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# The effects of divorce on children and adolescents

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# The effects of divorce on children and adolescents

## **Abstract**

This research paper focuses on the effects of divorce on children and adolescents. Based on a review of literature, there are many short-term and long-term effects including emotional, behavioral, and physical issues. Children and adolescents vary in adjustment to divorce depending on multiple factors such as communication, conflict, and parental adjustment. The stages that children and adolescents of divorce go through depend on one's developmental stage and gender. Counselors can greatly influence how children and adolescents adjust to divorce.

# THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Rachelle A. Haker

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## Abstract

This research paper focuses on the effects of divorce on children and adolescents. Based on a review of literature, there are many short-term and long-term effects including emotional, behavioral, and physical issues. Children and adolescents vary in adjustment to divorce depending on multiple factors such as communication, conflict, and parental adjustment. The stages that children and adolescents of divorce go through depend on one's developmental stage and gender. Counselors can greatly influence how children and adolescents adjust to divorce.

With divorce occurring in over half of all marriages in the United States (Amato, 2000), the lives of many children and adolescents are dramatically affected. There are multiple consequences of divorce, including social, emotional, behavioral, and physical health concerns. Some of the effects of divorce on children and adolescents only last for a short while, while others last throughout one's lifetime. Therefore, it is imperative that the topic of divorce be understood.

In addition to the effects of divorce on children and adolescents, many factors influence one's adjustment to divorce such as the level of conflict and communication in the home, as well as parent distress, behaviors, and skills. The purpose of this paper is to identify the effects of divorce on children and adolescents, the factors that influence their adjustment, and suggestions for counselors to help children and adolescents cope more effectively with this situation.

### General Effects of Divorce on Children and Adolescents

Adjustment to divorce occurs over time and in stages, and all involved in this process experience a great deal of strain, ambivalence, self-doubt, and uncertainty (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Seifert and Hoffnung (1997) described divorce as "a long period of distress, tension, and discord" (p. 421). The grieving process is different for everyone; yet there are certain common effects resulting from divorce.

#### *Short-Term Effects*

*Emotions.* There are multiple emotions that children from divorced families experience. One common feeling is embarrassment. Children and adolescents often feel that they are different than others and are ashamed of their new family status (Goldenberg

& Goldenberg, 2000). There is also a tendency for children to hide their situation from others.

Schwartz and Scott (1997) noted that divorce can also produce considerable guilt. Children try to make sense of divorce, but if they are missing the facts of the parental breakup, they often blame themselves (Schwartz & Scott, 1997) and feel responsible for the divorce, particularly if their parents have quarreled over them.

Other short-term emotions experienced by children and adolescents from divorced families are anger, sadness, despair, and grief. Oppawsky (2000) also noted that children often react to divorce with fear, aggression, and even hostility toward others, especially to parents. Unfortunately, they tend to withdraw from friends and family at certain points and experience decreased self-confidence and increased loneliness as well.

In addition, children with divorced parents exhibit more depression and withdrawal than children from intact families (Schwartz & Scott, 1997; Oppawsky, 2000). Young children may feel rejected by one or both parents and both children and adolescents may feel helpless about their family situation. Not surprisingly, Seifert and Hoffnung (1997) found that most teenagers who attempted suicide are those who experienced family troubles, including divorce. Suicide attempts are often cries for help because of the adolescents' intense loneliness, isolation, and hopelessness which typically accompany parental divorce.

According to Seifert and Hoffnung (1997), children and adolescents often have difficulty accepting the permanence their parent's divorce and hang onto the possibility or entertain fantasies that their parents will reunite. Marta (1997) noted that this is partly due to the fact that children cannot yet make the distinction between what is real and

what is unreal. Furthermore, they often do not have the capability of understanding the reality of the situation.

*Behaviors.* With all of these conflicting and confusing emotions experienced as a result of divorce, children often display multiple behavioral problems as well.

Unfortunately, decreased academic achievement is one such problem. Children of divorce are frequently absent from school, perform poorer on schoolwork, and misbehave more than children from intact families (Schwartz & Scott, 1997). According to Crosnoe and Elder (2004), there is a link between emotional support from parents and academic performance. A symptom of this is evident as the dropout rate is twice as high for children from divorced families than intact families (Oppawsky, 2000). One explanation is that typically during a divorce there is a decrease in parental support and the distancing relationship can be a tremendous stressor that disrupts proper functioning in school.

Furthermore, adolescents often lack confidence to meet challenges, pursue tough goals, and cope with adversity when lacking emotional support from others.

In addition to school performance, other behavior problems accompany divorce. Children and adolescents from divorced families are often more deviant, initiate sex earlier, and are more likely to become pregnant in their teens than children from intact families (Schwartz & Scott, 1997). In addition, Oppawsky (2000) found that children and adolescents from divorced families were more likely to become delinquent by age 15 and use alcohol and drugs.

*Relationships.* Relationships are also affected by divorce. When one parent moves out of the house after divorce, sometimes the parent moves out of the child's life. Due to decreased contact with the non-custodial parent, the relationship is sometimes

weakened (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). At the same time, parent-child relationships can deteriorate after a divorce regardless of living arrangements because children are often angry and blame one parent for the divorce. Also, because boundaries and roles are often modified to adjust to the transition, strain is placed on both parent and child. Therefore, change in relationships and power brings psychological distress on those involved and leads to the deterioration of parent-child relationships (Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon, & Korn 2004).

In addition, a child's perception of the relationship and support from his or her parent influences his or her sense of self-worth. Therefore, divorce has a major impact on children and adolescents' self-esteem. Schwartz and Scott (1997) stated that children with divorced parents viewed themselves as less competent than other children. Additionally, Dreman and Shemi (2004) noted that there is a significant correlation between parent-child relationship and children's self-worth.

### *Long-Term Effects*

The effects of divorce do not dissipate after a few years; rather they continue throughout one's lifetime (Sivanli-Ozen, 2004; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). One such long-term effect pertains to adolescent and adult relationships.

*Relationships.* According to Seifert and Hoffnung (1997), divorce complicates teenagers' ability to develop reasonable expectations about their own intimate relationships. Trust and confidence in their ability to form quality relationships may be decreased as a result of divorce. Children of divorce were found to be fearful of failure in intimate relationships and had lowered expectations about their relationships.

(Wallerstein, 1989, as cited in Seifert & Hoffnung, 1997). They also showed lack of satisfaction with current relationships and concerns about future relationships.

A study by Sivanli-Ozen (2004) showed a relationship between divorce and attachment style in adults of divorce. Sivanli-Ozen found that when children grow up in conflicted households, common to divorce situations, they were more likely to develop an insecure adult attachment style. This style was defined by an avoidance of close relationships and insecurities about relationships in general. Guttman and Rosenberg (2003) also stated that children from divorce experience fewer ties with family and friends and reduced marital quality. Therefore, these children have more difficulty developing and maintaining healthy relationships, especially if there are high levels of conflict involved. According to Schwartz and Scott (1997), people whose parents divorced have higher rates of divorce themselves than do children from intact families. However, that difference is only five to ten percentage points higher than children from intact families.

*Economic difficulties.* Families headed by divorced or never married mothers are most likely to be in a worse financial position than any other type of family organization (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). This change in economic status adds to the stress facing children and adolescents from divorced families. Forste and Heaton (2004) found that during the initial years after divorce, economic well-being of women declined by more than 30 percent. Children of divorce are mostly affected by this change because they are predominantly placed with their mothers, now single, who sometimes carry the entire burden of raising children alone.

These mothers often go through emotionally unstable periods, not only due to their financial situation, but also because of the grief, self-blame, loneliness, lack of support, and child-care arrangements (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Many divorced mothers take on new or additional employment, yet their standard of living frequently declines. Therefore, a reduction of economic resources correlates with poorer-quality housing, neighborhoods, schools, and child care. Divorce is often accompanied by a move, which in turn leads to a decrease in social support (Seifert & Hoffnung, 1997). All of the above factors that mothers deal with eventually affect the children as well.

### Stages of Adjustment to Divorce

Most children and adolescents follow certain adjustment stages when experiencing the divorce of their parents. However, it is important to note that not all children go through every stage in sequential order. Wallerstein (1983) identified six tasks children of divorce must resolve to live a healthy and adjusted life. The first task is acknowledging the reality of the marital rupture. This occurs when the child realizes the truth of the breakup of his or her parents. The second task is disengagement from parental conflict and distress. Children often have trouble distancing themselves from a divorce situation and withdraw from activities. However, they eventually separate themselves from their home situation and return to their normal activities.

Resolving the loss associated with divorce is Wallerstein's third task. This process encompasses dealing with the multiple losses experienced by the child such as the departure of a parent, neighborhood, school, friends, and church. Next, the child must resolve anger and self-blame, which entails forgiving themselves or parents who they once blamed for the divorce. The fifth task is to accept the permanence of the divorce.

Children often hold onto the hope that their parents will get back together, but will eventually learn to accept their situation and move on. The final task involved achieving hope regarding relationships, which is the process of risk taking in forming new relationships and realizing that sometimes relationships come to an end.

Kubler-Ross (1969, as cited in Swartz & Scott 1997) also identified stages of grief, which are applicable to children with divorced parents because of their loss associated with divorce. The first stage is denial, in which the child or adolescent does not accept that the loss, or divorce in this case, has happened and are in a state of shock. In the second stage, the child becomes angry about the situation and the anger may be displaced in multiple directions. The anger stage is often replaced by the third stage, called the bargaining stage, where the child wishes that the parents would get back together. The fourth stage is depression; this is when the child can become overwhelmed by the loss and feels helpless about the situation. Finally, during the last stage, the child or adolescent accepts that the divorce has occurred and is final and learns to live with the situation. It is important to note that a children do not necessarily go through all of these stages in a linear fashion, but rather, they may fluctuate between the stages.

#### Factors that Influence Adjustment

Every child is affected by divorce in some manner. At the same time, it is important to note that everyone grieves and adjusts to divorce differently. Furthermore, there are many factors that influence the adjustment process for all people involved. These factors greatly affect the extent of the pain and confusion a child faces, as well as his or her ability to cope and adjust to this transition (Amato, 2000).

### *Level of Conflict*

According to Sirvanli-Ozen (2004), the problematic adjustment children and adolescents of divorced families experience does not necessarily come from divorce itself, but rather from high rates of marital conflict. Sirvanli-Ozen noted that as marital conflict increased, parents became more involved in their marital problems, which resulted in less involvement with their children. Consequently, marital conflict had a negative impact on children's socio-emotional development, ability to regulate their emotions, their coping mechanisms, and the parent-child relationship. Fauchier and Margolin (2004) stated that more negative parent-child relationships are found in families with more negative marital relationships. Therefore, not surprisingly, these children displayed lowered self-esteem and higher levels of problematic behavior.

### *Coping Strategies*

In order for children and adolescents to adjust well to the divorce of their parents, the parents must model effective coping skills themselves. Children look to their parents for clues about how to act and cope with the loss. Sometimes parents hide their emotions in order to protect their children, but end up hurting them in the end. However, parents who attend to their own grieving process set a good example for their children (National Center for Grieving Children and Families, 1999).

After divorce, ex-spouses often are left hurt and angry at the other partner. However, it is a common mistake to put pressure on the children to feel the same. It is detrimental to put any form of demands on children to choose sides or be angry at the other parent. According to Seifert and Hoffnung (1997) the loyalty conflicts created by parents can make children angry and fearful that they will lose one of their parents in the

process. Furthermore, if parents refuse to give children the chance to cope, they will continue to be angry and burdened with a loyalty issues and the adjustment process will be prolonged.

However, the ability of parents to cope with their own angry feelings and allow their children to do the same helps everyone adjust to the unfortunate situation. The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (1999) recommended that parents make a child's world safe for grieving the loss of their once intact family unit. Children should be encouraged to talk about their thoughts and feelings pertaining to the situation. Furthermore, all emotions should be validated allowing the child to grieve and adjust in a safe way.

### *Parental Distress*

Divorce can create a lot of stress for a person experiencing it. Forste and Heaton (2004) stated that divorced individuals reported lower levels of happiness, more symptoms of psychological distress, and poorer self-concepts. Furthermore, parental alcohol consumption and physical violence often increase after divorce. With all of this stress on parents following divorce, it is clear that a child and his or her adjustment process can be greatly affected by the parent's state of emotional distress. Parental emotions have a causal role in organizing and directing children's reactions to a divorce. Furthermore, parents' negative emotions such as anger or depression affect a child's adjustment to the divorce, communication with the parent, and the child's sense of self-worth (Dreman & Shemi, 2004). In Dreman and Shemi's study, parents who displayed anger had poorer communication with their children.

### *Post-Divorce Parenting Behaviors and Skills*

During a difficult transition such as divorce, children and adolescents also need reassurance that they are still loved. The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (1999) suggested that parents be extra affectionate and compassionate with their children in order to reestablish a sense of security after the surprise of divorce. The most important thing a parent can do for grieving children is to be there and support them. Children and adolescents need to be reassured of their worth and reminded that the parents will always love them. Seifert and Hoffnung (1997) suggested that parents should avoid criticism and blaming others for the divorce. In addition, they should reassure the children that they did not cause the divorce. As stated previously, children often blame themselves for the divorce when they do not understand the facts.

At the same time, it is important for parents not to resort to the other extreme and become too overprotective (National Center for Grieving Children and Families, 1999). There is a tendency for parents to want to shield children from hurt after a painful experience like divorce, yet that hinders the development of adjustment. Thus, it is beneficial for parents to follow the child's lead in returning to outside activities and coping with the divorce rather than trying to protect them from.

### *Communication*

Communication greatly affects adjustment to divorce and family relationships. In a study by Koerner et. al., (2004) only half of the mother-adolescent pairs had consistent perceptions of the mothers' new relationships due to inadequate communication and withholding information about the new relationships. The authors believed that this finding was due to attempts to hold back information or feelings about the newly formed

relationship. Koerner et al., (2004) also pointed out that healthy functioning is typically associated with perceptions that are consistent across family members. Differing views of family issues are associated with difficulties in parent-adolescent relationships (Koerner et. al., 2004). Therefore, one can conclude that if family members do not communicate and important information is withheld from others, conflict and confusion occurs. This in turn leads to difficulties in adjustment to changes within the family. Dreman and Shemi (2004) also found that poor parent-child communication correlated with low adjustment to divorce and reduced self-esteem.

There are many other components of communication, as well. The research from the National Center for Grieving Children and Families (1999) recommended that parents listen to their children's concerns and answer questions honestly. Parents often want to protect their children; therefore factual information does not always get relayed to children. However, eventually they will overhear something and find out on their own. It is better for children to hear the correct information straight from the source instead of creating their own perceptions based on incorrect parts of the whole situation. These misconceptions can negatively impact a child's adjustment process.

#### *Pre- and Post-Divorce Family Functioning and Stability*

When divorce occurs, multiple changes take place for children and adolescence. Life can feel chaotic and unpredictable during and after divorce. One way to combat all of these changes is to establish consistency and routines. The National Center for Grieving Children and Families (1999) suggested that daily routines such as bedtimes, mealtimes, and family times be established to add consistency and safety to a child's life. Furthermore, returning to normal activities can be beneficial and comforting for children

because they can depend on these activities in an unpredictable time. In addition, consistent limits and rules can be useful because they help restore order and structure that was shattered by the breakup of their family. At the same time, adults need to be flexible and understanding while a child or adolescent is grieving.

### *Social Support*

Another factor that influences adjustment is the amount of social support the child or adolescent has. Divorce often disrupts social and supportive networks (Forste & Heaton, 2004). In a study conducted by Crosnoe and Elder (2004), parent-adolescent emotional distance, which is a common result of divorce, was significantly correlated with off-track behavior, lower engagement, attachment, and academic achievement in school. However, they found that adolescents were involved in a larger social context other than their families and that these outside relationships counterbalanced what was lacking at home. Crosnoe and Elder (2004) found that in some cases, non-parental personal relationships were directly related to positive academic outcomes. This was especially true when the student had formed a supportive relationship with their teacher. Also, younger girls found comfort in supportive and emotionally bonded friendships. Without that secure base, adolescents are less able to cope with the rapid changes of their lives and do not adapt as effectively to new roles and environments.

### *Developmental Considerations*

As previously noted, there are multiple factors that shape one's adjustment to divorce. A change in the family is difficult for children of all ages; however, the developmental stage of the child or adolescent influences how he or she adjusts. Each stage brings about unique issues for children and adolescents (Goldenberg & Goldenberg,

2000). During early childhood, children have a limited understanding of the divorce, leaving them feeling confused, frightened, and insecure. Children's behavior also may regress at this age. In middle childhood, children often view the divorce as their fault and wishfully hope the family will reunite (Seifert & Hoffnung, 1997).

Adolescents who experience family transitions such as divorce are most severely affected and are much more likely to experience unhealthy family climates, display more disruptive behavior, and have poorer school achievement (Seifert & Hoffnung, 1997). Most adolescents are already insecure due to their changing cognitive, emotional, and physical development. Therefore, divorce can be extremely difficult for those who are concerned about being normal and finding their identity (Seifert & Hoffnung, 1997).

### *Gender Differences*

Gender also impacts how one adjusts to divorce. According to Seifert and Hoffnung (1997) boys tend to externalize their distress due to divorce. They often become more aggressive, obstinate, and defiant. Guttman and Rosenberg (2003) found that boys respond with more hostility to parental divorce than girls. On the other hand, girls often internalize their distress or keep their emotions bottled up inside. Girls sometimes focus on relationships with males, are more sexually active, and are more likely to become pregnant early on.

### Suggestions for Counselors

With divorce affecting so many children and adolescents, there is a definite need for counselors to work with this population. School counselors can represent one stable force in a child's life during a family transition such as divorce and can help him or her

cope effectively with the situation, (Beekman, 1986). There are many things that counselors can do to help children and adolescents through this difficult time.

### *Individual Counseling*

According to the National Center for Grieving Children and Families (1999), it is most important to listen and hear the client's story and give him or her a safe place to express feelings and grieve the loss. All children experience divorce and grieve differently, therefore, it is crucial for counselors to take it at the child's pace and let him or her express grief in his or her own way. Beekman (1986) stated that counselors can help children and adolescents by providing a confidential and supportive environment in which children are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings about their family situation.

*Play therapy.* Young children lack verbal skills or cognitive abilities to articulate the depth of their emotions. Since play is the primary way children express feelings, counselors can use play therapy strategies to help children express the struggles in their lives as a result of parental divorce (Beekman, 1986). Landreth (1993) suggested that play therapy be used with children from divorced families in order to facilitate growth and adjustment because it allows children to externalize their emotions in a safe and natural manner.

*Bibliotherapy.* Bibliotherapy is another effective approach to help children from divorced families (Kramer & Smith, 1998). This type of counseling consists of selecting a story that relates to a child's situation and then personalizing it to his or her life. Bibliotherapy provides children with the opportunity to identify with situations similar to their own and derive comfort in knowing that they are not alone. (Kramer & Smith,

1998; Beekman, 1986). Bibliotherapy also allows children to develop insight about their thoughts and emotions, as well as coping strategies for dealing with the divorce of their parents (Kramer & Smith, 1998).

### *Group Counseling*

Another highly effective approach is small group counseling (Beekman, 1986; Marta, 1997). Group counseling not only allows children to label and understand their feelings and the divorce process, but it also provides an opportunity for children to learn new coping skills and realize that others have similar feelings and experiences.

(Beekman, 1986). Children, and especially adolescents, don't like to be different from their peers, and often times they are unaware that others have had a similar experience (Marta, 1997).

It is also beneficial for children to be supported as they grieve. Brigman and Earely (1991) stated that the support students receive in a group is often more powerful than the support they receive in individual counseling. Furthermore, through group counseling, participants receive more ideas, confirming messages, and information than one could get in individual counseling. A group setting can also decrease the loneliness, helplessness, and anxiety children and adolescents from divorced families often feel and replace it with a sense of belonging and support.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, divorce can be very difficult for children and adolescents. With such a high rate of divorce in the United States today, a large number of children are drastically affected by this family issue. However, it doesn't affect everyone in the same way and it doesn't have to be traumatic if handled correctly. Children and adolescents

will adjust to family transitions more effectively if their parents are more aware of the effects of divorce, as well as knowledge of strategies to help their children. Counselors can play an essential role in the adjustment process and can help children and adolescents learn to cope with their thoughts and emotions in order to adjust to their parents' divorce.

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