

Review on the Effects of Divorce on Children

Douglas, V. I.

Department of Sociology / Psychology, Zenith University College, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

A comprehensive review of research from several disciplines regarding the effects of divorce on children yields a growing consensus that significant numbers of children suffer for many years from psychological and social difficulties associated with continuing and/or new stresses within the post divorce family and experience heightened anxiety in forming enduring attachments at later developmental stages including young adulthood. Different conceptual models in the field are explicated. Major challenges in research, particularly around issues of public policy, are identified. The critical importance of expanding clinical research to enhance understanding of the child's perspective and experience is proposed.

Keywords: Divorce, Children, Psychology, and Adulthood.

INTRODUCTION

Divorce can be a difficult time for a family. Not only are the parents realizing new ways of relating to each other, but they are learning new ways to parent their children. When parents divorce, the effects of divorce on children can vary. Some children react to divorce in a natural and understanding way, while other children may struggle with the transition. Divorce, also known as dissolution of marriage, is the process of terminating a marriage or marital union [1]. Divorce usually entails the canceling or reorganizing of the legal duties and responsibilities of marriage, thus dissolving the bonds of matrimony between a married couple under the rule of law of the particular country or state. Divorce laws vary considerably around the world, but in most countries divorce requires the sanction of a court or other authority in a legal process, which may involve issues of distribution of property, child custody, alimony (spousal support), child visitation / access, parenting time, child support, and division of debt. In most countries, monogamy is required by law, so divorce allows each former partner to marry another person. Grounds for divorce vary widely from country to

country. Marriage may be seen as a contract, a status, or a combination of these [3]. Where it is seen as a contract, the refusal or inability of one spouse to perform the obligations stipulated in the contract may constitute a ground for divorce for the other spouse. In contrast, in some countries (such as Sweden, Finland, Australia, New Zealand), divorce is purely no fault [4]. Many jurisdictions offer both the option of a no fault divorce as well as an at fault divorce. This is the case, for example, in many US states (see Grounds for divorce (United States)) or the Czech Republic [5]. Though divorce laws vary between jurisdictions, there are two basic approaches to divorce: fault based and no-fault based. However, even in some jurisdictions that do not require a party to claim fault of their partner, a court may still take into account the behavior of the parties when dividing property, debts, evaluating custody, shared care arrangements and support. In some jurisdictions one spouse may be forced to pay the attorney's fees of another spouse [6]. Laws vary as to the waiting period before a divorce is effective. Also, residency requirements vary. However, issues of division of

property are typically determined by the law of the jurisdiction in which the property is located.

Children are resilient and with assistance the divorce transition can be experienced as an adjustment rather than a crisis. Since the children in a divorce vary (different temperaments, different ages), the effects of divorce on children vary, too [7]. Family Means understands this and approaches a divorce by understanding what the effects are on children of all dispositions.

Children's View of Divorce

Regardless of age, children of divorce deeply resent the strains and difficulties which arise in long-held family celebrations, traditions, daily rituals, and special times, and rate these changes as major losses [8]. Grown children continue to see their parents' divorce very differently than do the parents. Judith Wallerstein, a clinical psychologist from San Francisco, was the first to disturb the nation in 1980 with her research on the effects of divorce on children. She found that 10 percent of children felt positively about their parents' divorce, but 80 percent of the divorced mothers and 50 percent of the divorced fathers judged the divorce good for them 15 years after the divorce [9]. Girls, young men and women react in slightly different ways to their parent's divorce [9]. Young women from divorced families will feel a need for love and attention and yet fear abandonment; they will also be prone to both desire and anxiety.⁶³ Women whose parents divorce are likely to be hampered or even overwhelmed by anxiety when it comes time to make decisions about marriage, though some "women with no ill effects from paternal divorce, may develop [the] security of friendship-based love quite well" [10]. One study linked parental divorce to lower relationship commitment and confidence in women but not in men. While parental divorce affects the child's view of marriage, girls may be less influenced in their attitudes towards divorce "because they have more role models of intimacy and marriage as the ideal in their environment than boys do,

especially in the media." By contrast, boys have fewer role models of intimacy outside of their families. Hence a father's modeling of interpersonal skills are more important for boys [11]. Men from father-absent homes also experience less masculine sexual identification and more feminine sexual identification.⁶⁸ Men whose parents divorced are inclined to be simultaneously hostile and a "rescuer" of the women to whom they are attracted, rather than the more open, affectionate, cooperative partner, more frequently found among men raised by parents of an intact marriage.⁶⁹ By contrast, the problem of being overly meek or overly dominant is much more prevalent in the romantic relationships and marriages of the daughters of divorced families than it is among daughters of intact marriages.

Effects divorce has on children

Poor Performance in Academics

Divorce is difficult for all members of the family. For children, trying to understand the changing dynamics of the family may leave them distracted and confused [12]. This interruption in their daily focus can mean one of the effects of divorce on children would be seen in their academic performance. The more distracted children are, the more likely they are to not be able to focus on their school work.

Loss of Interest in Social Activity

Research has suggested divorce can affect children socially, as well. Children whose family is going through divorce may have a harder time relating to others, and tend to have less social contacts [13]. Sometimes children feel insecure and wonder if their family is the only family that has gotten divorced.

Difficulty Adapting to Change

Through divorce, children can be affected by having to learn to adapt to change more often and more frequently [14]. New family dynamics, new house or living situation, schools, friends, and more, may all have an effect.

Emotionally Sensitive

Divorce can bring several types of emotions to the forefront for a family, and the children involved are no different. Feelings of loss, anger,

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confusion, anxiety, and many others, all may come from this transition. Divorce can leave children feeling overwhelmed and emotionally sensitive [15]. Children need an outlet for their emotions - someone to talk to, someone who will listen, etc. children may feel effects of divorce through how they process their emotions.

Anger/Irritability

In some cases, where children feel overwhelmed and do not know how to respond to the affects they feel during divorce, they may become angry or irritable. Their anger may be directed at a wide range of perceived causes [16]. Children processing divorce may display anger at their parents, themselves, their friends, and others. While for many children this anger dissipates after several weeks, if it persists, it is important to be aware that this may be a lingering effect of the divorce on children.

Feelings of Guilt

Children often wonder why a divorce is happening in their family. They will look for reasons, wondering if their parents no longer love each other, or if they have done something wrong [17]. These feelings of guilt are a very common effect of divorce on children, but also one which can lead to many other issues. Guilt increases pressure, can lead to depression, stress, and other health problems. Providing context and counseling for a child to understand their role in a divorce can help reduce these feelings of guilt.

Introduction of Destructive Behavior

While children go through a divorce, unresolved conflict may lead to future unexpected risks [18]. Research has shown children who have experienced divorce in the previous 20 years were more likely to participate in crimes, rebelling through destructive behavior which harms a child's health, with more children reporting they have acquired smoking habits, or prescription drug use.

Increase in Health Problems

The process of divorce and its effects on children can be a stressful. Dealing with

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these issues can take its toll, including physical problems [19]. Children who have experienced divorce have a higher perceptibility to sickness, which can stem from many factors, including their difficulty going to sleep. Also, signs of depression can appear, exacerbating these feelings of loss of well-being, and deteriorating health signs.

Loss of Faith in Marriage and Family Unit

Finally, despite hoping to have stable relationships themselves when they grow up, research has also shown children who have experienced divorce are more likely to divorce when in their own relationships [20]. Some research indicates this propensity to divorce may be two to three times as high as children who come from non-divorced families. Yet, while these are some of the possible effects of divorce on children, they are by no means absolutes, or written in stone. More and more, families understand just how stressful divorce is for their children, as well as their selves. Families have begun to turn to supportive services such as at FamilyMeans, seeking help to find a peaceful way to divorce [21]. Through our Collaborative Divorce program, we are helping families more successfully navigate this transition, both for the sake of the parents, and for the children involved.

Factors affecting children's postdivorce adjustment

Although the research suggests that children of divorce may experience a variety of problems ranging from psychological disturbances to diminished social relationships, the type, severity and persistence of these problems may be mediated (or moderated) by a number of factors. Some of the factors researchers have identified include: child characteristics, such as gender and age at the time of divorce; family characteristics, such as socio-economic status of the custodial household, race, and childrearing skills; and, situational characteristics, such as parental absence, length of time since marital dissolution, conflict, support systems, divorce

proceedings, custody arrangements, remarriage, and environmental changes [22]. The findings on gender differences in children's responses to divorce have been contradictory. Some research points to more adjustment problems for boys in divorcing families than for girls; other research finds more negative effects for girls, and some research has found no differences in the effects of divorce on boys and girls. Immediately following divorce, [23] found that both boys and girls showed poorer performance on achievement tests compared to children from intact families. However, by the fifth year following divorce, boys' grades and achievement tests were adversely affected, while girls' were not. Similarly, [24] found that, immediately following the divorce, boys and girls experienced some disruption in play situations, however, the effects appeared to be more sustained in boys. [25], in a ten-year follow-up of children who were pre-schoolers at the time of divorce found that although there were no initial sex differences in the effects of divorce. Eighteen months following the divorce, many of the girls appeared recovered, but boys were significantly more troubled at school, in the playground and at home. Five years after the divorce, these sex differences had again disappeared. [26] found that boys in divorced households exhibited more adverse effects than girls, in terms of inappropriate behaviour, work effort, and happiness. Girls with divorced parents, on the other hand, scored higher in locus of control than their counterparts.

Other studies have found more detrimental effects for girls than boys. [27] found that adolescent girls from disrupted homes had lower self-esteem and more behaviour problems than adolescent boys in similar homelife situations. Furthermore, while female adolescents from disrupted homes reported higher levels of family conflict than females from intact families, the opposite was true for males. [28] found that, one year following divorce, 63 percent of the girls were in worse

psychological condition compared to 27 percent of the boys. Frost and [29] found that girls from recently disrupted households reported truancy in higher proportions than their male counterparts and then children from intact families. They were also significantly more dissatisfied with their social network than girls from intact families. Finally, some studies have found no differences on various effects of divorce between girls and boys. [30] found no gender differences for self-reported antisocial behaviour among adolescents from divorced families, although they found gender differences in other areas (such as truancy and social networks). There have been fewer studies examining differences among adult children of divorce. In a study by [29], clinical directors of college mental health counselling centres said that female adolescents had more difficulty than males in adapting to divorce. However, in a review of the literature, Amato (in press) found minimal sex differences, although women from divorced families appear to attain lower levels of education than those from intact families. In a meta-analysis of 37 studies which examined the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult well-being, [31] found no support for the contention that parental divorce has more detrimental consequences for males than females. Finally, in a longitudinal study, [12] found no evidence to support the hypothesis that young adult males were more likely than girls to be vulnerable to the effects of marital disruption. A possible reason for the contradictory findings related to gender could be that boys and girls may be affected by divorce in different ways. For instance, [13] suggests that disruptions in the father-son relationship are linked to a multitude of development interferences in boys. For girls, on the other hand, the emotional loss of father is seen as rejection. Similarly, [24] argue that boys and girls show sex-role-typical patterns of distress when they see their fathers more often and more regularly - high self-esteem and more behaviour

problems for boys, and low self-esteem and fewer behaviour problems for girls. Amato (in press) suggests that the negative effects on social adjustment may be stronger for boys than girls, but in other areas there are no major differences. Other research suggests that girls may be more affected psychologically (e.g., depression) [25]. Also, it is possible that behaviour problems commonly seen in boys are the more readily observed behaviours than the types of problems that girls have (self-esteem). Another possible reason for the differing results among studies could be that boys and girls are affected by different aspects of the divorce process. For instance, although [26] found that divorce had more adverse, long-term effects on boys than girls, they found that girls had more adverse effects as a result of remarriage of the custodial mother. Finally, the heightened divorce adjustment problems for boys found in some research may be less related to gender per se than to characteristics of the postdivorce household arrangements. For instance, [17] found that children living with parents of the opposite sex were especially prone to problem behaviours. However, other studies [8] have found no significant differences between sex of custodial parent and child's adjustment. It has also been argued that the differential impact of divorce on children may be linked to parenting styles - particularly with regard to the issue of discipline. [9] found that mothers use different amounts of control for sons than daughters. The use of relaxed control by mothers on boys was a high predictor of the child's competent social behaviour. Further, custodial fathers and mothers have been found to differ in their parenting style, with fathers much less likely to become involved in coercive exchanges with boys than mothers [10]. The very small number of father custody families and the very selective nature of this arrangement compared to mother custody families means that these studies must be interpreted with a great deal of caution.

[11] suggest that the question of whether boys or girls are more adversely affected by divorce is quite complex, and the answer is likely to depend on a host of factors such as the sex of the custodial parent, their parenting style, whether they have remarried, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the amount of contact with the noncustodial parent.

3.1.2 Age at Divorce

Many studies point to the relevance of age at the time of separation for children's divorce adjustment. Although early findings suggested that separation from a parent at an early age had more negative effects for children than for older youth, this factor has proven to be more complex than was initially believed. In a ten-year follow-up of pre-school children from divorced families, Wallerstein found the initial response to divorce to be worse for younger children, but in later years they appeared better adjusted than their older counterparts. She concluded that those who are very young at marital breakup may be less burdened in the years to come than those who are older. Similarly, [12] found that the majority of children who were very young at the time of divorce reported that they were not strongly affected by the break-up. The current thinking appears to be that children at every age are affected by divorce, but in differing ways. For example, [23] suggests that early separations may be associated with deficits in social and emotional functioning, but not in intellectual functioning. From an examination of numerous studies, [22] argue that young children encounter problems with personal adjustment and peer relations, while adolescents encounter problems with sexual relations and antisocial behaviour. Similarly, [12] found that youth who experienced a family disruption prior to 6 years of age showed poorer relationships with their fathers than those who experienced disruption later in childhood. [23] describe how children's level of development affects their reactions to divorce, although they acknowledge that there may be overlap.

The primary reaction among infants may be regression in developmental attainments (e.g., sleeping, eating, language, independence). For preschoolers, difficulties may appear in social relationships and separation anxiety. School age children may react with sadness, somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach-aches) and intense anger towards parents. Adolescents may encounter problems establishing an adult identity, demonstrate anger towards self or others, and experience somatic complaints. Finally, [17] found marital dissolution which occurred very early in a child's life (2½ years of age or less) was associated with separation-related difficulties; separation during the oedipal phase (2½-6) caused the greatest effects overall on children; and, for those 6 years

The family is the building block of society, and marriage is its foundation. Divorce has pervasive weakening effects on children and on all of the five major institutions of society, the family, the church, the school, the marketplace, and government itself. However, this foundation is growing weaker as fewer adults marry, more adults divorce, and more adults choose single parenthood or cohabitation. Society's major institutions (family, church, school, marketplace and government) all have a great interest in reducing divorce to almost zero, for it weakens each institution by weakening the human capacities of each laborer, citizen, worshiper, and student that it

CONCLUSION

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of age or older, the results were inconsistent.

Damaging Behaviors

Child suicide is often triggered by thoughts that his divorced parents reject him or have lost interest in him. The fact that the suicide rate has risen along with the divorce rate is no coincidence [15]. One study reported that risk of a suicide attempt was higher in divorced families, though the association was eliminated after controlling for adverse experiences. As the work of Patricia McCall, a sociology professor at North Carolina State University, shows, the strongest demographic indicator of suicide is the family structure within which a person resides: the divorced family structure has the highest suicide rate [20].

touches. Leaders of these institutions must shoulder their responsibility to end the culture of rejection. Policymakers, pastors, and academics all bear the responsibility to motivate them in that direction.

It is necessary to know reality and the facts in order that we see and understand the whole bleak picture and are moved to set about the task of rebuilding a culture of families based on marriage, a culture of love and belonging, with all the societal props and protections necessary to make this familial norm normal once again. Each and every child deserves it. The nation needs it.

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