

The Effects of Divorce on Children

How Can We Help

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Some Statistics

- Each year over the last ten years, over one million children have been affected by divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).
- 40%-50% of first marriages from the 1990's will end in divorce (Amato, 2001).
- If current divorce rate trends continue, it is estimated that separation and divorce will occur in as many as 2/3 of all first marriages (Hensley, 1996).
- 1998 U.S. B.O.C. found that 20 million children primarily live with just one parent.
- 75% of divorced mothers and 80% of divorced fathers eventually remarry. But...the divorce rates for remarriage are 60% (Feng & Fine, 2000).
 - Children must adjust to a series of household and marital transitions following their parent's initial and possibly subsequent separation and divorce (Hetherington et al., 1989).

History of Divorce: Some Terms

Tender Years, At Fault, Best Interests of the Child, No-Fault, Irreconcilable Differences

Today

Mediation as an alternative to divorce
Court ordered parenting classes
Shared parental rights
“Parental responsibility”

The best interests of the child
Child special advocates
Treatment alternatives

Theories for the negative effect of divorce

Parental absence perspective

- Two parents are better than one

Economic disadvantage perspective

- Increased stressors including parents feeling socially isolated, changes in living arrangements, economic hardship, visitation problems, continued parental conflict

Family conflict perspective

- Children are affected negatively by parental conflict.
 - (Amato and Keith, 1991)

Parental absence perspective

- Examined differences in academic achievement, conduct problems, social relations, self-concept, and psychological adjustment between three groups of children:
 - Intact two parent families, Children of Divorce, Children who had lost a parent through death
- Findings: Children from **two parent families** vs. Children who experienced the **Death of a parent**: Performed worse in all areas: academic achievement, conduct, adjustment, self-esteem, and psychological adjustment

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- Surprising: When comparing **Children of Divorce vs. Death of parent groups:**
Children of Divorce performed worse on academic achievement and conduct measures
- When all outcomes collapsed into a single category: (Best to Worst)
Intact two parent family, Loss of parent through death, Children of divorce

Economic disadvantage perspective

- Post divorce custodial mothers experienced the loss of 1/4 of their previously combined income
- Post divorce custodial fathers experienced the loss of 10%
- Drops in income could result in moving to worse neighborhoods, lower quality schools, and into areas with increased crime rates.
- All of these could impact adjustment and well-being of both parents and children.
- **Findings:** Economic decline associated with more parent-child negative ratings on relationship measures.
- However, when mothers remarried and economic situations improved, the well-being of children of divorce did not improve.

Family conflict perspective

- Are children affected negatively by family conflict?
- Compared **Intact High-conflict vs. low-conflict families**
- **Findings:** Children in the HC group did worse on measures of conduct, self-concept, and psychological adjustment.

Predivorce conflict

- In comparing Intact HC families with children from divorced families:
Children in the HC group scored lower in measures of self-esteem and psychological adjustment.
- In comparing children whose parents had low predivorce conflict vs parents with high predivorce conflict:
Children from the high predivorce conflict group showed significantly improved well-being after the divorce. (Amato, 2001).

Two more perspectives

- **Parental distress**
If parents experience decreased psychological well-being, they exhibit diminished ability to parent and support their children through the divorce process.

Individual risk and vulnerability perspective

Individual Parental attributes which may increase the chance of dysfunctional marital relationships and other social relationships, **Genetic factors**

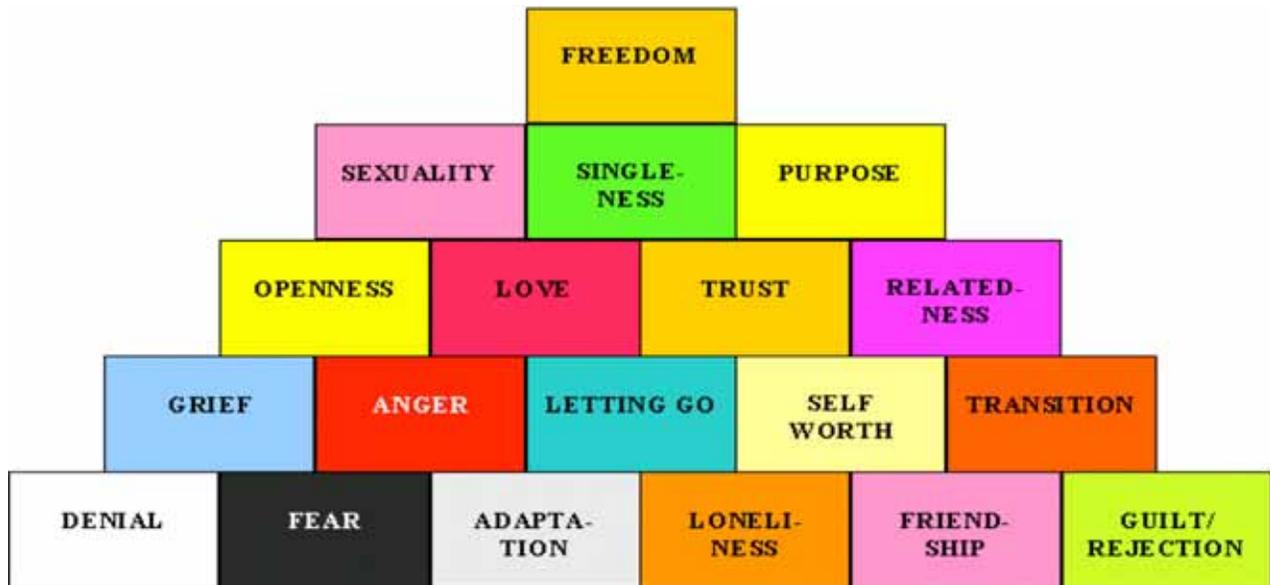
Findings: Divorce and marital status do not occur at random

Overgeneralizations and poor research

- “Methodologically unsophisticated studies may overestimate the effects of divorce on children.” (Amato and Keith, 1991).
- Lower levels of well-being are experienced by children of divorce but the effects are weak.

Theories of divorce adjustment

- **Kaslow and Schwartz (1987):**



– 7 stage dialectic model encompasses: Predivorce, during divorce, postdivorce

- **Fisher (1997): 19-step model**
 - Rebuilding blocks/ Stumbling blocks
- **Wallerstein (1984) 6 psychological tasks children go through during a divorce**
 - 1) Acknowledging the reality of the marital rupture
 - 2) Disengaging from parental conflict and distress and resuming customary pursuits
 - 3) Resolution of loss
 - 4) Resolving anger and self-blame
 - 5) Accepting the permanence of the divorce
 - 6) Achieving realistic hope regarding relationships

Divorce Myths

Wallerstein et al., (2000) The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce

- “Cherished myths”
- “If parents are happier, the children will be happier too.”
- “Divorce is a “temporary crisis that exerts its most harmful effects on parents and children at the time of the breakup.”

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) For Better Or For Worse

- Divorce only has two outcomes, win or lose;
- Children always lose out after a divorce;
- The pathways following divorce are fixed and unchanging;
- Men are the big winners in divorce;
- The absence of a father—and consequent poverty—are the two greatest postdivorce risks to children;
- Death and divorce produce similar outcomes.

Six myths surrounding fathers: Braver and O’Connell(1998)

1. Most divorced dads become deadbeats who won’t pay child support even when they can afford it.
2. Most divorced dads are runaway dads who quickly and voluntarily stop visiting their children and discontinue their parenting role.
3. Divorced mothers and their children go into poverty while fathers economically prosper.
4. Divorce settlements favor fathers and are unfair to mothers.
5. Divorced fathers have it emotionally easy after divorce, only ex-wives and children suffer emotional distress
6. Fathers initiate most divorces and when women do so, it is because they have been cheated on or abused.

Protective factors vs. Risk factors

Protective factors can lessen and moderate the effects of divorce on children.

Risk factors (Mediating factors) may increase the risk of adjustment and achievement problems in children and adolescents.

Protective factors

- Strong internal resources in parents and children
- Active and continued involvement of both parents
- Economic stability

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- Positive parent-child relationships
- Interventions that enable parents to settle disputes (divorce education, mediation, etc.)

Risk Factors

- Custodial parent less effective in parenting role
- Less involvement from noncustodial parent
- Interparental hostility
- Decline in economic resources
- Series of disruptive life changes (Kelly, 2001)

Externalized versus Internalized problems

- Compared to never-divorced children, divorced children are significantly more:
 - Aggressive, impulsive, and are more involved in antisocial behaviors.
 - Have problems with peers, authority figures, parents, and other significant relationships.
 - Boys tend to have more externalizing behavior problems compared to girls including suspensions from school, contact with legal authorities, running away from home.
 - Girls may have more depression and anxiety but research is mixed.

The bad news

“As many as half of the behavioral and academic problems of children in marriages whose parents later divorced were observed 4 to 12 years before the separation.” (Kelly, 2001)

The good news

Hetherington indicated in an interview with Waters (2001) that one year after the divorce, many of the children’s problems diminish and by the end of the second year, 75%-80% of the children appeared to be functioning close to normal.

What about temperament?

- A child’s temperament impacts their relationship with their parents and ability to cope with challenges.
- Compared to children who are temperamentally easy, children with a difficult temperament are less adaptable to change and have more vulnerability to diversity.
- In addition, temperamentally difficult children are “more likely to be the elicitor and the target of aversive responses by both parents and step-parents, whereas the temperamentally easy child not only is less likely to be the recipient of criticism, displaced anger, and anxiety but also is more able to cope with these responses.”

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Multidimensional view of divorce vs. divorce as a single event

- Is divorce the cause of adjustment problems or is divorce a process?
“Divorce occurs in the context of many factors that are co-occurring both before and after the divorce.” (Ellis, 2000)
- Children encounter a set of interrelated risks... (Hetherington et al., 1998)

Divorce as a transactional model which looks at:

- Multiple trajectories
- Interrelated risk factors and protective factors

Multiple stressors

- After a divorce, the child may need to adjust to parental conflict, changes in economic resources, changes in living situations, chaotic household routines, the absence of one parent, and new parent relationships.
- The psychiatric risk for children to a single stress is typically low but as children are exposed to multiple stressors, “the adverse effects increase multiplicatively”(Hetherington et al., 1989)

Factors affecting child adjustment: (Whiteside and Becker, 2000)

A good father-child relationship associated with

- Children’s improved performance in cognitive skills
- Lower level of externalizing and internalizing symptoms

When maternal warmth was low

- Children had more externalizing and internalizing symptoms

When mothers had high scores on depressive symptoms

- Children showed high scores on total behavior problems

When mothers had a high degree of warmth

- Children had significantly better social skills

When one parent had a **positive relationship** with their child, it was likely that the other parent did as well.

- Parents who had a **low level of hostility** and a **high level of cooperation** with each other reported lower levels of anger and tension.

Parent hostility was associated with:

- Decreased maternal warmth
- Decreased frequency of visitation by the father

When all of the results were put together:

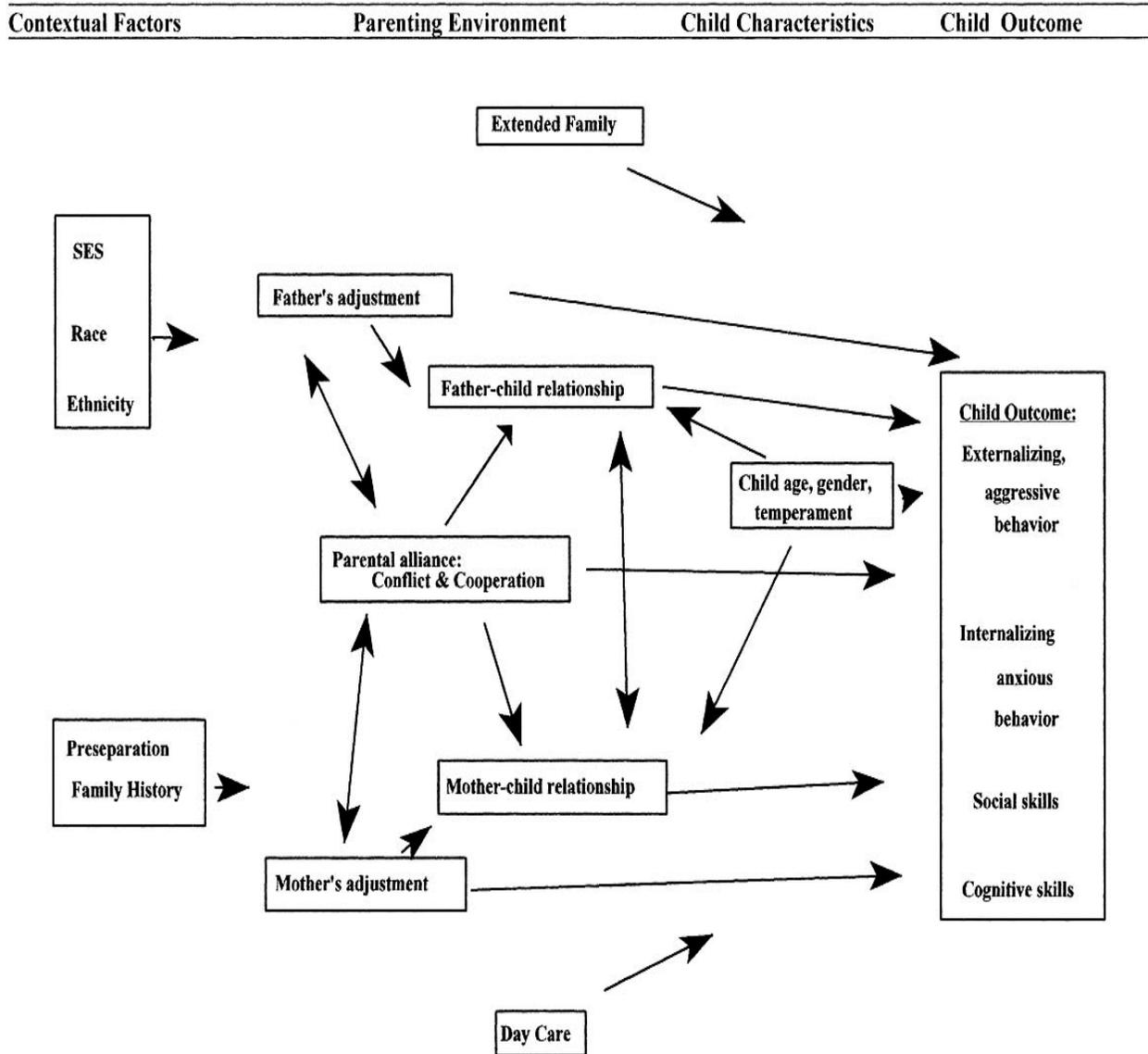
- Negative correlation between child internalizing symptoms and the father-child relationship. The father contributed positively or negatively to the child’s adjustment on a number of factors.

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- As maternal depressive symptoms increased, children showed more behavior problems
- **Interparental hostility** played a central role in the quality of the father-child relationship and frequency of father's visits.



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Developmental Considerations (From O'Rourke and Worzbyt, 1996)

3 to 5 years old children

- Poor understanding of the family situation
- Feelings: frightened, insecure
- May have nightmares, whining, crying, clinging behavior
- Temper tantrums
- Changes in eating and sleeping
- Regression to more infant like behavior

6 to 8 year old children

- Trouble separating their own needs from those of their parents
- Feel sad, loss, frightened, uncertain
- Generalized anxiety
- Disorganized and unsettled
- School work problems
- Feelings of abandonment by and miss parent they don't see much
- Anger at perceived rejection
- Lashing out at custodial parent, teachers, other children
- Denial, self-blame, feel alienated
- May attach themselves to other adults for security

9 to 12 year old children

- Sense of loss
- Feel rejected, helpless, lonely, ashamed, embarrassed
- Powerless to control parental behavior
- Psychosomatic symptoms
- Anger, withdrawn, overactive
- Blame one parent for the divorce, direct anger
- School work problems
- Struggling with feelings of mixed loyalties, loneliness, depression
- Power struggle with authority
- May seek support from other adults outside of the home

Also see Baris & Garrity (1988), Johnston & Roseby (1997), and Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003) for good reviews of developmental guidelines

Some trends (Amato, 2001)

In looking at studies from the 1960's to present, Amato found general trends that children of divorced families are significantly worse than children from married families on measures of:

- Academic achievement
- Conduct
- Psychological adjustment
- Self Concept
- Social relations

Treatment Implications

- ❖ Early intervention
- ❖ Systems approach: Involve parents, teachers, children
- ❖ Developmental differences
- ❖ Parent education
- ❖ Parent treatment
- ❖ Case management, supportive services
- ❖ Importance of non adversarial divorce
- ❖ Collaboration between attorneys, mediators, special advocates, and therapists
- ❖ Continuing education about new research and laws
- ❖ Parent education and support through groups and individual therapy
- ❖ Child support through groups and individual therapy

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Checklist of Protective and Risk Factors for Children of Divorce

Protective factors

- Competent and involved custodial parents
- Cooperative co-parenting
- Individual child characteristics such as intelligence, ability to self-regulate, independence, high self-esteem
- Strong internal resources in parents
- Positive achievements in academics, sports, and positive peer relations
- A close sustained relationship with a competent adult such as a teacher, other family member, therapist, friend's parent, etc.
- Having an easy temperament
- Positive sibling support
- The active and continued involvement of both parents
- Economic stability
- Positive parent-child relationships
- Interventions that enabled parents to settle disputes: divorce ed programs and mediation
- A positive father-child relationship
- Mothers having a high degree of warmth toward their children
- One parent having a positive relationship with their child
- Low level of parental hostility

Risk factors

- Custodial parent exhibiting less effective parenting
- Diminished involvement from the noncustodial parent
- Continued parental hostility with each other after the divorce
- The diminishment of economic resources
- Low maternal warmth
- Mothers with a high level of depressive symptoms
- Continued and repeated life changes including changes in residence and schools
- Subsequent parental relationships, marriages, and divorces
- A divorce process that is acrimonious

From Hetherington and Kelly, 2002; Kelly, 2001, Whiteside and Becker, 2000

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