

## Divorce - Effects On Children, Effects On Couples, Effects On Parents

One instructive means of thinking about divorce is to consider divorce not as a single event that influences people's lives, but rather as a process. This conceptualization of divorce suggests that the manner in which divorce ultimately affects children involves a confluence of factors and processes that occur early in the divorce, as well as processes occurring after the divorce. Moreover, this line of reasoning suggests that many negative effects for children in divorced families may be due to exposure to traumatic experiences and processes that have nothing to do with divorce per se. That is, children whose parents divorce witness negative family interaction prior to a divorce and also experience many life transitions and strained familial relationships after divorce. This view of divorce as a process has been corroborated in a review of studies conducted in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia (Rodgers and Pryor 1998).

Marriages that end in divorce typically begin a process of unraveling, estrangement, or emotional separation years before the actual legal divorce is obtained. During the course of the marriage, one or both of the marital partners begins to feel alienated from the other. Conflicts with each other and with the children intensify, become more frequent, and often go unresolved. Feelings of bitterness, helplessness, and anger escalate as the spouses weigh the costs and benefits of continuing the marriage versus separating. Gay C. Kitson's (1992) influential study of marital breakdown describes a distressing process characterized by emotional distance, dissatisfaction, and frequent thoughts and discussions about whether and how to separate. Many unhappy couples explore marital counseling, extramarital relationships, and trial separations, with marital happiness fluctuating upward and downward from day to day and year to year as the marital relationship and marital roles are renegotiated.

These predivorce changes in the family often negatively influence the psychological states of parents; parental stress, anxiety, and depression, in turn, inhibit effective parenting. Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth (1996) conducted a rare longitudinal study on a national sample and documented problems in parent-child relationships as early as eight to twelve years prior to parental divorce. Other studies observe that, before



parental divorce, U.S. and U.K. children and adolescents suffer due to high levels of marital discord, ineffective and inconsistent parenting, diminished parental wellbeing, and reduced parent-child affection (Demo and Cox 2000; Rodgers and Pryor 1998). Taken together, these studies suggest that the alterations in family functioning that occur during a predivorce process lead to children witnessing their parents fighting, parents' emotional and psychological states deteriorating, and diminishing levels of parental warmth, affection, and supervision. It is important to note that these changing family dynamics contribute to children experiencing behavior problems prior to parental divorce, and that children's behavior problems, in turn, strain marital relationships, undermine parental well-being, and increase the chances of parental divorce (Acock and Demo 1994; Cherlin et al. 1991). Consequently, some researchers would argue that the negative effects of divorce on children begin *well before* an actual divorce occurs.

For both parents and children, the most difficult and stressful phase of the divorce process is usually the period leading up to and immediately following parental separation and divorce. The uncoupling process takes on several dimensions at this stage, as divorcing parents confront legal challenges and expenses, make their intentions public to family and friends, and redefine their roles as residential and nonresidential parents.

In addition, the process of unraveling and family dissolution continues, coupled with numerous potentially life-altering transitions for children. Following divorce, children live in many different family forms, but the most common pattern is they live with their mothers and have less contact with their fathers. In the United States, five of every six single-parent households are headed by a mother (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998). As a result, a common alteration that children are forced to

make is an adjustment to life without their father at home. Most children share time between the mother's household and the father's household, and families are creative in finding ways for children to maintain meaningful relationships with both parents. For example, children change residences to accommodate changes in their relationships with their parents, changes in parental employment, remarriage, and stepfamily formation (Maccoby and Mnookin 1992). Still, most children suffer from declining father involvement after divorce. National surveys indicate that more than one-fourth of children living in single-mother families never saw their fathers in the previous year, slightly more than one-fourth saw their fathers at least weekly, and among those children who maintain regular contact with their fathers, less than one-third had opportunities to spend significant amounts of time with them. There is evidence, however, that frequent father-child interaction and close relationships are more common in African-American families. Postdivorce father involvement is also higher among fathers who had very close relationships with their children prior to divorce, fathers who live near their children, and fathers who have joint custody (Arditti and Keith 1993; Mott 1990). These studies provide further evidence to suggest that characteristics of families prior to and after divorce ultimately influence the adjustment and well-being of children.



## Individual Variation

Substantial research evidence shows that, on average, children who have experienced parental divorce score somewhat lower than children in first-marriage families on measures of social development, emotional well-being, self-concept, academic performance, educational attainment, and physical health (Amato 2000; Furstenberg and Kiernan 2001). This conclusion is based on group comparisons that consistently show small differences between the average adjustment level of children in first-marriage families and the average level for children whose parents have divorced. Equally important, but less well understood, is that children and adolescents in divorced families vary widely in their adjustment (Demo and Acock 1996). That is, many children exhibit delinquent behavior, difficulties with peers, and low self-esteem following their parents' divorce, while many others adjust readily, enjoy popularity with friends, and think highly of themselves. A useful way of thinking about this is that children's adjustment within any particular family structure (e.g., first-marriage families, divorced families, stepfamilies) varies along a continuum from very poor adjustment to very positive adjustment, with many children and adolescents faring better postdivorce than their counterparts living in first-marriage families. This latter point raises the possibility that in some cases, parental divorce may have *positive* effects on children. Children most likely to benefit from parental divorce include those who endured years of frequent and intense marital conflict (Amato and Booth 1997; Hanson 1999), and those who develop very close, mutually supportive, and satisfying relationships with single parents (Arditti 1999). These studies support the notion that preand postdivorce family environments (i.e., highly conflicted prior; supportive after) have great potential to assist in understanding how children will adjust to life after their parents' divorce.



The preponderance of scientific evidence thus suggests that popular impressions, media images, and stereotypes greatly exaggerate the effects of divorce on children. On average, there are small differences in emotional and social adjustment between children of divorce and children in intact families, and in some instances, parental divorce has a positive effect on children. Most children and adolescents experience short-term emotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties, which usually peak at the point in the divorce process when their parents physically separate and engage in legal battles related to divorce. These problems tend to subside with time, however. Children tend to be resilient, adapt well to most changes in their family roles and life situations, and exhibit normal adjustment (Emery and Forehand 1994). Still, a minority remains vulnerable. Following divorce, approximately 20 to 25 percent of children in divorced families experience long-term adjustment problems, compared to roughly 10 percent of children in first-marriage families (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2000).

The children and adolescents who appear to be most vulnerable socially and emotionally are those who experience multiple transitions in parenting arrangements



throughout their childhood. Research indicates that children who experience no changes in family structure (e.g., children who live continuously with both biological parents, or those who live their entire childhood with a single parent) have higher levels of adjustment (Demo and Acock 1996; Najman et al. 1997). As the number of parenting transitions increases, children's adjustment generally decreases, albeit modestly. Thus, children whose parents divorce (one transition) have somewhat lower adjustment; those who experience divorce and subsequent remarriage of their residential parent (two transitions) exhibit lower adjustment than those in the one transition group; and children who experience two or more parental divorces and/or remarriages have the lowest adjustment and most behavioral problems (Capaldi and Patterson 1991). Studies conducted in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia corroborate these findings (Rodgers and Pryor 1998). Again, there is wide variation among children who experience multiple family transitions, but the evidence suggests that each change in parenting arrangements represents a risk factor, thus increasing the likelihood that a child will react negatively to their postdivorce environment.



#### **Interventions to Alleviate the Negative Effects of Divorce on Children**

Overall, research suggests that family relationships and economic circumstances prior to and following divorce have considerable potential to influence child adjustment. Consequently, there are ample opportunities for intervention efforts that may offset some of these negative processes.

Given that a large proportion of U.S. children will experience divorce, an important research and public policy objective is the development of strategies to assist children during the divorce process. Although in some instances divorce may have positive effects for children (as in the case where exposure to intense and frequent fighting between parents is reduced), in many other situations, changing parent-child relationships, life transitions, and economic strains that accompany divorce present challenges to children's well-being. Social science research has successfully identified key factors accompanying divorce that negatively affect children, thus illuminating potential areas for intervention. That is, programs and policies can be developed to address the factors that ultimately compromise children's well-being during the divorce process.

Many states require divorcing parents to complete either a divorce mediation or parent education program (Emery 1995; Grych and Fincham 1992). These programs are designed to increase parents' understanding of the difficulties that their children may face during the divorce process. Parents are taught, for example, how to manage their conflict, avoid treating children like pawns in disputes, and to appreciate the importance of maintaining positive relationships with their children. Studies have shown that following a divorce, parents may find it difficult to maintain optimal

parenting behaviors, such as monitoring their children's activities, providing warmth and support, and keeping consistent rules. Consequently, if programs for parents can intervene and educate divorced parents to the importance of maintaining positive parenting during stressful transitions, some negative effects on children may be mitigated.

Other possible areas for intervention include policies and programs that recognize the economic strain that divorcing parents, and especially the custodial mother, often face post-divorce. Studies have shown that custodial mothers often face dramatic economic losses following divorce, leading to feelings of stress that adversely affect parenting. Researchers have postulated that divorce is disruptive for children largely because the custodial parent faces a significant amount of economic stress in the time period immediately following the divorce (Furstenberg 1990). Economic loss may trigger multiple transitions for the child (e.g., moving, changing schools, taking in other household members), adversely affecting child well-being. Social policies should address the economic strain experienced by divorcing parents and recognize its potential to adversely affect family relationships.

Another important step toward reducing the negative effects of divorce on children involves the de-stigmatization of divorce. Given our cultural emphasis on the sanctimony of marriage and our cultural disapproval of divorce, many children suffer psychologically because they perceive that their family experiences are dysfunctional. Societal mores and cultural beliefs strongly devalue divorced families. Such families (in their many forms) are judged to be inferior to the traditional nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner and female mother and homemaker who live together from marriage until death, and who produce and rear children in an intact family environment. The popular North American culture, Hollywood movies, television sitcoms and talk shows, and best-selling books on how to survive divorce perpetuate these images and sensationalize the negative experiences of parents and children living in post divorce families. In European countries, there is great concern about rising divorce rates, but divorce may be seen as more acceptable, at least in Sweden (Wadsby and Svedin 1996). Consequently, most U.S. children who experience parental divorce face the challenge of adjusting to new family arrangements and life situations in a society that has negative perceptions and stigmas associated with divorced families. Another way to allay negative feelings related to divorce, then, would be to counsel children regarding the normative process of divorce, to let them know that they are not alone as children of divorce, and to educate them regarding the healthy functioning of many divorced families. Finally, scholars in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia have suggested that social service personnel and officials of the courts could be trained to be supportive of divorcing parents and their children as a means to strengthen family relationships and reduce feelings of stigma.

Thanks For Reading

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