The impact of divorce and healthy adjustment of children

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to examine the impact divorce has on children as well as how parents can help their children adjust to divorce. The negative impacts that divorce may have on children include emotional and behavioral problems. However, positive effects such as allowing the child to escape a hostile environment were also found. A review of the literature indicated that children's response to divorce differed according to type, stage, and age of the child at the time of divorce. The types of strategies that are being used to aid parents in helping their children cope include mediation, educational workshops, and seminars.

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THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE AND HEALTHY ADJUSTMENT OF CHILDREN

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Stephanie A. Harken

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The purpose of this paper was to examine the impact divorce has on children as well as how parents can help their children adjust to divorce. The negative impacts that divorce may have on children include emotional and behavioral problems. However, positive effects such as allowing the child to escape a hostile environment were also found. A review of the literature indicated that children's response to divorce differed according to type, stage, and age of the child at the time of divorce. The types of strategies that are being used to aid parents in helping their children cope include mediation, educational workshops, and seminars.
The Impact of Divorce and Healthy Adjustment of Children

And they lived happily ever after. This is the ending that many children hear as their parents read them a fairy tale. In reality however, this ending is often much different for parents who experience the bitterness of divorce. Fortunately, with the right information, resources, and support, the ending can still be happily ever after for children, or at least close to it.

This paper provides a review of the literature that relates to the effects of divorce on children as well as interventions that parents can use to help their children cope and adjust following divorce. This information can help counselors learn about the effects of divorce on children and what they can do to aid parents in helping their children adjust.

The information presented will cover the short-term, long-term, negative, and positive effects of divorce on children. Types and stages of divorce will also be covered, in addition to children’s response to divorce at different ages. Finally, some of the newer strategies that are being used to lessen the negative effects of divorce, such as mediation, educational workshops, and seminars, will be discussed.

Statistics

The divorce rate has fluctuated over the past few decades, but according to current trends, divorce rates are somewhat stable at the present time (Ahrons,
According to Lamb, Sternberg, and Thompson (as cited in Ahrons 1999), 45% of all first marriages end in divorce. Kot and Shoemaker (1999) found that 60% of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. Of these divorces more than one million children are impacted in the course of a year (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999).

According to Grollman (1969), couples with children are faced with three difficult choices when there is a breakdown in the marriage. The choices are “Stick it out for the sake of the children, try a long and painful process of repairing the marriage, or one or both parents decide to obtain a divorce” (Grollman, 1969, p.1).

When parents do decide to obtain a divorce, the impact that divorce has on their children is dependent on many factors. One of these factors is the type of divorce.

Three Types of Divorce

According to McDonough and Bartha (1999), there are three kinds of divorce. The effects that divorce can have on children varies among these three types.

Amicable. The first type of divorce identified by McDonough and Bartha (1999) is the “amicable divorce” (p.3). The amicable divorce is described as the easiest for children. It is a divorce in which both parents are able to speak openly to each other about the children, and the parent’s hostile feelings toward one
another are not displayed. The child is allowed to have a complete relationship with both parents, and both parents are actively involved in the child’s life. Children are allowed to talk about the other parent openly. The degree of comfort that is established within the parental relationship in the amicable divorce allows children to develop a stronger self-concept (McDonough & Bartha, 1999).

Disengaged. In contrast, the next type of divorce is the “disengaged” (McDonough & Bartha, 1999, p. 4). A good connection, meaning effective communication and positive interaction, to both parents is characteristic of this type of divorce. Hostility between the parents is managed through avoidance of the other parent. Children are allowed to be close to their parents and the parents are described as being “disengaged from each other, but not from their children” (p. 4). Many divorces in which the parents cooperate follow the disengaged style, and the children are able to grow and develop by being spared the conflict (McDonough & Bartha, 1999).

High conflict. The third and most damaging type of divorce is the “high conflict” (p. 5). In divorces in which there is high conflict, it is not uncommon for the parents to continue fighting even three years after separating from each other. The children who are caught in a high conflict divorce have been described as living in “war zones” (McDonough & Bartha, 1999, p.5). According to McDonough and Bartha (1999), these children often exhibit signs of distress, which may include, stomachaches and temper tantrums, for example. These
symptoms can also be descriptive of someone who has suffered some type of trauma. The feeling of being caught between the parents and being exposed to hostility creates a harmful and stressful environment for the children. McDonough and Bartha (1999), write that the most important question one can ask is, "What kind of divorce am I creating?" (p. 5).

As well as types of divorce, there are also stages of divorce. The behaviors of the family and how the family manages their conflict influence the stage of the divorce.

Stages of the Divorce Process

Kalter (1991) identified three stages of the divorce process. These include the "immediate crisis phase", "short-term aftermath", and the "long-range period" (p. 5). According to Kalter, the crisis stage may last for only a month or two after the parents separate for some families. For others, it may continue for one or two years past the separation. The degree to which conflicts are worked out between the parents and new patterns of living are created is the characteristic of transition from one stage to the next. Because of this, children require different kinds of help and support from parents and professionals.

Immediate crisis. The "immediate crisis" phase begins as the parents separate and/or petition for divorce. The children sense that their lives will be altered dramatically. This may be a time of shock and disbelief. Conflict between
the parents is thought by Kalter (1991) to be one of the most serious stressors that the child encounters during this stage.

**Short-term aftermath.** The "short-term aftermath" stage may last up to two years after the immediate crisis phase has passed. For the family, there is a deepening recognition of the realities of divorce. Patterns, such as visitation with the other parent, become established. Parents may turn to the children or use them as go-betweens, pawns, or allies, which burdens the child (Kalter, 1991).

**Long-range.** The "long-range phase" begins two to three years after the initial separation. The main stressor here is inter-parental hostility. Children who are faced with ongoing, serious conflicts between parents are at risk for developing emotional and behavioral disorders.

The adult's calm in the face of the child's emotional pain or behavior problems and the willingness to try to make sense of what is going on can provide their child with a model for confronting his or her troubles and provide hope of resolving the underlying conflicts (Kalter, 1991, p. 26).

Based on the type of divorce that the child experiences, the effects can also vary. Some of these effects are believed by researchers to be long-term while others are more short-term. In addition, research (Wallerstein, 1991; Kot & Shoemaker, 1999) has found that children can suffer many negative effects from divorce. However, other research (Gately & Schwebel, 1992) has found some positive effects as well.
Effects of Divorce on Children

The previous section described the different types of divorce and how the effects that divorce has on children can vary according to the type. The following section will present information as to what the research has shown these effects to be. Additionally, these effects can be short-term, long-term, negative and positive.

Short-term. Kot and Shoemaker (1999) identified three short-term effects. The first one is that children become upset immediately after the parents separate. An additional effect is that young children may experience feelings of depression and anxiety due to the fact that they are divided between their two parents. The perception by the children that they are “losing a parent may cause the child to be hesitant in forming close relationships with others for fear of another loss” (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999, p.166). The third potential effect is that the child’s behavior in school might become a problem, and there may be a decline in academic achievement.

Unfortunately, these could cause long-term effects because of the impact they might have. Wallerstein (1991) found that up to 15 years after their parents’ divorce, many children were still depressed, were unable to achieve normally, and experienced difficulties in love and attachment. These long-term effects, which primarily deal with self-esteem and relationship issues, will be presented next.

Long-Term. One long-term effect identified by Kot and Shoemaker (1999) is that children growing up in a single-parent household are at an increased
risk of becoming delinquent compared to children in a two-parent home. Another effect is that younger children of divorce are at a greater disadvantage than older children because fathers are often less involved with the younger children (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Other negative long-term effects include decreased self-esteem, more difficulties in relationships, and a pessimistic outlook on the future.

Sommers-Flanagan, Elander, and Sommers-Flanagan (2000) found that it may not be the divorce itself that creates the negative emotions and behaviors, but instead it might be the exposure to conflict, hostility, and abuse that happens in these families and between the parents that is the cause for the children’s maladjustment. This raises the question as to whether divorce can be positive for the family.

Positive effects. In families in which abuse is present and there is a great deal of conflict between the parents, it is thought by some experts that divorce might be in the best interest of the child. In these circumstances, divorce would likely be seen as positive for the child by helping him or her to avoid the hostile environment.

Gately and Schwebel (1992) reported that there were additional favorable outcomes in children who had to adjust to their parents divorce. Some of these positive effects included enhanced level of functioning in maturity, self-esteem, empathy, and androgyny.
How Parents Can Help

Regardless of the reason for divorce, there are ways that parents can help their children adjust. There are things that parents can do in order for children to have the best outcome and not suffer long-term negative consequences. “We rarely have a choice about whether change will happen, but we have many choices about how to respond to the changes that come into and define our families and our lives” (Sommers-Flanagan, Elander, & Sommers-Flanagan, 2000, p. 1).

Ahrons (1999, p. 391) indicated that the research identifies some of the factors that influence the healthy adjustment of children to divorce:

1. Children need to have their basic economic and psychological needs met.
2. They need support for maintaining the familial relationships in their lives that were important and meaningful to them before the divorce, which often includes extended family.
3. They benefit when the relationship between their parents is generally supportive and cooperative.

Children’s Response to Divorce

Children, no matter what their age, often fantasize about their parents getting back together again (McDonough & Bartha, 1999). The response of a child to divorce and the changes that it will ultimately bring depends on the
child's age, gender, and developmental level. Depending on the child's age and developmental level, there are strategies that parents can use to help their child adjust and suffer fewer negative consequences as a result of their parents' divorce. 

McDonough and Bartha (1999) identify the different ages of children and how parents can respond to the child depending on the child's needs at that stage of development.

Preschoolers

The preschooler experiencing divorce fears that he or she might be abandoned by one or both parents. The child at this stage of development may revert to previous behaviors such as wetting the bed or acting like a baby. At this time, parents need to reassure the child over and over again that the divorce was not his or her fault (McDonough & Bartha, 1999).

School-Age

According to Amato and Keith (1991), a child between the ages of six and eight becomes the most distressed as a result of separation and divorce. In this stage, the parents can best help their children by not putting down the other parent and providing consistency for the child.

Older School-Age

Older school children may deny the divorce to their friends and blame their parents (McDonough & Bartha, 1999). It is recommended that parents be
responsible for their own problems and feelings. It is important not to treat the child as a replacement for the other spouse.

Grollman (1969) noted that one of the most important concerns is to be sure that the children involved know why the divorce is taking place and what it will mean to them in terms of how it will effect their lives. “One of the great gifts that one can give a child at this time is the right to feel” (Grollman, 1969, p. 40).

Alternatives for Families

As stated earlier, parents do have a choice in how to make this the best divorce for their children and help them adjust in a healthy manner. In addition to the recommendations mentioned previously, some newer strategies have been identified to help families going through a divorce. These include mediation, psycho-educational workshops, co-parenting seminars, and divorce therapy. The underlying premise of these strategies is to create healthier outcomes in families that are experiencing divorce.

Mediation

One of these strategies, mediation, encourages couples to make their own decisions regarding their families. Problem-solving skills are taught during this process with the expectation that the family use these skills in the future as well. It helps couples to come to a reasonable solution for both parties regarding custody, child support and property settlement (Emery, 1995).
Typically, with mediation, the divorcing couple meets with a mediator during several sessions (Lundstrom, 1998). The easiest issues are dealt with first, and then gradually the couple works into the most difficult issues such as custody of the children.

The divorce is granted after the couple reaches an agreement and this agreement is approved by the lawyers and then by a judge. Lundstrom (1998) stated that mediation is generally successful with parents that put their children’s interests first and are also no longer emotionally involved with each other.

Emery (1995) noted that because of the emotions that may surface during the mediation process, it is important for the mediator to be able to empathize with each person while being able to stay in charge and continue with the procedure. Emery (1995) reported that mediation decreased the likelihood of the divorcing couple to go to court and resulted in numerous agreements being reached.

In addition to the emergence of mediation being used to help lessen the negative effects of divorce, educating parents has been found to be useful as well. Education of parents has been taking the form of workshops and seminars. During the classes, parents learn about the impact of divorce on children and how they can make the divorce better for their children.
Psycho-Educational Workshops/Seminars

According to Griffin (1998), many courts in the United States are now making it a requirement for divorcing parents to attend classes that are intended to make them aware of the effects of divorce on children as well as aid the parents in helping their children cope with the effects of the divorce. Griffin (1998) reported that the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers started a program to educate the public on the effects of divorce on children, and they recommend that divorcing parents keep their children out of the conflicts and “encourage a relationship with the other parent” (p.100).

Generally, court ordered parenting classes are seminars that last two and a half to four hours (Griffin, 1998). In these classes, parents are provided with information about the legal, financial, emotional, and psychological effects of divorce. They may include information on the different responses a child may have according to his or her developmental level. These classes push for the parents to develop co-parenting strategies and to work together for the sake of the children.

According to Griffin (1998), 41 states now have approximately 1600 mandatory programs, which has increased since 1990 when there were only 100 such programs. Many of these programs use trained mental health professionals as the program instructors, and they are offered through colleges or universities, non-profit organizations and court systems (Griffin, 1998).
One such program is the Parents’ Education About Children’s Emotions [PEACE] program. In a study conducted by McKenry, Clark, and Stone (1996), this program was evaluated to determine its effectiveness by comparing participants to others who did not complete such a program over a five-year period.

The PEACE program, which began in Ohio, was one of the first programs required for divorcing parents to attend. Typical of most mandated divorce education programs, the program is a two and a half hour seminar required before a divorce is granted. The primary goal of this particular program is to help children adjust following a divorce (McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1996).

“Parents are seen as intentionally or unintentionally involving children in on-going conflicts and unresolved marital issues with former spouses” (McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1996, p. 130). The program helps parents who are divorcing understand the impact of divorce on children and how the parents’ behavior directly affects children’s responses. A grief-loss perspective is used as a way to help parents look at divorce as a crisis event and learn about typical reactions and how to recover from the loss. Program leaders teach parents techniques to help them meet their child’s needs during the grief process.

Another program called the Children of Separation and Divorce teaches parents to keep their children out of the conflicts and to let the children have a
good relationship with both parents. The program also urges parents to cooperate in the parenting role.

One technique used by this program involves using graduates of the program to share their experiences, including mistakes they have made, and model what they have learned for the participants (Frieman, Garon, & Garon, 2000). One other part of the seminar involves providing practical guidelines to help parents have a working relationship. The program helps parents develop a parenting plan that lists the needs of their child and how each parent will help to meet those needs (Frieman, Garon, & Garon, 2000).

**Parenting Plan**

A final alternative is a parenting plan. A parenting plan sets out the responsibilities of each parent and how he or she will conduct him or herself in regards to the children so that they can work co-operatively and effectively as separated parents (McDonough & Bartha, 1999). It is recommended that the parents show the plan to the children and help to ease their fears of losing either parent, as well as provide security for the child. Some of the ideas that should be included in the parenting plan include behaviors, decision-making, living arrangements and annual reviews of the plan.

**Effectiveness of Programs**

In a study by Slavkin (2000), a divorce education program was evaluated to determine the effectiveness of a psycho-educational program designed to
“reduce the negative implications of marital discord and teach children effective strategies for dealing with divorce” (p.10). It was found that the program was helpful in educating parents and children about the changes in the family dynamics, as well as effective in teaching positive coping skills after their parent’s separation. The program consisted of parent education, workshops for parents, and a children’s counseling program.

Fischer (1997) conducted a national survey of court judges to determine the effectiveness of one of these educational programs (Children Cope With Divorce). He stated that family court judges are vital in the observation of the impact of parent education seminars. This seminar, like others, provides parents who are divorcing with resources and information in an attempt to lessen the negative impact of divorce. Fischer (1997) stated that divorce can cause a disruption in parenting and that this is what is especially harmful to the child.

According to the survey, 75% of the judges believe that the program leads to “quicker resolution of custody matters,” as well as less “litigation involving the child, and parents for any reason” (Fischer, 1997, p. 45). In addition, 96% of the judges felt that the seminars lessened the negative impact of divorce on children, and 98% felt that the program was a benefit to the families that participated.

Conclusion

Parental divorce has been found by researchers to have an impact on children. The negative impact may include emotional and behavioral problems as
well as cause problems in relationships. The positive effects can be escaping from a hostile or abusive environment as well as increased maturity in the child.

However, parents do have choices and resources to help make divorce the best situation for their children, and help them adjust with fewer negative effects. Counselors, whether working with the individual, couple, family, or children can use this information to help parents and their children become educated and achieve a healthier outcome.
References


