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## Children of divorce: The emotional effects of divorce on adolescents

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## Children of divorce: The emotional effects of divorce on adolescents

### Abstract

Hetherington (1979) predicted that as many as one-half of all children born in the United States during the 1970's would spend some time in a single parent home. These children faced unique circumstances as they continued to grow and develop (Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, and Hunt, 1979; Kurdek and Siesky, 1980b; Levitin, 1979; Luepnitz, 1979; Wallerstein, 1984a,b; and Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). When parents separated, these youth felt an insecurity about their situation (Andrew, 1978; Farber, Primavera, and Felner, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Nelly, 1984; Wallerstein, 1984a,b; and Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). At times this uncertainty hindered their ability to function, hurt their relationships with peers, and caused stresses which contributed to under achievement or failure academically (Kurdek and Siesky, 1979, 1980a,b; Neely, 1984; Wallerstein 1984a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE:  
THE EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON ADOLESCENTS

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Hetherington (1979) predicted that as many as one-half of all children born in the United States during the 1970's would spend some time in a single parent home. These children faced unique circumstances as they continued to grow and develop (Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, and Hunt, 1979; Kurdek and Siesky, 1980b; Levitin, 1979; Luepnitz, 1979; Wallerstein, 1984a,b; and Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). When parents separated, these youth felt an insecurity about their situation (Andrew, 1978; Farber, Primavera, and Felner, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Nelly, 1984; Wallerstein, 1984a,b; and Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). At times this uncertainty hindered their ability to function, hurt their relationships with peers, and caused stresses which contributed to under achievement or failure academically (Kurdek and Siesky, 1979, 1980a,b; Neely, 1984; Wallerstein 1984a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

While effects of divorce were not always negative, serious, or long-lasting, the school age children of divorce were a population at risk (Drake, 1979). With one-half of all children born in the United States during the 1970's being former, current, or possible members of this population (Hetherington, 1979), the number of adolescents in our schools who fall into this category was substantial. The emotional readjustment following the divorce was also substantial (Andrew, 1978; Faber, Primavera, and Felner, 1983; Luepnitz, 1979; Neely, 1984; and

Wallerstein, 1983a). One of the people best suited to help these young people was the school counselor (Drake, 1979).

For many children of divorce, the breakup was the central part of their lives and often remained so through their adolescent years (Wallerstein, 1983a). The effects of the divorce "are incorporated within the character, the attitude, the relationships, the self-concept, the expectations, and the world view of the child." (Wallerstein, 1983a, p. 233).

This discussion attempted to explore the consequences of divorce upon adolescents, the 12-20 year old age group. A review of professional research and literature provided data on types of reactions experienced by the youth and the stages of divorce the families went through. A discussion centered on the emotional consequences of divorce for adolescents and how time changed these reactions was included. While other issues, such as the function of the adolescent in the family, the adolescent's view of a family, and what constitutes good parenting (Levitin, 1979), were also factors affecting this age group's responses to the reality of divorce, the review contained emotional consequences specific to divorce as much as possible.

Any discussion must consistently cite references to the longitudinal study by Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly. This study began in 1971 and included 60 divorcing families with 131 children ranging in age from 3 to 18 years old (Wallerstein, 1980, 1983a,b, 1984a,b, Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). An initial

report, an eighteen month follow up, a five year follow up (Wallerstein, 1980, 1983a,b, Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980) and a ten year follow-up (Wallerstein, 1984a,b) had all been done and were included in this research. There were no other studies so extensive over this kind of longitudinal range (Wallerstein, 1984a,b), and their study was continuously cited in the references of other literature on the subject matter.

### Three Stages

Wallerstein's (1983a) contention that divorced families tend to go through three stages was the only available analysis of the progression of the divorce experience. The first she called the acute stage. This involved the actual separation with the father usually being the parent to move out of the house, and the legal step of filing for divorce being taken (Wallerstein, 1983b).

The second stage of divorce was called the transitional phase (Wallerstein, 1983b). This was characterized by new roles for children and adults as the family was restructured. The family's standard of living often dropped (Neely, 1984, Nelson, 1981, Wallerstein, 1983b). Conflicts and tensions tended to occur frequently as adaptation to these complex changes occurred (Wallerstein, 1983a).

As the family restabilized and began to function more normally, the third stage was reached. This stabilizing phase

was marked by relationship patterns being set and remarriage often occurring. Not all families moved through all three stages in the same time periods. Some never moved into new stages (Wallerstein, 1983a).

Even though it was seldom found, positive adjustment to the divorce situation, for the children and the family as a whole, was more likely when there was an amiable settlement between the parents (Luepnitz, 1979; Nelson, 1981; Peterson, Leigh, and Day, 1984; and Wallerstein, 1983a). Since moving through all three stages was important for the family's readjustment, an amiable relationship was desirable to promote positive development.

#### Emotional Reactions

The following emotions were found to be present in adolescents during the divorce experience. Divorce was frightening with some fears being realistic and others not (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein, 1983a, 1984a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Divorce caused sadness and yearning and contributed to a sense of loss (Kurdek and Siesky, 1979, 1980a,b; Reinhard, 1977; Wallerstein, 1980, 1984a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Divorce led to worry which was not confined only to what was going to happen to them: adolescents were often more concerned with their parents' ability to manage (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a,b; Wallerstein, 1980; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Divorce often led to conflicting loyalties within children as parents openly competed for their love (Neely, 1984; Noble, 1983; Wallerstein, 1984a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Children of divorce often felt rejected as they perceived the parent who left as no longer having any interest in them (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a,b; Wallerstein, 1983a,b, 1984a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Anger was often the emotion that was the reaction of these youth to all or some of the above circumstances (Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, and Hunt, 1983; Farber, Primavera, and Felner, 1983; Hetherington, 1979, Jewett, 1982; Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a,b; Luepnitz, 1979; Neely, 1984; Noble, 1983; Reinhard, 1977; Rosen, 1977; Wallerstein, 1984a,b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

### Sense of Loss

The first emotions children of all ages were apt to experience during the divorce experience were shock, fear, and grief at the loss of a parent (Jewett, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). The children were depressed and fatigued. A substantial number felt that their parents had no awareness of their distress. This was particularly true for adolescents (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

### Shock

Yet in spite of seeing some positive things resulting from the divorce, many children as a group had a difficult time dealing with the divorce emotionally (Rosen, 1977; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). News of the divorce came as a shock to most of the youth. Even those who came from families of violence and strife were not happy after the divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). However, the very few children who expressed relief when told of the divorce were adolescents from families that had experienced violence (Andrew, 1978; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

### Disapproval

For the family of divorce there was severe stress and disorganization in the year after the separation (Andrew, 1978; Fine, Moreland, and Schwebel, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a,b; Neely, 1984; Nelson, 1981; Noble, 1983; Peterson, Leigh, and Day, 1984; Reinhard, 1977; Wallerstein, 1983a,b, 1984a,b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found a reflection of this turmoil when 75 percent of the children initially felt strong disapproval for their parents' divorce. After five years this had dropped to 30 percent; still a significant minority; yet, it also indicated that the initial reactions were the most severe. Fine, Morland

and Schwebel's 1983 research also found the initial reactions were severe and the youth were not in favor of a split in the family.

### Approval

A study by Luepnitz (1979) indicated that for some the divorce was actually preferable to staying together. For these children the conflicts between their parents before the divorce were worse than any consequences of the divorce. This was supported by Rosen (1977) in a study involving 92 children that found that 79 percent of the children would not have chosen to keep their home intact with conflict present. They thought this would be very destructive. At the five year mark, 28 percent of the Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) study strongly approved of the divorce.

Older children were much more likely to approve of their parents divorce (Rosen, 1977; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Some even saw the divorce as a step up. Among the benefits noted were: they felt more independent and responsible (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980b; Rosen, 1977; Teleki, Powell, and Dodder, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980), they were more aware of adult emotions and values (Rosen, 1977; Teleki, Powell, and Dodder, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980), and they saw themselves as more mature than their peers (Rosen, 1977).

While one study showed the children felt a higher level of acceptance and approval from their mothers (Teleki, Powell, and Dodder, 1982), another showed children eight and older "often felt the mothering had been almost entirely withdrawn..." (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 36).

The positive adjustment to divorce did not depend on sex. Reactions to the divorce for adolescent girls and boys were not significantly different (Reinhard, 1977; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). However, the Wallerstein and Kelly study found this the case in their 18 month result and altered in their five year followup. After five years, males tended to disapprove more and this disapproval reached its height during early and mid-adolescence. This trend did not hold true for girls. They were more likely to approve as they grew older (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

### Anxiety

"The most common agreement among experts is that, in the short run, divorce causes anxiety in children. Suddenly there is only one parent between them and the world." (Andrew, 1978, p. 78). This fearfulness was very prevalent and to a large degree was a result of a failure to identify the divorce as a parental crisis instead of a family one (Andrew, 1978). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) did not find one single family that had allowed the

children to discuss, inquire, or question. This type of approach enhanced the opportunity for positive adjustments to take place (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980b).

Adolescents from families changed by divorce felt like they had to grow up in a hurry (Wallerstein, 1983b). Many felt burdened by chores and deprived of leisure time (Wallerstein, 1983b, 1984b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Other feelings expressed included longing for an intact family, a concern for their parents, a loyalty conflict, being in the middle between parents, and feeling unloved and unlovable (Wallerstein, 1983b, 1984b). Some adolescents felt like the divorce was the most stressful time period of their lives (Wallerstein, 1984b).

Yet, the degree of disengagement from the situation by the parent also played a large part in the child's perception of the divorce. While the child could see the need for the home situation to change, they definitely did not want their relationship with their parents to end (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a; Wallerstein, 1983b, 1984a). Many children faced the emotions of the divorce without parental support (Wallerstein, 1984b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). This disengagement from family roles was mainly a result of parents focusing on their own problems; yet, the more the roles change, the more stress the child felt. If they saw parents handling this well, they were more secure about their continued relationship with the parent (Jewett, 1982; Neely, 1984; Noble, 1983; Rosen, 1977; Teleki,

Powell, and Dodder, 1982; Wallerstein, 1984b; and Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

For many of the children involved in the Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) study, one major complaint was the way one parent would "bad mouth" the other. These complaints were supported when parent interviews found approximately half of the parents extremely critical and abusive of the other parent (Wallerstein, 1984b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Some embittered parents felt a need to gain their children's alliance and support, often leaving the children anxious, depressed, and/or disgusted because the implication from the custodial parent was that the child would lose their support and love if they retained any loyalty for the non-custodial parent (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

#### Loss of Respect

A study of young adults who had spent their adolescent years in a restructured or single-parent family setting found that the majority of them perceived their mother and father less positively than those who had spent those years in an intact, traditional family setting (Fine, Moreland, and Schwevel, 1983). The mothers' decreased image could be due to economic pressures, the social stress of being single again, the enforcement of discipline, and poor parenting skills. Fathers dropped in esteem

because of continued fighting about parenting issues, poor visitation patterns, lack of enthusiasm when visiting, and losing touch with what the child thought was important (Fine, Moreland, and Schwevel, 1983).

Reinhard's results (1977) disagreed with this contention. Among the youth in the population studied, not one expressed hostility toward their mothers; in fact, there did not appear to be feelings of rejection or estrangement toward either parent.

### Acting Out

A majority of children affected by divorce were irritable and difficult to manage. This acting out by adolescents was especially annoying to parents who were preoccupied with their own emotions at the time (Kurdek and Siesky, 1979; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

### Sense of Blame

It was somewhat more likely that an adolescent, rather than a younger child, blamed himself/herself for the divorce happening. Yet only eleven percent of their parents noted this occurring (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980a).

## Anger

The predominant emotion among adolescents was anger. They lost someone they had loved and trusted and often felt like their parents were being selfish and insensitive when the teen's needs and desires seemed paramount to him or her. While Jewett (1982) found that adolescents often become violently angry, Wallerstein's and Kelly's (1980) research disagreed and found very few who became physically violent. It was not unusual for an adolescent to displace and/or internalize his/her anger because of fear of alienating the custodial parent, or of getting into additional trouble during a tense situation (Jewett, 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Peers and school personnel were likely to notice this increased hostility (Jewett, 1982).

Five years after the divorce, those adolescents in trouble psychologically were mostly either depressed or angry (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). The portion of adolescents in this study who were significantly angry was 23 percent and these same children were often failing school and exhibiting acting out behavior. While anger was directed at both parents, it was most frequently targeted at fathers. For boys who had reached late adolescence at the five year point of the Wallerstein and Kelly study, this anger was intense, continuous, and the dominating factor in the father-son relationship. "The angriest were those who had experienced severe economic deprivation as a result of

the father's failure to provide child support that was well within his means."(Wallerstein, 1984a, p. 456).

### Time and Changes

Time was an important part of the adolescents' ability to cope and adjust emotionally to the divorce situation. The intense stress of the acute phase was mostly short lived (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Eighteen months after the separation, the following changes were found among Wallerstein and Kelly's sample of 131 children: twenty percent were acutely anxious, down from fifty plus percent; fifteen percent still felt "overwhelmed" by the divorce, down from fifty percent. Fewer were also feeling deprived, unhappy, or lonely.

Yet, while the numbers decreased, these were still substantial minorities. The follow-up found that a considerable number exhibited manipulative behavior with their peers and others, a fourth of the sample was depressed, and only ten percent found their new family arrangements to their liking (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

After five years of separation, the sample population for Wallerstein's and Kelly's (1980) study exhibited the following emotional distribution: 34 percent of the children were doing well with good self-esteem and the ability to cope at school and home; 29 percent still felt sad about the divorce at times but

not to the extent it was a limitation or detriment; and 37 percent were moderately to severely depressed with their development hindered to some degree. One major characteristic of this latter group was the feeling of intense loneliness. Also at this time, 56 percent saw no or little improvement between their family situation now and the one they had prior to the divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

The ten year follow-up showed some encouraging signs. Wallerstein (1984a) reached 31 of the 34 preschool aged youngsters from the original study for her ten year follow-up. These children were now between the ages of 12 and 17. The adolescent who experienced divorce while quite young probably will be less burdened than one who experiences divorce as an adolescent (Wallerstein, 1984a). They had fewer unhappy memories of conflict and suffering. They "have emerged less consciously troubled than their older siblings." (Wallerstein, 1984a, p. 458).

Other studies had surprisingly similar results. The Rosen (1977) study of 92 children of divorce found 24 percent said they benefitted from the divorce, 43 percent did not feel in any way negatively affected, 11 percent said they had been affected and then rebounded, and 32 percent felt they had been negatively affected. From Kurdek and Siesky's (1980a) research involving 132 children ages 5 to 19, 54.3 percent of the sample agreed with the statement: "my parent's divorce no longer bothers me in any

way." (p. 367). From the same study, 19.2 percent of the 10-14 year olds responded "there aren't any" when asked "What are some of the good things about your Mom and Dad not living together?" (p. 353).

### Closure

Adolescents had a great deal of influence on themselves and their outcomes (Kurdek and Siekey, 1980b; Neely, 1984; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). These young people thought about the experiences and drew conclusions based on them. They wanted to avoid the mistakes their parents had made, especially in regard to lovers and marriage partners (Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White, 1984; Kurdek and Siesky, 1980b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Based on the extensive longitudinal study by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) good readjustment for the child depended on the following: if the divorce action was rational and purposeful, the friction between parents was alleviated, the adolescent understood the procedure was intended to solve a significant problem, the action made one or both parents happier, the non-custodial parent made positive contributions to the parenting process, and a stable, loving relationship with both parents based on regular, dependable visitation schedules was established. Yet, "even successful resolution leaves some anger,

sadness, and anxiety that will remain forever." (Wallerstein, 1983b, p. 242).

The information the review of literature provided was thought provoking and informative. It showed the divorce experience to be traumatic and highly stressful, it does not inevitably lead to emotional disturbances in adolescents (Rosen, 1977; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). It also showed the short and long term effects could be devastating to some children of divorce (Wallerstein, 1984b). The most significant point was that in some way and at some time, an adolescent from a divorced home was highly likely to be adversely affected by the situation (Wallerstein, 1984a,b; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Considering the frequency of divorce and the large number of children affected, this research was vital in understanding some of the responses exhibited by these youth. A knowledge of this research would be of benefit to all those who work with these adolescents, including the school counselor. More research should, and no doubt will be done, and these studies need to continue to be published so people in the helping professions may attempt to assist children of divorce to cope with their situation.

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