

Center for Marriage and Families

Research Brief No. 12, July 2008

Divorce, Dads, and the Well-Being of Children *Answering Common Research Questions*

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Divorce is a powerful force in contemporary American family life. Current estimates suggest that between 43 and 50 percent of first-time marriages will end in divorce. Consequently, more than one million U.S. children experience parental divorce each year. The growing number of divorces has profound implications for children, mothers, fathers, and society. The consequences of these family changes for children and society are hotly debated. To bring clarity to this debate, this brief reviews current research about divorce and its consequences for children.

Is Parental Divorce a Problem for Children, Teens, and Young Adults?

Numerous studies have found that divorce is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children and adolescents. Those whose parents divorce have higher rates of academic difficulties, such as getting lower grades, failing a grade, and dropping out of high school, and greater externalizing behaviors, such as opposing authority figures, getting into fights, stealing, and using and abusing alcohol and drugs. Children and adolescents who experience the divorce of their parents have higher rates of depressed moods, less ability to make friends and interact appropriately with others, and lower self-esteem.¹

Parental divorce is also associated with negative outcomes and earlier life transitions as the children enter young adulthood and beyond. Compared to those with continuously married parents, offspring of divorce are more likely to experience poverty, educational failure, unhappiness, emotional problems, risky sexual activity, nonmarital childbirth, earlier marriage, cohabitation, marital discord, and divorce. Young people from divorced families are one-and-a-half to two times more likely to divorce at some point in their own lives.

How Strong Is the Link between Parental Divorce and Children’s Problems?

The strength of the association between parental divorce and their offspring’s behavior and feelings is one of the most debated questions in this area. Scholarly reviews and meta-analyses, which pool results from numerous studies, have typically found that divorce is associated with a small to medium effect relative to other risk factors, meaning that parental divorce plays an important role in influencing child well-being, but parental separation is not the only factor or even the most important factor that influences the adjustment of children and young adults.

As just one example, numerous studies have found that approximately 10 to 12 percent of children from intact homes receive some type of mental health treatment, whereas roughly 25 percent of offspring from divorced households receive such treatment. Therefore, parental divorce is

associated with a roughly twofold increase in the likelihood of seeking counseling. At the same time, the separation of one's parents does not mean that one will *certainly* go see a mental health specialist (roughly 75 percent of children do not).

More recent research is beginning to unveil more subtle effects of divorce. Most studies of parental divorce have focused on very serious problems among children, such as dropping out of school, getting into fights, or experiencing their own divorce. Recent research is finding that parental divorce is also associated with lower-level difficulties, characterized by one research team as "sub-clinical distress." That is, even if children are not diagnosed with serious disorders they may nevertheless have painful and perhaps interfering feelings related to the divorce. Across two such studies, adults from divorced families were (1) twice as likely to report always feeling like an adult when they were growing up; (2) three times as likely to question whether their father loved them; (3) six times as likely to report feeling like they didn't have a home; and (4) seven times as likely to indicate feeling alone as a child, just to name a few examples.²

Do the Problems Lessen Over One's Lifetime?

Initial research has suggested that parental divorce is both preceded and followed by periods of chaos that can include the separation from one parent, relocation to a new home, disruption of normal routines, and more. These transitions typically subside within a couple of years after the divorce.³ Two meta-analyses, however, have suggested that problems associated with parental divorce seen during adolescence and young adulthood are *larger* than the effects seen during childhood. A long-term study by Andrew Cherlin and his colleagues found that emotional problems associated with parental divorce that were experienced during childhood actually increased as young people reached young and middle adulthood.⁴ Therefore, social research suggests that the implications of parental divorce may actually increase over time.

Have the Problems Decreased as Divorce Has Become More Socially Accepted?

A meta-analysis of all divorce studies from 1960 to 2000 indicated that the differences in outcomes for children from intact and divorced families decreased from 1960 to 1980 but have actually increased since the 1980s.⁵ These negative outcomes, which have increased even as divorce has become much more commonplace, include academic difficulties, behavioral problems, psychological problems, and lower self-esteem among the children of divorce.

What Is a Cause and What Is an Effect?

There are two main and competing explanations for the increase in problems seen among children of divorce. The *causal* or divorce-stress-adjustment hypothesis, suggests that divorce itself harms children and causes their subsequent problems. The *selection* hypothesis emphasizes that divorced parents are different from those who do not divorce and that these differences lead both to divorce and to later adjustment problems in the children.

Research on divorce has revealed a variety of possible explanations for the association between parental divorce and difficulties experienced by the offspring. One of the most consistent explanations is parenting practices. After a divorce, parents are more likely to exhibit more punitive discipline, are less consistent in enforcing rules, monitor children less, and engage in more negative conflict with their children compared to married parents. Mothers and fathers are also less likely to be actively involved in their children's lives after a divorce.

Conflict between parents after divorce is also associated with more behavior problems in the children. Marital conflict has been found to influence child adjustment through multiple pathways. Sadly, divorce typically does not end acrimonious relationships between parents. Lack of cooperation and conflict between parents after the divorce, especially overt conflict to which the children are exposed, predicts more behavior problems and adjustment difficulties in the children's lives.

Numerous large-scale studies have also indicated that the economic pressures children experience after divorce, usually in mother-headed households, account for upwards of 50 percent of the association between divorce and childhood offspring problems. The economic pressure influences the quality of parenting and increases the number of stressful life events for children.

Research also indicates that fathers are particularly likely to become distant after a divorce. Although earlier studies suggested that frequency of contact with noncustodial fathers did not measurably help children, a recent meta-analysis illustrated that authoritative parenting (that is, parenting marked by warmth and discipline) by noncustodial fathers is linked with greater academic competence and fewer behavioral and emotional problems for children.⁶ The literature, therefore, has generally shown that the quality of the contact between noncustodial fathers and their children is more important than the number of visits or amount of time together. A recent study also suggested that the presence of fathers who exhibit high levels of antisocial behavior after divorce may actually be harmful for children.⁷ Further research is therefore needed to examine whether the benefits of father involvement after divorce depend on the particular background or characteristics of the father.

Some of the differences in well-being between children from intact and divorced families could be due to reasons that cause both divorce *and* negative outcomes for children. A number of studies have demonstrated that many of the psychological problems found among children after divorce were actually present before the parents' marital separation. Poverty, marital conflict, psychological problems in the parents, and stressful life events might both increase the likelihood of divorce and adjustment problems in children. Even more distant factors may likewise account for the adjustment problems in the offspring of divorced parents. Researchers have found that maternal history of delinquency during adolescence predicted her later marital status and much of the association between parental divorce and child behavior problems.

Or genetic factors—such as those that influence personality traits—might lead both to divorce and to behavioral problems in the children of divorce. My recent research, which explored possible genetic selection factors, suggested that higher rates of depression in adult offspring of divorced parents, compared to adults from intact families, was due to genetic risk found in both generations and not due to the divorce. The same study, however, suggested that higher rates of alcohol abuse and behavior problems in adults from divorced families *are* specifically associated with the separation of one's parents.⁸

Why Do Some Children Fare Better Than Others?

After parental divorce, the well-being of some children might improve while others show no noticeable changes and still others have extreme problems. Parental conflict levels before and after the divorce, the number of family structure transitions, and children's personality characteristics explain some of the differences in the response to parental divorce.

A number of important studies have found that the level of marital conflict preceding the divorce greatly influences how children function following the divorce. Children from families with high levels of marital conflict pre-divorce do significantly better after the divorce than children from families who were experiencing low levels of conflict before a divorce. When parents divorce after minimal levels of conflict, their children actually

have more emotional and behavioral problems. Although researchers are not sure exactly why this is the case, they have suggested that divorce might be better for a child if it removes him or her from high levels of conflict, especially physical or emotional abuse. On the other hand, parental divorce may come as a shock to children from families in which there was little overt conflict before the separation. Since a majority of divorces now occur in families with little overt conflict before the divorce, many children are being exposed to the type of divorce that is most detrimental.

After a divorce, parental conflict has the opposite implication for children. When divorced parents continue fighting, engage in ongoing legal battles over the children, and involve their children in altercations, the children more often show markedly poorer adjustment and increased social and emotional problems.

Divorce is not a single event. Rather, divorce is a process that typically leads to further changes in family structure for children. Most parents live with another partner or remarry after a divorce. The presence of a stepparent typically brings new stressors for the children. And because remarriages are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages, many offspring are also exposed to further family instability. The more family structure transitions to which a child is exposed, the more likely the child is to suffer from social or emotional problems.

Researchers have also noted that children's individual characteristics can influence the types and degree of problems they experience. Children with greater intellectual abilities, better coping skills, fewer mental health problems, adaptable personalities, and greater capacity to seek out social support tend to have fewer difficulties after their parents' divorce.

What Can We Conclude about the Effects of Parental Divorce?

Parental divorce is associated with an increased risk of adjustment, emotional, behavioral, academic, and relationship problems in children and young adults. Research shows some of these difficulties can be specifically attributed to divorce and its subsequent problems. But a number of studies have suggested that factors present before divorce might account for some of the difficulties in the offspring. However, in a careful summary of the literature on cause and effect, Paul Amato, one of the foremost researchers in this field, concluded that the weight of the literature shows that divorce *itself* causes social, emotional, and academic problems for children.⁹

What Might Help Children?

Policymakers, scholars, and professionals in the United States are currently engaged in a debate about the importance of marriage and the consequences of divorce. Many point to the "small" effects found in studies of divorce and the fact that an overwhelming majority of people from divorced families do not have significant or diagnosable problems. The scholars conclude that divorce should not be a major focus of attention, especially relative to other issues that children in our society face. Other professionals have pointed out that small effects when multiplied by the millions of people who experience parental divorce constitute a very serious social problem. Although not all children of divorce suffer serious problems, studies show that divorce typically doubles the risk for such problems. Divorce is also associated with emotional distress for many children and has large financial costs for society. Recent research showing that the effects of divorce increase across one's lifetime and that the problems have increased over the past two decades further suggests that addressing the implications of divorce is a critical social challenge.

Debates about how to improve marriage and family life tend to shift between proposed policies that focus on cultural and legal policies to strengthen marriage (that is, solely targeting *family structure*) and initiatives that focus on economic, social, and psychological policies to improve the emotional lives of all families (that is, solely concentrating on socioeconomic factors and family process, such as family conflict and parent-child relationships). This dichotomy, however, fails to recognize that family structure, family processes, and socioeconomic factors interact with one other. For example, family structure influences social and familial processes; socioeconomic factors, such as poverty, increase the likelihood of divorce; and the consequences of parental separation depend on the levels of marital conflict.

With respect to the role of fathers, interventions encouraging an active role for fathers after a divorce, including (but not limited to) ongoing child support and positive relationships with the children, could help many children. However, initiatives aimed at strengthening the role of fathers after a divorce that do not also address the related factors influencing father involvement risk being ineffectual or, even, detrimental. These contextual and socioeconomic factors include employment; antisocial behavior and mental health issues; interpersonal issues, such as ongoing conflict with the mother of the children; and societal influences, such as prevailing attitudes that consider a divorced father more of a visitor than a parent.

Generally, initiatives aimed solely at addressing either family structure or social/family processes fail to appreciate that healthy families are more likely to flourish in environments in which marriage is strong *and* in which families have access to the material, social, and psychological resources they need to thrive. Accordingly, legal, mental health, and school initiatives, as well as public policy reforms, should adopt a comprehensive approach toward reducing the risks in children's lives, including parental divorce.

Endnotes

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Center for Marriage and Families
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This research brief was commissioned by National Fatherhood Initiative and supported by Grant No. 2006-DD-BX-K003 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not represent the official position or policies of the United States Department of Justice.

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