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# Divorce and its effects on the development of children

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# Divorce and its effects on the development of children

## **Abstract**

More than likely, children are not part of the decision making when it comes to divorce. They are the innocent bystanders of divorce that have no choice but to become an integral part of an adult issue. There are no rule books with specific directions to depend on when it comes to children understanding the separation of their parents. Children of divorce need resources, guidance, and more than ever, commitment and consistency from significant people in their lives. Divorce has no boundaries and carries no prejudice. Divorce affects all ages, ethnicities, races, gender, and socio-economic levels. In the earlier part of the 20th century, the nuclear family could be defined as father, mother, and children, all biological of course. The 21st century has produced a much more complex family structure that encompasses anything from single parent households to step-families. Researchers have been studying these dynamic changes for generations attempting to understand the effects on children. Over the last several years, researchers have found that the factors involved in the pre and post divorce relationship are just as detrimental to the children as the divorce itself. This paper will attempt to educate its readers on the wide spectrum of factors affecting children involved in divorce. Historical statistics will be highlighted along with implications to children at different developmental milestones.

**DIVORCE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN**

**A Research Paper**

**Submitted**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Masters of Arts**

**Lisa Barron**

University of Northern Iowa

May 2010

DIVORCE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN


A Research Paper

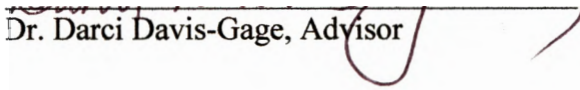
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Dr. Darci Davis-Gage, Advisor

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Running Head: DIVORCE AND ITS EFFECTS ON CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Divorce and its Effects on the Development of Children

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### Abstract

More than likely, children are not part of the decision making when it comes to divorce. They are the innocent bystanders of divorce that have no choice but to become an integral part of an adult issue. There are no rules books with specific directions to depend on when it comes to children understanding the separation of their parents. Children of divorce need resources, guidance, and more than ever, commitment and consistency from significant people in their lives. Divorce has no boundaries and carries no prejudice. Divorce effects all ages, ethnicities, races, gender, and socio-economic levels. In the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nuclear family could be defined as father, mother, and children, all biological of course. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has produced a much more complex family structure that encompasses anything from single parent households to step-families. Researchers have been studying these dynamic changes for generations attempting to understand the effects on children. Over the last several years, researchers have found that the factors involved in the pre and post divorce relationship are just as detrimental to the children as the divorce itself. This paper will attempt to educate its readers on the wide spectrum of factors affecting children involved in divorce. Historical statistics will be highlighted along with implications to children at different developmental milestones.

## Historical Perspectives

*Statistics.* It may be unimaginable to many, but there was a time in the United States, when married couples had no legal way of divorcing. South Carolinians would have to wait until 1949 in order to do so while Maryland was granting divorces in 1907 (Historical Divorce Rate Statistics, 2009). Since that time this country has witnessed a steady increase with the highest numbers reported in the 1970's (Historical Divorce Rate Statistics, 2009). Many believe this is due to the 'no fault' legislation that was adopted into law during this decade. By the year 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the divorce rate at 4,539 per 100,000 for men and 6,577 per 100,000 for women (Historical Divorce Rate Statistics, 2009). Only 63% of American children grow up with both biological parents (U.S. Divorce Statistics, 2009). As of 2003, 43.7% of mothers and 56.2% of fathers were either divorced or separated (U.S. Divorce Statistics, 2009). Finally, in 2003, it is reported that 7.8 million Americans paid roughly \$40 billion in child or spousal support, with 84% of these male (U.S. Divorce Statistics, 2009).

*Family formation change.* Beyond the historical father, mother, biological children definitions, many new family formations have erupted. Non-marital births have shown an increase over the years with 36% of U.S. children in 2004 being born to unmarried mothers (Amato & Maynard 2007). Many economists sight the major cause in the rise of child poverty in this country is in the decline of married-couple households (Amato & Maynard, 2007). Another increase being seen is the number of children being born to cohabitating biological couples (Amato, 2005). Unfortunately some of the grimmest statistics in separation are with this particular population. One study found that 31% of cohabiting couples had broken up before the child's fifth birthday (Amato, 2005).

Many are familiar with stepfamilies and the dynamics that come with this particular family structure. Most have one biological parent and the other has no biological relationship to the child. Studies across generations have indicated the problems children exhibit living in step-families compared to those living with biological married parents (Amato, 2005). These changes in family dynamics and the new definitions of family structures come with it new research into the effects of the child's chances of their own successful marriage. Research has shown when one partner is a child of divorce; the chances of that couple divorcing are double (Fincham & Stanley, 2002). When both partners are children of divorce, the chances of divorce triple. With these stated changes in the family formation, and the increase rates of divorce, the United States has become less stigmatized by divorce, and more accepting of diverse family forms, which can be even more detrimental for the children (Lansford, 2009).

#### Effects on children

*Current findings.* Researchers continue to study divorce in order to understand the impact that it can have on the child. Many are seeking to find specific factors that implicate potentially damaging outcomes. In the 1970's many researchers were looking only at the divorce itself as the main cause for future problems in children. As time went on, more and more research has begun to analyze the implications of pre-and post divorce characteristics of the family (Lansford, 2009). Some research shows it is much less about divorce and more about parental interaction. Inter parental conflict is one of the newest factors being researched today. Couples who have both high conflict relations before and after divorce tend to have the greatest negative impact on children (Fincham & Stanley 2002). Amato (2005) went on to find that interparental conflict is a direct stressor for



children, effecting attachment and emotional insecurity. Children who are in these conflict environments tend to show more emotional issues later in life.

There have also been studies showing that ethnicity effects how children respond to divorce. Amato (2005) found that although African Americans are shown to have higher rates of non-marital births, and strong martial conflict, the children are less affected by living in single parent households than white children. One reason for this could be that many families that are African American have a higher statistic of single parent homes, so in a way this may not be felt as something ‘dysfunctional’ to this culture. Another important factor affecting children from divorced families is the support system from other family members and friends (Temke, 2009). Adult family and friends along with teachers and mentors can provide emotional support to children. They can have a positive impact on children who are transitioning away from the nuclear family by communicating with them and being there as role models (Temke, 2009). By doing so, the child can continue to have supported, consistent stability during a tumultuous time in their life.

*Social, emotional, cognitive effects.* Research data has stayed consistent over time when focusing on the effects of the divorced child’s emotional, social, and cognitive well-being, including academic problems, depression, anxiety, isolation, and rebellion. Professionals agree that two-parent families have a higher standard of living, share more cooperative discipline, and are emotionally closer to their children (Amato, 2005). In 1991, Amato and Keith generated the most widely sourced meta-analysis, summarizing the results of ninety-three studies published from the 1960’s through 1980’s with confirmation that children from divorced parents were worse off than those with married

parents. Through different psychological testing, the study covered areas of academics, conduct behaviors, psychological well being, self-esteem and peer relations (Amato, 2005). Amato (2001) furthered his research with another meta-analysis based on sixty-seven studies that were conducted in the 1990's and again found that children from divorced parents scored lower on measures of well-being than children from married homes. It is important to highlight findings that shed positive findings correlating to divorce, keeping in mind that these studies are not typical. Brenner and Hyde (2006) found that there was no significant differences between divorced and intact mothers when it came to emotional interaction, scaffolding and proximal development with their child, while another study conducted by Barnes, Burt, Iacono, and McGue (2008) suggested that the experience of the divorce has more of an impact on adolescent delinquency than common genes themselves, which agrees with most other research of the strong implications of divorce on children. With the statistics of divorce likely to stay stable or even increase with each generation, many researchers are focusing on strategies to help children cope.

There seems to be consensus among many that depending upon the age of the child, and the corresponding developmental stages, children will be affected by divorce differently. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) acknowledged that no one factor of model can account for the range of effects in children of divorce. It is still a mystery to some that many children of divorce who face the same risk factors end up with different degrees of success. Some of those risk factors include the death of a parent, separation in early childhood, amount of contact with nonresidential parent, maternal or paternal loss, and outcomes before and after separation (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The above risk factors

can carry long term effects on children. If a child has had close contact with his or her father for the first several years of his or her life, and then a divorce results and that child no longer has contact with the father, it can greatly impact the child's emotional well-being. Along with these risk factors other variables have to be considered. Those include age of child at time of divorce, gender, race, socio-economic status, interparental conflict, and demographic changes (Temke, 2009). DeBord (2009) further emphasizes that communication levels with the children, the ease of adjustment to the divorce, parenting skills, and parental remarriage are also strong indicators as to the level of adjustment for the child.

*Signs and symptoms.* DeBord (2009) and Tempke (2009) both attempt to highlight appropriate risk factors and common interventions parents can utilize with their children. Parents may think that their infant will not be affected by divorce. Unfortunately infants often react to parental stress showing signs of increased mood and decreased appetite. Some researchers hypothesize that both infants and toddlers will have long term effects of the divorce that will not be evident until their later years, including abandonment issues and emotional attachment issues (Butler, Douglas, Murch, Robinson, & Scanlan, 2003). Toddlers also sense conflict and change. Temke (2009) reported that many toddlers believe they have caused their parents' divorce. Toddlers can express emotional symptoms of depression, anger, moodiness and aggression (Temke, 2009). DeBord (2009) goes on to state that many toddlers understand that a parent has moved away but does not understand why. This is where parent communication is very important; being honest with the child, explaining the separation or divorce in an age-appropriate fashion. Parents need to stick to routines, spend time with the child, and welcome other family

members to provide care and assurance (DeBord, 2009). School aged children are better able to understand grown up problems. More than likely they have a friend or someone they know who has experienced divorce (Debord, 2009). Often times this age group is in emotional pain over their parent's separation. Some may be still too young to understand how to control these emotions. They may experience social embarrassment, anger, divided loyalty issues, false hope that their parents will reconcile, and somatic symptoms (Temke, 2009). Parents can support their child in keeping lines of communication open, seek professional help if signs of depression become apparent, plan special time together, keep daily routines, and encourage expressions of all emotions (DeBord, 2009).

Teenagers also face many emotional symptoms ranging from anger, fear, and loneliness to depression and guilt. Many teens have a hard time accepting the divorce. Knowing the physiological changes occurring during adolescence, including increase levels of testosterone or estrogen, it is no wonder than this age group can be critically affected by major life changes. DeBord (2009) reports teenagers feeling disillusioned, abandoned, highly stressed, which may lead to high-risk behaviors including skipping school, drugs, alcohol, and shoplifting. The teenager also can take on adult like roles, feeling like they need to help with finances and help to take care of younger siblings. Others worry that they will never be able to trust marriage themselves, and may choose to cut one or both parents out of their lives due to anger and the fear of the unknown (Temke, 2009).

Parents' can help their teenager feel more in control by talking to them about the divorce, maintaining rules of the household and reminding the child that they had nothing to do with the divorce and assure them that they are just as loved as they were before the separation (Temke, 2009). It is important for parents to remember not to use their

teenager as a replacement partner, keeping in mind that even though the child is older, he or she is in no position to be told personal information regarding the details of the divorce or feel put in the middle (DeBord, 2009). Research has shown that boys of divorce show an increased risk of social development over girls (Amato, 2005). Boys have been shown to have higher incidences of aggression and social misconduct (Barnes, Burt, Iacono & McGee, 2008). Another important factor for all parents to keep in mind is the importance of the non-custodial parent, typically the father (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Research has shown that continuing a strong bond with the father or non-custodial parent is important for keeping children emotionally connected to both parents. Unfortunately, non-custodial parents have been shown to have little contact with their children after a divorce has occurred. Hughes (2005) reports that on average, nonresidential fathers see their biological offspring only 4 times per month following separation and divorce. Hughes (2005) goes on to state that 20% of children of divorce have no contact with their fathers 2-3 years after the divorce.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there are without a doubt several negative implications for children of divorced families. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) utilized a quote from a 1998 newspaper stating, "Only fanatics can continue to deny that divorce has harmful effects on children.....if this were a medical disease, it would prompt demands for a national campaign of eradication." Since the 1970's when divorce rates were at their highest, researchers have been working diligently to understand its affects on our most precious commodity; our children. The results are grim. Not only are statistics of divorce increasing in this country, but the effects on our children are both disturbing and

repetitive. Children of divorce have higher rates of emotional instability, academic problems, social conflicts, and cognitive disadvantages compared to those children from continuously married parents (Amato, 2005). The rates of divorce for children who grow up to marry are higher than those children who come from continuously married couples (Amato & Booth, 2001). Adults who report that their parents were unhappily married tend to report a high number of problems and issues in their own marriage (Amato & Booth, 2001). Recent studies have focused on attachment issues in children. One does not have to look far to understand the correlations between attachment and children of divorce. Without the emotional bonding that is so important during the first years of a child's life, endless years of attachment issues may prevail into adulthood maladjustment. Some researchers have attempted to find positive interventions for couples considering divorce (Amato & Maynard, 2007). Some professionals propose policy changes including mandatory counseling for couples filing for divorce while others hypothesize school prevention classes where abstinence and the promotion of marriage are key components (Amato & Maynard, 2007). Although some of these preventative measures are already being utilized today, it seems too early to warrant any positive outcomes. In the meantime, the statistics of divorce continue to rise, and the children involved continue to suffer its ill effects.

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