

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE AND PARENTAL CONFLICT ON CHILDREN

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Abstract

Many children have experienced severe anxiety that has affected their social and emotional well-being due to parental conflict because of divorce. The purpose of this paper is to identify the effects family conflict has on children when parents are at odds with one another. These effects can significantly impair children's social-emotional development when it comes to establishing and maintaining relationships, succeeding in education, and having positive experiences in the community. This study will also highlight how parents can handle conflict in divorce in a healthy manner.

Keywords: Conflict, Custody, Divorce, Anxiety, Behaviors

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Chapter One: Introduction

Divorce orders are granted in the United States 1 in every 36 seconds (McKinley & Irvin 2012). One out of every two marriages today result in divorce and more than 85 % of those divorcing must decide who will have placement of the children. According to the Center for Disease Control, there is a decline in divorce and marriage. The divorce rate in the U.S. in 2014 and 2016 was 3.2 divorces for every 1,000 people while the marriage rate was 6.9 per 1,000 people. The Center for Disease Control (CDC 2017) used the term “crude divorce rate” to describe these ratios combined together. This rate is used to compare divorce rates over time.

There have been few longitudinal studies conducted over the past four decades. Although there are gaps in research literature, most studies reveal that children with divorced parents experience more mental and physical health problems when compared to children with married parents. Between the 1960s and the mid-1990s, the number of divorces increased. The public developed a concern about the effects of divorce on parents and their children (Amato, 2012). This concern was the catalyst for new research. Since then, however, the emerging perspective in US society has normalized divorce despite the growing number of children and adolescents emotionally involved and negatively affected by divorce (Amato, 2010). Considering what is in the best interest of children must be at the forefront in the dissolution of marriages, and family court judges must make decisions regarding the custody arrangement of the children of the marriage.

The National Center for Fathering reported in 2017 that more than 20 million children were living in homes without the physical presence of a father. There were concerns about how many children were in the custody of only their mothers in this country. There was a comment

in this report that if being “fatherless” were a disease, the US would have a national epidemic. Millions of other children might have fathers who are physically present, but emotionally absent. Forty percent of children in the US do not reside with their natural fathers. Equally as many had not seen their fathers in the past 12 months. Over half of the children had not visited their father’s residence, as 26% of fathers resided in different states than their children (National Fatherhood Initiative [NFI], 2016).

Divorce leaves permanent psychological and emotional scars on children and children’s ability to develop and maintain healthy, and positive relationships throughout their lifetime can be affected. Since children are often exposed to conflicts (verbal or physical) prior to legal proceedings of divorce begin, children suffer permanent and often irreversible psychological and emotional harm. Included in this paper will be descriptions of the impact of divorce on children, the long-term effects of divorce on establishing and maintaining healthy long-term relationships, and recommendations for reframing how marriages can be dissolved to lessen the negative impact on the lives of children.

Statement of the Problem

There are some research studies that reveal that divorce does not harm children long term, however most studies reveal that divorce can cause damage to the lives of children. This study included an analysis of the effects and it can be summarized that divorce might have a larger impact than originally understood. Divorce presents changes in the lives of children regardless of race, sex, or county of origin. Children who experienced high conflictual divorce often suffered permanent psychological and emotional harm that can affect them long-term.

Significance of the Study

The overall significance of this study is to re-awaken awareness that divorce can be devastating for children. There is estimated more than one million children who are emotionally affected due to their parents divorcing. Since divorce is common in the US, some might believe that divorce is not problematic. Divorce can cause harm to children that is irreparable. Divorce can hinder and lower the quality of one's life as well. It is recorded that psychosocial tension can lead to mental health problems (Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Jourdan, & Mannix-McNamara, 2014). It is helpful for parents and caregivers to be made aware of common challenges that children have when their parents' divorce and to know how to mitigate the negative effects of divorce for their children.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to raise awareness about how wide spread and how significant the effects of divorce can be on children and to highlight strategies to minimize the negative effects on children.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety - is a feeling of being worried, a sense of nervousness feeling uneasy and tensed about an event or situation. Anxiety is a normal reaction that people have when they are faced with problems. Some of the anxiety symptoms are dry mouth, shortness of breath, heart problems and nausea (Suszynski, 2010).

Depression - is when a person feels sad and hopeless. Depression is a medical condition that causes a person to feel unimportant and not able to live comfortably (All About Depression.com).

Divorce - A divorce is a formal ending of a marriage. It's more permanent than a separation and involves a legal process (Vocabulary.com).

Fatherless Children – Children live in a home without the physical presence of a father. The impact of fatherlessness can be seen in our homes, schools, hospitals and prisons (Father.com).

Socioeconomic status - social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. (apa.org).

Separated – A relationship status when contemplating a permanent split or working toward eventual reconciliation. "Legal separation," however, specifically refers to a court-approved separation which defines legally enforceable rights and obligations but does not permanently end the marriage. Legal separation differs from more informal separation because a court must approve and order legal separation (family.findlaw.com).

Delimitations of Research

The Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin was used to gather resource for this study between September 2017 to January 2018. The research information that was collected focused on children, adolescents, and their parents' behaviors towards each other once their marriage and or partnerships had been severed. The key words that were used were "parental conflict," "children," "child behaviors," "academics," "emotional/psychological damage," "divorce," and "trauma". The articles were limited to peer reviewed articles that were published within the last 7 years.

Method of Approach

A comprehensive search was conducted using studies that dated back to 2011 pertaining to children and the consequences of divorce. The results of these studies allowed for the selection of literature that was synthesized in chapter 2 of this report. The findings of this research were based on the information provided in the literature. Conclusions and recommendations are included in Chapter 3.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Many people are aware that divorce can be stressful to children. However, in addition to the psychological and emotional effects of divorce on children, children also experience the effects of divorce in many other ways. The effects of divorce can include behavior, academic success, social adjustment, self-concept, and physical wellbeing. Each of these aspects of wellbeing are examined here.

Psychological/Emotional Impact

“According to the United Nations convention of the ‘Rights of the Child,’ a child should grow up in a family environment filled with happiness, love, and understanding to insure a full and harmonious development of child and personality” (Brockinton et al, 2011 as cited in Vaez, Indran, Abollahi, Juhari, & Mansor, p.1, 2015). However, in homes where parental conflict is significant, this is often not the case. Psychosocial stressors present an increased risk of mental health problems in children exposed to parental conflict and divorce (Velez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2012). Children of divorced parents are at greater risk of becoming depressed when compared to children whose parents stay married (Amato, 2012). Higher levels of anxiety have been identified in this same group, according to Amato (2012). Unhappiness and fear were found to be higher in children with divorced parents when compared to children whose parents were happily married (Marakovitz, Wagmiller, Mian, Briggs-Gowan, & Carter as cited Vaez et al., 2015). Parental anxiety often carried over to children. According to Dumas, LaFreniere and Serketich, (1995) as cited in Markovitz et al. (2011), parents with anxiety disorders were found to be more controlling and conveyed less warmth than other parents. In homes where domestic violence was an issue where a parent was unable to care for and protect their children, children

might be frightened, distressed, anxious, and physically and emotionally injured (Holden 2003; Holt et al., 2008; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Levendosky et al., 2002; Margolin and Vickerman 2007; Osofsky, 2003 as cited by Fortheringham, Dunbar, & Hensey, 2013). Often psychological and emotional stressors caused children to act out behaviorally.

Behavioral Effects

It is not uncommon for children to exhibit behavior problems as a result of their parents' divorce or separation. In the United States and abroad, researchers found that there are higher rates of behavioral and conduct disorders among children of divorce (Amato, 2012). This included higher rates of risky behaviors including substance use (tobacco, marijuana, illicit drugs, and alcohol), sexual promiscuity, and criminal activity (Amato, 2012). Children who came from families with parental conflict often felt unsupported by their parents and their home environment, which then caused the children to act out (Blaustien, 1999; Harold et al., 1997; Siranli-Ozen, 2005; Smith, O'Conner, & Berthelesen, 1996, as cited in Vaez et al., 2015).

One specific cause of an increase in behavior problems might be explained using the Social Learning Theory. According to this theory, children learn behaviors from what they observe and what they experience. Children who witness aggressive behavior and verbal attacks at home can learn this behavior and imitate it in their own social environments, including at school (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2012).

Academic Performance Patterns

Academics is one of the most important areas in children's lives. Divorce can affect children's thought processes and hinder their ability to concentrate (Buehler et al., 2007; El-Sheikh, Buckalt, Mize & Acebo, 2006 as cited in Vaez, et al., 2015). It can affect children throughout their childhood, and the effects of divorce can carry into adulthood (Buchann,

Maccoby & Dornbush, 1991; Chelin et al., 1991; Millward, 1997 as cited in Benard et al., 2015) School performance has a ripple effect. Benard et al. (2015) poor academic performance at a young age can affect subsequent learning. As a result, opportunities to go to college and earn a higher salary after graduation might be reduced. Children of divorce fall behind in their grades in school and they have more difficulties concentrating.

Corras et al. (2017) conducted a study that focused on the academic success of children of both divorced and married parents in 3 age ranges. The youngest age group included children aged 8 to 11 years old. Among children of divorced parents in this age group, there were increased rates of aversion to educational institutions and to learning in general. Among 12 to 14-year-old children, Corras et al. (2017) found increased aversion to instruction, lower levels of commitment to school work, lower levels of motivation, and increased aversion to teachers. Children 15 years old and older with divorced parents also reported higher levels of aversion to instruction and teachers when compared to children of the same age with married parents. They also reported lower levels of commitment to school work and motivation, and higher levels of school dissatisfaction. Corras et al. (2017) also noted that older children of divorced parents experienced greater negative academic consequences than their younger siblings.

“School maladjustment was closely linked to a general and persistent life-long maladjustment trajectory” (Fontaine et al., 2009; Arce et al., as cited in Corras et al. 2017). Amato (2012) noted that school continuation and educational attainment, specifically, were affected negatively by parental divorce. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), there is a direct connection between levels of education and income. This is one example of how experiencing a parental divorce during one’s childhood might have a significant effect into adulthood.

Not all children were affected the same by parental divorce regarding academic performance. Corras et al. (2017) found four factors that determined how significantly school performance was affected among children of divorce. The first factor was the degree to which fathers were involved in school matters. The second factor was the quality of the parent-child relationship. The third was the level of financial stability or instability. The fourth factor was how decisions were made regarding legal custody of children. According to Corras et al. (2017), academic performance was closely related to self-concept and social wellbeing, and conversely so.

Social Adjustment into Adulthood

As noted above, income in adulthood can be affected due the divorce of parents in childhood. Another factor that can be affected in adulthood is the success rate of marriages among adults whose parents divorced. Amato (2012) reported that, "Individuals who experienced parental divorce while growing up reported more problems in their own marriages and are more likely to see their marriages end in disruption "(p.13). Other social adjustment issues experienced at higher rates among individuals whose parents divorced were increased criminal activity and increased self-esteem issues (Amato, 2012).

Physical Wellbeing

Studies have revealed that children going through a parental divorce not only experience psychological, behavioral, academic, and social adjustment effects, they also experience negative physical effects. Children whose parents were separated sometimes transferred their psychological stress into physical symptoms including gastrointestinal, genitourinary, dermatological, and neurological disorders attributed to parental separation (Corras et al., 2017; Amato, 2012). Access to health insurance, quality health care, quality living conditions, and

good nutrition can be affected by low income levels after divorce. In 2009, children living with one divorced parent were 11% more likely to live at the poverty level as opposed to children with two parents living in the home (Anderson, 2014).

Summary

Anderson (2014) summed up all these findings very well in this statement:

Nearly three decades of research evaluating the impact of family structure on the health and well-being of children demonstrates that the children living with their married, biological parents consistently have better physical, emotional, and academic well-being. Pediatricians and society should promote the family structure that has the best chance of producing healthy children. The best scientific literature to date suggests that, with the exception of parents faced with unresolvable marital violence, children fare better when parents work at maintaining the marriage. Consequently, society should make every effort to support healthy marriages and to discourage married couples from divorcing.
(p.378)

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was designed to examine the short and long-term effects of divorce on children. Additionally, the areas in which children were most likely harmed were identified. Helpful interventions are outlined from Amato (2012) are listed here:

1. Some children benefit from participating in divorce support programs. The benefits of participation in such a group include increased social support, a reduction in feelings of isolation, increased coping skills, and better adjustment to new circumstances following parental divorce.
2. Even when mandatory, parents have found divorce classes helpful. Parents who participated in such classes were less likely to return to court after divorce and experienced less conflict with their former spouses.
3. Using mediation rather than arguing through decisions worked in $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of couples trying this method to resolve their differences. Benefits to using mediation included less litigation, lower legal expenses, and increased parental satisfaction of divorce outcomes. Other benefits included increased contact of non-resident fathers with their children, increased communication between former spouses, and less conflict.

4. Another recommendation is to use an authoritative parenting style. This includes providing emotional support, being firm in expectations, and providing ongoing supervision of children.
5. Additional recommendations include not involving children in disputes about living arrangements, visitation, and child support. It is also recommended that divorced parents not introduce new romantic partners until children have adjusted to their new circumstances following a separation or divorce. It is recommended, when possible, that children remain in the same neighborhood and same school immediately after divorce to reduce the number of adjustments they need to make at that difficult time.

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