indicator variable *good student*, which is one if the student has reached a level of 1 (excellent) or 2 (very good), on a scale from 1 to 6, where 4 is the passing mark, in a minimum of two of the three subjects. By this measure, 32% of all persons are or were "good students". In addition, there is information on whether or not a student had to repeat a grade (*repeat*), which can be interpreted as a signal of reduced scholastic aptitude. This applied in 19% of all cases.

Some additional aspects of educational achievement may be captured by the type of intellectual environment a person was exposed to while growing up. The most obvious indicator is the educational attainment of the parents. I use here two indicators variables (*mother-gym* and *father-gym*) that are one if the mother or father, respectively, completed the highest general schooling level. In addition, I control for the number of books present in the household. Clearly, the factors mentioned in this section are strongly interrelated. Parental education and number of books are very strong predictors of the actual educational attainment of the child in these data, a standard result in the literature. However, it may still be worthwhile including them as additional variables, as they may have separate effects on subjective well-being that go above and beyond the effect of own educational attainment.

2.3. Material well-being

The most direct measure of material well-being is disposable household income. I use here information on current monthly net household income, i.e. income after taxes, mandatory social contributions and government transfers. Rather then adjusting income on a per-capita basis, or using an arbitrary equivalence scale, I include, logarithmic family size as a separate variable in order to account for possible size and scale effects. In the context of educational attainment, several recent studies have exploited the longitudinal structure of the GSOEP to find some evidence for long-term effects of income during childhood (Büchel et al., 2001; Jenkins and Schluter, 2002; Mahler and Winkelmann, 2004). However, with the type of well-being indicator under scrutiny here – current satisfaction with life in general – this line of reasoning is less compelling.

A second indicator of material well-being relates to the living circumstances. The variable *own room* is one if the adolescent has his/her own bedroom. This is the case for 85% of all observations. Somewhat related is a further indicator, namely whether or not the person is a *single child*. Twelve percent in the sample are. Many past studies have established a firm empirical basis for the concept of "sibling rivalry". In general, the resources (material, but not necessarily only so) available for a child are decreasing in the presence of more children and single children, therefore, usually enjoy a higher material well-being, *ceteris paribus*. This is not to say that being a single child cannot have also other consequences on child development that go beyond the purely material aspects.

2.4. Family structure

To what extent is a disrupted family structure responsible for low well-being? The data offer two measures of family structure. The first one refers to the situation at the time of interview. Each respondent of the youth survey is asked whether she/he lives with both parents, with the mother only, with the father only, or with none of the parents. The last three possibilities are grouped together in a single variable *non-intact* family. We would expect that adolescents living in a non-intact family have a lower subjective well-being than others. In addition, all respondents provide retrospective information on the number of years spent in an intact family structure during the first 15 years of their life. From this information, I calculate the proportion of *non-intact years* among the first 15 years of life, in percent. This variable measures how cumulative past disruptions affect current well-being.

3. Methods

The determinants of well-being are analysed using a simple cross-section ordered probit model. In such a model, the conditional expectation of an underlying latent variable y_i^* is modelled as a linear combination of the various regressors

$$E(y_i^*|x_{i1}, \ldots, x_{ik}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{ik}$$

Under the additional assumption that $y_i^*|x_{i1}, \ldots, x_{ik}$, $i = 1, \ldots, n$ are independently and normally distributed with constant variance σ^2 and that

$$y_i = j \text{ if and only if } \kappa_j < y_i^* \leq \kappa_{j+1} \quad j = 0, \ldots, 10$$

where $\kappa_0 = -\infty, \kappa_1, \ldots, \kappa_9, \kappa_{10} = \infty$ are threshold values, we obtain the ordered probit model for the observed outcomes ($y_i \in 0, 1, \ldots, 10$). The parameters of this conditional probability model can be estimated by the method of maximum likelihood.

There are several ways to interpret the parameters of the model. One can compute marginal probability effects, i.e. the change in the probability $\Delta P(y_i = j)$ associated with the change of a given regressor, in the case of dummy variables from 0 to 1, keeping everything else constant. Another simple way to assess what factors matter most is tracing out "iso well-being" contours. For example, if $\beta_1 = \beta_2$ then an increase in x_1 by one unit requires a decrease in x_2 by an equal amount to keep overall well-being constant.

When making such comparisons, one has to keep in mind that the two non-binary regressors, income and number of books, are measured on a logarithmic scale. This is in the spirit of logarithmic utility functions used elsewhere in economics. It implies decreasing marginal utility of income, or books. Specifically, proportional income changes are assumed to have a constant effect on well-being, i.e. for richer households larger absolute income changes are needed to obtain the same increase in well-being than are necessary for poorer households. For small income changes, the marginal effect of income on the latent well-being indicator is well approximated by $\beta_{\text{linc}} \times \%\,\Delta\text{income}/100$. For larger income changes, this approximation may be poor. The true marginal effect can be overestimated by quite a bit. For example, the effect of doubling income is $\beta_{\text{linc}} \times 0.69$, rather than β_{linc} as suggested by the approximation. Of course, before considering the magnitudes of the diverse effects, one should test, and reject, the null hypothesis that the coefficients are zero.

As explained in the previous section, the choice of regressors to be included in the model is motivated by an economic perspective, where well-being, as a proxy for utility, depends both on material goods – present and future consumption as captured for example by income, households size and schooling track – and on immaterial ones, such as the family environment and the emotional support it provides. The GSOEP being a general-purpose survey, the choice of variables is of course somewhat restricted. We don't know whether the young person is subject to bullying in school, has just broken up with a girlfriend or boyfriend, and the like. The approach of the paper is then to control for as many potentially relevant aspects as possible with these data and to see whether a ceteris paribus effect of non-intact family remains. For a causal interpretation, it is required that the explanatory variables are exogenous. For many variables, such as composition, size, and economic position of the family, exogeneity is a-priori plausible. For others, such as school achievement, exogeneity may be more problematic. We will see in the next section that the central results are robust and do not depend on whether these potentially endogenous variables are included or not.

4. Results

Five different models were estimated. They differ in the number and type of regressors that are included. In the simplest model, the ordinal well-being indicator is regressed on a single variable, non-intact. In a second model, both non-intact and non-intact years, the cumulative past exposure to living in a non-intact family during the first 15 years of life, in percent, are included. The remaining three regressions add successively more controls to assess how the specific effect of family structure changes in extended models where the potential of omitted variable bias is reduced.

The regression results are displayed in Table 2. In the first column, we see that the expected underlying latent well-being index is lower for adolescents living in non-intact families than in intact families. The point estimate is -0.258, and it is highly significant. The particular value has no interesting interpretation per se. To understand its quantitative meaning, one has to compute marginal probability effects, i.e. $\hat{P}(Y = j|\text{non-intact} = 1) - \hat{P}(Y = j|\text{non-intact} = 0)$. The

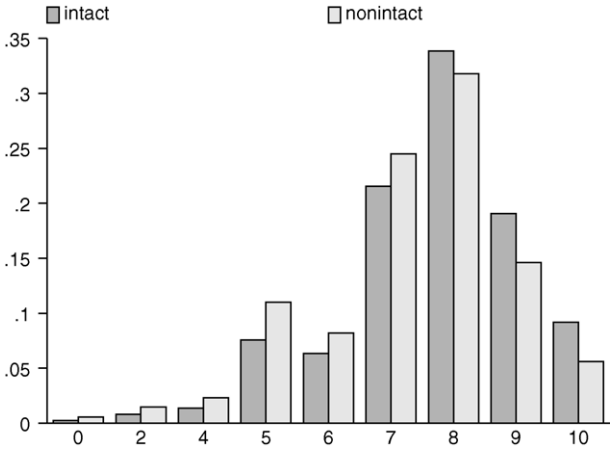

Fig. 2. Relative frequencies of well-being responses by family type. $N = 640$. Source: German socio-economic panel, 2000 and 2001.

predicted probabilities are shown in Fig. 2. For example, living in an intact family increases the predicted probability of a "10" on the 0–10 scale by 3.6% points. The predicted probability of low well-being (a response of five or below) increases by 5.3% points for those living in a non-intact family relative to those living in an intact family.

In the second column of Table 2, I add a second variable, namely the proportion of time spent in a non-intact family up to the age of 15. This variable captures the cumulative effect of past exposure to living in a non-intact family, rather than the current situation that is described by the variable non-intact. A-priori, one might think that both variables have independent effects on well-being. And indeed, both estimated coefficients are negative. To make the coefficients comparable, consider a "worst-case" scenario of a youth who has lived in a non-intact family for all her life. The contribution to current well-being from past exposure is then -0.00146×100, which is less than the -0.195 coming from current status. Therefore, the present matters more than the past.

The two effects are jointly significant at the 5% level, as a likelihood ratio test shows. However, the two variables are closely correlated and the specific effects are estimated very imprecisely. For example, in only 12 cases have there been past incidences of non-intactness among youths who currently live with two parents. Also, 20 more observations are lost due to missing information on the duration variable. As a consequence, I decided to drop the duration variable from the further analysis and concentrate on the non-intact variable instead.

Starting from the preliminary conclusion that there is indeed a negative association between non-intact family and well-being, I will now explore in more detail whether or not this association is spurious. To begin with, parental separation in most cases means lower income and reduced consumption levels. In the present data, family income in non-intact families is about 30% lower than family income in intact families. In model 3, I test whether non-intact has an independent effect on subjective well-being of youths after accounting for the confounding effect of material well-being, i.e. holding income and other aspects of material well-being constant. As a result of including these additional controls, the non-intact coefficient drops by about 35%, and it is no longer statistically significant. The income variable is positive and significant (at the 10% level

Table 2
Ordered probit results for well-being of youth

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Non-intact family	−0.258** (0.100)	−0.195 (0.153)	−0.166 (0.110)	−0.157 (0.113)	−0.118 (0.115)
Non-intact years (in %)		−0.001 (0.003)			
Log income			0.211 (0.109)	0.160 (0.115)	0.174 (0.127)
Log household size			0.128 (0.185)	0.071 (0.187)	0.114 (0.192)
Own room			−0.149 (0.120)	−0.069 (0.129)	−0.026 (0.131)
Single child			0.031 (0.141)	0.070 (0.142)	0.072 (0.143)
Male				−0.022 (0.083)	0.060 (0.086)
German				−0.388* (0.155)	−0.350* (0.160)
West				0.209* (0.096)	0.280** (0.099)
School				0.379* (0.183)	0.326 (0.193)
Vocational training				0.290 (0.195)	0.224 (0.199)
Work				0.347 (0.300)	0.289 (0.304)
Lives at home				0.049 (0.528)	0.119 (0.529)
Mid-sized city				0.012 (0.129)	0.006 (0.130)
Small city				0.003 (0.121)	0.023 (0.122)
Rural area				0.081 (0.116)	0.050 (0.118)
Hauptschule					0.079 (0.171)
Realschule					0.271 (0.149)
Gymnasium					0.200 (0.159)
Good student					0.308** (0.095)
Repeat					−0.023 (0.114)
Father gymnasium					−0.148 (0.134)
Mother gymnasium					−0.089 (0.167)
Log number of books					−0.013 (0.036)
First wave					−0.006 (0.098)
Observations	640	620	640	640	640
Log-likelihood	−1105.8	−1069.9	−1102.3	−1092.4	−1083.8

Source: German socio-economic panel, 2000 and 2001. Standard errors in parentheses. The estimated cut-points are not displayed.

* Significant at the 5% level.
** Significant at the 1% level.

of significance), whereas the other indicators of material well-being, household size, having an own room and being a single child, are insignificant.

The 4th model presented in Table 2 adds the set of variables capturing the general socio-economic background. Interestingly, German (i.e. having German citizenship rather than being a foreigner) has a large negative effect on reported well-being. One speculative explanation is that this difference may express differences in expectations, which, if unfulfilled, lower subjective well-being. Youths living in the West are more satisfied with their lives than youths living in the East. Well-being is also significantly higher among those enrolled in school relative to those who are economically inactive.

Finally, the 5th model in Table 2 adds variables related to schooling and scholastic aptitude. It turns out that neither the type of school visited, nor the parental education background matters for well-being. The only significant effect is observed for the variable good student. This variable, to recapitulate, is constructed from school grades, and it is one if a good grade is reported in atleast two out of the three relevant subjects. Being a good student leads to significantly higher levels of well-being, ceteris paribus. The effect of this variable can be quantified as follows: if all the other explanatory variables are kept constant at their mean values, the probability of having a low well-being (five or less on the 0–10 scale) for a good student, relative to others, is reduced by 5.1% points.

A formal likelihood ratio test confirms that model 5 is the preferred model, as the P-value of testing model 4 against model 5 is 0.046. In this most comprehensive model, the coefficient of non-intact has been reduced to -0.118, less than half of the unadjusted effect. It is not statistically significant from zero, and the point estimate is also small relative to other effects. Case in point is the variable good student which has an estimated effect of $+0.308$, more than twice as large in absolute terms. Based on this evidence, one can conclude that living in a non-intact family is relatively unimportant for subjective well-being of youths.

Having found that there is no substantial negative effect of living in a non-intact family, ceteris paribus, one may object that this is not the right question to ask. If, for example, non-intact family situations cause lower educational attainments, then one should include this effect when computing the overall cost of parental separation, and not “control” for it. Evidence on the link between educational attainment and living in a non-intact family is shown in Table 3, where two probit regressions of educational attainment are displayed. In the first model, the dependent variable describes whether or not the person attended Gymnasium, the highest level of secondary schooling in Germany. In the second model, the dependent variable is one if the person is a good student and zero otherwise.

Reading down the first column of Table 3, we see that parental education, in particular the mother’s education, is quantitatively the most important determinant of attending Gymnasium. The coefficients translate into a 37% points difference in the predicted probability of attending Gymnasium between those whose mother did, and those whose mother did not attend Gymnasium herself. Father’s education matter as well but the effect is smaller. Children growing up in a rural area, and in the West, are also less likely to attend Gymnasium, as are boys compared to girls. The effect of non-intact family is negative and economically significant. Children living in non-intact families have a 20% lower probability of attending Gymnasium than others. The effect is smaller than having a mother who attended Gymnasium herself.

There are some notable differences between the determinants of schooling level and grades: the mother’s education level and the place of childhood are unimportant for grades, whereas they matter for the access to Gymnasium. This finding supports the often-voiced concern about the Germany school system that school track choice is based more on parental background and the

Table 3
Probit results for educational attainment

	Gymnasium	Good student
Non-intact family	−0.612** (0.169)	−0.210 (0.156)
Log income	0.360* (0.170)	0.179 (0.168)
Log household size	−0.794** (0.283)	−0.079 (0.253)
Own room	0.226 (0.189)	−0.564** (0.167)
Single	−0.175 (0.193)	−0.087 (0.188)
Male	−0.457** (0.114)	−0.538** (0.110)
German	−0.079 (0.220)	−0.192 (0.211)
West	−0.278* (0.132)	−0.446** (0.127)
Mid-sized city	−0.157 (0.179)	−0.003 (0.171)
Small city	−0.203 (0.167)	−0.153 (0.164)
Rural area	−0.342* (0.160)	0.148 (0.154)
Father gymnasium	0.427* (0.175)	0.433* (0.171)
Mother gymnasium	0.975** (0.232)	0.052 (0.212)
Log number of books	0.208** (0.050)	0.147** (0.047)
First wave	0.138 (0.125)	−0.285* (0.118)
Observations	640	640

* Significant at the 5% level.
** Significant at the 1% level.

accessibility of schools (which is reduced in rural areas) than on actual achievement of the child. Importantly, there is no significant effect of living in a non-intact family as far as being a good student is concerned. If one combines this result with the previous evidence – that well-being is higher for good students, whereas school type visited has no effect on well-being – one is forced to conclude that the evidence speaks against a causal channel going from non-intact family via educational attainment to subjective well-being.

5. Concluding remarks

The main finding of this study is that living in a non-intact family has not the hypothesised large negative effect on well-being of youths. Once we compare youths in intact and non-intact families in otherwise similar living circumstances, the difference in well-being is both statistically and economically insignificant. Other factors, such as living in the eastern part of Germany, being German rather than a foreigner, or being not a good student have all much larger negative effects on well-being than living in a non-intact family.

Some issues of causality were discussed above. The basic technique employed in this paper was to make youth in intact and non-intact families as similar as possible by including a large number of control variables. Still, there could be a selection problem: marriages that eventually end in separation may already be unfavourable for child well-being before it comes to separation. However, in the present case, this objection is not relevant since I do not find a significant negative effect of separation on well-being, once I hold constant other determinants of well-being.

In fact, not finding an effect can be explained by a number of factors. First of all, there can be a habituation effect: while a separation reduces well-being at first, children eventually get used to living with a single parent only. Second, as mentioned before, some of the so-called “intact” families are likely to be disfunctional as well. In either case, it is not separation per se that is detrimental to subjective well-being.

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