



Long-term Effects of Divorce on Children

Divorce rates rose a dramatic 79 percent in the United States between 1970 and 1977. Although these high rates have since declined, a high proportion of marriages still end in divorce. In the 1970s, children were considered to be better off living with one parent than to live with both parents amidst conflict, abuse, or both. Indeed, there is considerable evidence from numerous research studies that indicate a conflict-ridden marriage is not in the best interest of the children. Sometimes, divorce is the best course of action. However, even under the best of all circumstances, few would argue that children are not affected by divorce.

The greatest focus of divorce's effect on children has been on the weeks, months, and the first few years following the divorce. But what about the long-term effects of divorce? For example, those preschool children who experienced the divorce of their parents in the 1970s and early 1980s have now reached young adulthood. What has been their life experience over the last 20 to 25 years, and how did the divorce impact those experiences? This publication summarizes the findings of several recent studies related to this question.

The Reality of Divorce

Regardless of personal values, community standards, or religious teachings, divorce is a fact of life, as shown by these facts:

- 2 of 5 children will experience the divorce of their parents before they reach age 18.
- About 25 percent of all children will spend some time in a step-family.
- A couple's marriage lasts about 7.2 years prior to divorcing.
- Divorce rate leveled in the 1980's and

is now about 11 percent lower than in 1979.

- There are about 1,250,000 divorces per year in the United States.
- Every year, over 1 million children under age 18 are involved in a divorce.

The Phases of Divorce

Divorce is much more complex than it appears on the surface. Ending a marriage relationship is not a one-time event that occurs in a courthouse; it is a process. Usually, a series of events and behaviors on the part of one or both spouses erodes the positive feelings toward one or the other or both. Over a period of time, one or both of the marital partners becomes convinced that the relationship is intolerable, or at least is not working.

The divorcing couple, as well as the entire family, experiences a variety of abrupt changes which impact nearly every aspect of their lives. Divorce is most often an extremely painful series of events. According to one expert, divorce occurs in six phases:

The *emotional divorce* centers around the problem of the deteriorating marriage. This phase usually takes place over a period of time, which varies from couple to couple. The positive feelings of love and affection are displaced by increasing feelings of anger, frustration, hurt, resentment, dislike, or hatred, and the perception that the positive feelings are gone forever. The attributes that attracted the couple to each other become less important in the presence of these negative feelings.

The *legal divorce* is based on grounds for the divorce. Even if "no-fault" divorce laws exist, one or both divorcing spouses usually states reasons why the other is at fault. The law usually recognizes incompatibility as

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adequate reason for divorce. This phase of the divorce process involves the legal documentation that the couple is no longer married to each other.

The *economic divorce* deals with money and property. For many divorcing couples, this is the most volatile phase of divorce. Emotions often run high when it comes to dividing material goods accumulated during the marriage. If the couple cannot negotiate a fair property and asset settlement, the court will mandate what it considers a fair distribution to each of the divorcing persons.

The *co-parental divorce* deals with custody, single-parent homes, and visitation. This is also a very emotional part of the divorcing process. Traditionally, mothers were automatically given custody of their children unless they were proven to be unfit. Today, most custody decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, and the child or children are placed with the parent deemed capable of providing the overall best environment for them. It is common for the non-custodial parent to pay monetary child support payments to the custodial parent. Sometimes, the court awards joint custody in which both parents have more or less equal responsibility in the raising of their children. In such cases, the children may spend equal amounts of time living with each of the two parents.

The *community divorce* involves the changes of friends and community that every divorcing person experiences. Married couples tend to socialize with other married couples. After divorce these two individuals no longer fit comfortably in the couples' environment. For economic reasons, one or both of the divorcing persons may have to move to a less expensive part of town or to a smaller house or apartment.

The *psychic divorce* manifests the problem of regaining individual autonomy. This simply means that each of the two divorcing persons has to adjust to living alone. Each loses the part of his or her identity that was established as being a part of a married couple. Daily decisions and activities are now carried out as an individual, rather than as an individual who is part of a couple relationship.

Some of these phases may take several years to complete, and some people never finish certain phases. The children have to process through each stage right along with their parents.

Children at Risk

A child's perception of divorce will be largely determined by age and gender, as well as the child's history of stress and coping. When stressful events outweigh available protective factors, even the most resilient child can develop problems. A growing body of information suggests that certain factors may make some children more at risk for maladjustment than other children. Some are unalterable and some existed before

divorce. Others exert considerable pressure on children at the time of separation or divorce, and still others influence the children following divorce.

Prominent Risk Factors:

Gender—Boys are more at risk than girls, primarily because mothers are awarded custody more often than fathers. It is difficult because the same-gender parent, the father, is no longer living in the home. The absence of the male role-model makes it more difficult for boys to adjust to divorce.

Age—Younger children are at risk short-term due to confusion surrounding the divorce and the loss of the parent no longer living in the home. Younger children are less able to make sense of all the changes that are occurring. Preadolescent and adolescent children are more at risk over the long-term, because in the short-term their close alignment with their peers represses their feelings regarding their parents' divorce.

Socioeconomic status—Standard of living often changes dramatically following divorce. Less money can mean some of the children's needs may not be met.

The degree to which the child was drawn into marital conflict. The more a child is part of the parental conflict, the more confusion, frustration, anger, and loyalty conflicts he or she is likely to experience.

Relationship with each parent before the divorce. If pre-divorce relationships with parents were positive and nurturing, the risk for post-divorce problems is reduced. If problems with parent-child relationships existed before the divorce, those problems will likely become worse following the divorce.

Parents' inability to separate their roles as parent and spouse. Divorcing spouses who cannot peaceably make decisions about their children's welfare and negotiate issues related to the children, put those children at increased risk for problems.

Continual open conflict between spouses. The greater the conflict between the parents, the greater the risk for children to experience emotional turmoil.

The perceived loss of the non-custodial parent. Unless extra care is taken by both parents to nurture the relationship between the non-custodial parent and the child, a child may feel loss and even abandonment.

Short-term Effects of Divorce on Children

Almost everyone agrees that divorce affects all the children in the family at some time and to some degree. Some effects of divorce emerge rapidly following separation and some of these increase over the first years following divorce and then decline; still other may emerge later.

Various factors lead to negative effects on children. For example, children are almost inevitably burdened by greater responsibilities and feel less cared for. It is possible that when a marriage ends, especially if it ends in angry conflict, parents *can* experience a decline in their deep feelings for their children and the extent to which they voluntarily undertake responsibilities for the children.

Another factor is that the non-custodial parent, usually the father, tends to progressively disengage from his children over the years following a divorce, both geographically and emotionally. A nurturing father-child relationship is crucial for children's long-term development. Without such a relationship, children may experience emotional frustration and confusion.

The gender of the custodial parent may play a part in determining the impact of divorce on children. There is some evidence that children tend to show more problems if they are in the custody of a parent of the opposite sex than a parent of the same sex.

And, as indicated earlier, inter-parental conflict has powerful direct effects on children's functioning. A rule of thumb is the greater the conflict between divorcing parents, the greater the number of problems the children will experience.

Specific short-term effects may include the following:

anger
sadness
depression
opposition
impulsivity
aggression
non-compliance
perceived parental loss
interpersonal conflict
economic hardship
life stress
less parental supervision
less consistent discipline
more negative sanctions
lower academic achievement
acting out
lower self-concept
social adjustment difficulty
increased dependency

Many of these short-term effects can adversely affect long-term development in that they build up over time. The intensity and longevity of each problem is determined by these characteristics related to positive post-divorce adjustment:

- Parental ability to resolve post-divorce conflict and anger.
- Ability of the custodial parent to successfully resume the parenting role.
- Ability of the non-custodial parent to maintain a mutually satisfying relationship with the child or children.
- Personality characteristics of the child and the ability to develop coping skills.
- Ability of the child to find and use support systems.
- Diminished depressive or angry responses by the child.
- The age and sex of the child.

Long-term Effects of Divorce

Findings from several research studies indicate that certain effects of divorce are quite persistent even when a wide range of pre-divorce conditions is considered. Consider some of the summary statements from a few of these studies:

“Research suggests that problematic parent-child relations associated with divorce persist throughout the life course.”
(Amato and Booth, 1996).

“One cannot predict long-term effects of divorce on children from how they react at the outset.” (Wallerstein, 1989).

“...the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult attainment and quality of life may prove to be more serious than the short-term emotional and social problems in children.” (Amato & Keith, 1991)

“...children from disrupted families are significantly more likely to express discontent with their lives as measured by an index of life satisfaction.” (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994).

Children can sometimes experience what might be called the “sleeper effect”. They recover rather quickly following the divorce, but because of denied feelings at a subconscious level, feelings about the divorce may emerge at some point later in life. It is a delayed

reaction. Professional counselors have shown that all kinds of traumatic experiences of childhood can be repressed in the subconscious. For example, sexual abuse or physical abuse might be “forgotten” for a number of years and emerge at some later point in adulthood. The same can be true of the trauma caused by divorce.

At a 5-year follow-up, one study of divorced children (Wallerstein, 1985) showed:

1. Persistence of anger at the parent who had initiated the divorce.
2. Intensity of longing for the absent or erratically visiting parent.
3. Persistence of youngster’s wish to reconstitute the pre-divorce family.
4. Moderate to severe clinical depression in over one-third of the original sample.

At the 10-year follow-up with those same children of divorce (Wallerstein, 1985), the following information was gathered about the participants:

1. A dominant feeling of sorrow about their parents’ divorce still existed.
2. Quotes from the young adults themselves:

“My life would have been happier if my parents hadn’t divorced.”

“Divorce was better for them but not for me. I lost my family.”

“I lost the experience of growing up in a family unit.”

“I wish my mom and dad had not divorced. It would have been easier to be a regular family.”

“I was really hurt. The hardest thing was watching my family break up.”

“It was only when I was a student in an AFS family abroad that I got to see parents who quarrel and [positively] resolve the argument.”

Although most of these young adults had arrived at the understanding that the divorce had been a wise decision, many of them remained critical of both parents for having made the mistake of a misguided marriage. They were especially critical of their parents for not having rectified the mistake before the children were born.

Many of these youngsters describe themselves as having emerged stronger and more independent as a consequence of their parents’ divorce. Yet there was a bittersweet quality to their statements.

3. Physically, these participants reported poorer physical health than children from intact families.
4. Emotionally, they indicated persistent problems with the following:

- Fears of betrayal, abandonment, loss, and rejection.
- Rising anxiety in late teens and early 20s—feelings and memories about their parents’ divorce arise with new intensity as they enter adulthood.
- Life-long vulnerability to the experience of loss.
- Anger, resentment, and hostility.
- A reduction in psychological well-being.
- Depression in young adulthood.
- Low life satisfaction.

5. Socially, the children’s relationships in later life were affected as follows:

- Divorcing parents apparently set the stage for children’s poor relationships.
- Reduction in the ability to develop and maintain supportive friendships and dating relationships.
- Children of divorce are more likely themselves to divorce as adults.
- Earlier sexual intercourse.
- Delinquent behaviors.
- Daughters of divorce are more likely to:
 - Marry and have children early
 - Give birth before marriage
 - Divorce
- Fear of repeating his or her parents’ failure to maintain a loving relationship.
- Fear of commitment and intimacy.
- Less trust in future spouse.
- Reduction of inhibitions toward divorce as a solution for marital difficulties.
- Lower socioeconomic status.
- In relationship to their parents, adult children of divorce:
 - Feel less affection for parents.
 - Have less contact with them.
 - Engage in fewer inter-generational exchanges of assistance than do other adults.

- Children of divorce tend to become more conservative morally than their parents. They also adopt more traditional views of how marriage and family *ought* to be.

In the same 10-year follow-up study (Wallerstein, 1989), children who adjusted well had:

- A mother-child relationship characterized by mutual respect, consideration, and a mother who had reorganized her life and “had a life.”
- Children who had moved to live with their father had a similar relationship with their father as described in 1 above. Father had set limits on his professional development so he could have a relationship with his children.
- A positive relationship with a set of grandparents who stayed out of the parental conflict and identified and met children’s needs.
- A history of stability in the post-divorce family arrangements. Organized households with rules and clear expectations were important.
- Seen a good, healthy, and positive adult couple relationship between at least one parent and a new partner.

What Can Parents Do?

When divorce is inevitable or is the best decision for family members, what can parents do to help minimize the negative effects of the disrupted family on their children? How can they help make the new family structure as positive as possible?

First of all, parents need to know that *not all* of the negative effects mentioned in the studies will be experienced by *all* children of divorce. And those that are present can be made less intense with education, nurturing, good communication, and lots of love.

At least two general avenues to helping children process the divorce experience are available: outside help and parental effort. An example of outside help might be an intervention program for children. An ideal prevention program would accomplish several things, including:

- Helping children to resolve divorce-related anxieties, confusion, and blame.
- Helping children to express anger in divorce-related situations.
- Helping parents agree on visitation and custody.
- Helping parents to respond appropriately to children’s divorce-related concerns.
- Helping ex-spouses develop good post-divorce parental relationships and parent-child relationships.
- Helping parents resolve issues of anger and disappointment.
- Establishing support systems of friends and relatives.

Specific things that parents can do to help themselves and their children include the following:

- Let children know that they are loved and that parents as well as children need time to do things they enjoy.
- Include the children once in awhile in a social activity that everyone can enjoy.
- Understand that children need predictability.
- Be keenly aware that children need relationships with both parents, if at all possible.
- Keep children out of the middle of parental conflicts.
- Provide children with positive adult role models.
- Let some things go or change regular routines to adjust to the demands.
- Divide the chores and let the children be responsible for taking care of their own possessions and rooms.
- Consider using a cleaning service for a half day to handle some of the chores.
- Allow the children to contribute to family problem solving.
- Look for free or inexpensive activities and entertainment.
- Make a budget and stick to it.
- Find out about assistance programs — food stamps, medicaid.
- Do not expose children to casual relationships with members of the opposite sex. If a serious relationship develops, introduce the person slowly into the children’s lives.
- Before starting a second family, remember obligations to the first family.

Summary

Research studies conducted over time, especially Wallerstein’s 10-year follow-up, suggest that some effects of divorce are long lasting. A significant number of the young adults in the follow-up study appeared burdened by vivid memories of the marital break-up, by feelings of sadness, continuing resentment at parents, and a sense of deprivation. Without judging or moralizing, the weight of the research shows that if it were an ideal world, children fare better in nurturing two-parent families than do those in single-parent and step-families.

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