Schools today face the burden of educating students with many potential problems. The risks that children face in growing up have particular meaning for professional educators because they manifest themselves in children's social and academic behavior in the school setting, and because, with more mothers employed outside the home, teachers and schools have become increasingly important sources of stability in children's lives.

Poor grades, low motivation, and low long-term goals are risk factors for other problems in the teenage years, such as early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. For example, girls who become pregnant often have had substantial school problems before the pregnancy. Having a child is another burden that is likely to remove the girl completely from the school system—but it may be the last blow, not the first. The most important predictor of how well her child will do in school is her own educational level. Thus are the failures of the mother passed on to her children—and to society.

Research can help educators define important family issues. In this article I present the results of demographic research, much of it funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Then I link these trends in the family to the consequent risks children face.

**Marriage and Divorce**

There are three dominant trends to remember. First, twice as many marriages—almost half—end in divorce today as did two decades ago. Second, young women are postponing marriage. The mean age for marriage for white women rose from 21 years during the 1950s to 23 between 1975–80. Among black women the mean age rose from 21 to 26 years in the same period. Since women's likelihood of marrying declines as they age, fewer women than ever before will get married. Third, divorce does not necessarily imply disillusionment with marriage. In fact, from 30 to 40 percent of marriages are actually remarriages (Espenshade 1983).

The increase in parental divorce and separation has had a major impact on children's lives. Over the past two decades the proportion of children living with two parents has fallen dramatically, while the proportion living with only their mother has more than doubled. In 1984, 15 percent of white children and 50 percent of black children under age 18 lived with their mother only, compared with 8 and 29 percent respectively in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985b). In 1984, 24 percent of Hispanic children lived with only their mother. If current trends continue, between 42 and 70 percent of white children and 86 to 94 percent of black children born around 1980 will spend some time in a one-parent family before reaching age 18 (Bumpass 1984, Hofferth 1985). Such children often have little contact with their absent parents (Furstenberg et al. 1983).

In addition, the proportion of children born out of wedlock has sharply increased. In 1984, 13 percent of white children and 59 percent of black children were born to unmarried mothers, compared with 6 percent and 38 percent respectively in 1970 (NCHS 1985). Of all children living with their mother only, 24 percent were living with a never-married mother, compared with 7 percent in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1985b).