



An Overview of the Psychological Literature on the Effects of Divorce on Children

May 2004

Despite decades of psychological research, there is still considerable debate in the field concerning the effects of divorce on children. While most studies have reported at least some negative consequences of divorce for children, few, if any, have examined factors associated with children's positive adjustment. More recent research underscores our need to better understand the impact of marital conflict pre-divorce and family environment on child adjustment. Some children do well post-divorce and others do not. However, not enough is known to disentangle the impact of contextual factors that often accompany divorce (e.g., financial pressures and marital conflict) from the impact of the divorce itself.

The Impact of Divorce vs. Marital Conflict

Divorce: Recent research utilizing more sophisticated methodology than previous studies shows that while children of divorced parents overall have more adjustment problems than children of intact families, the differences between these two groups is smaller and less pronounced than previously believed. In fact, the majority of children of divorce fall within the normal range of adjustment on standardized measures. While it is often difficult to isolate the myriad of factors that impact children of divorce, research has established that they are at a higher risk for adjustment problems than children from intact families. For example, divorced children experience less financial security, lower academic achievement, more alcohol and cigarette use, and lower rates of employment as young adults. Although research has shown that there are long-term negative consequences of divorce, these consequences are more closely linked to educational attainment, rather than divorce per se. Moreover, the long-term consequence for most children of divorce is resiliency rather than dysfunction. Factors such as the age of the child, time since the divorce, parenting style, financial security, and type and extent of parental conflict all contribute to post-divorce adjustment. McLanahan (1999) estimates that economic problems faced by divorced households contribute to half of the adjustment problems seen in children of divorce. Again, this underscores the need to better understand contextual factors that contribute to children's post-divorce adjustment.

The manner in which parents resolve conflict has been determined to affect child adjustment. Chronic, unresolved conflict is associated with greater emotional insecurity in children. Fear, distress, and other symptoms in children are diminished when parents resolve their conflicts and when they use compromise and negotiation methods rather than verbal attacks. The beneficial effects of these more resolution-oriented behaviors have been reported whether or not they are directly observed by the child.

Violence is more likely to occur in high-conflict marriages, has an independent effect of children's adjustment, and is significantly more potent in affecting adjustment than is marital conflict. Clinical research with preschool children traumatized by the earlier battering of their mothers demonstrates pervasive and differentiated negative effects on their development. Repeated exposure to violence is predictive of posttraumatic stress disorder in children, particularly when combined with other risk factors of child abuse, poverty, and the mental illness of one or both parents. Compounding the effects of marital violence is the fact that there are higher rates of both child abuse and sibling violence in violent as compared with nonviolent high-conflict marriages. In one study, the co-occurrence rate of abuse of children in samples of battered women was 40%. This is similar to other estimates that between 40% and 60% of children in all marriages with violence are targets of violence from mother, father, or both. Marital violence, independent of violent high marital conflict and parental substance abuse, has been related to young adults low life satisfaction, poor self-esteem, less closeness to mother, more psychological distress, and more violence in their own relationships.

Marital Conflict: Research indicates that marital conflict rather than divorce or post-divorce conflict is a more important predictor of child adjustment. Although the frequency and severity of marital conflict play a central role in child adjustment, marital conflict nonetheless has been demonstrated repeatedly to have negative effects on children. For example, children in high-conflict marriages are more likely to experience behavioral and academic problems including, but not limited to, disobedience, aggression, delinquency, poor self-esteem, antisocial behaviors, and depression. Young adults who experienced a high level of marital conflict during childhood, are more likely to experience depression and psychological disorders than young adults from low-conflict families. Moreover, parents in high-conflict marriages are less warm towards their children, more rejecting, more harsh in their discipline, withdraw more from their parenting

role (especially fathers), and are more depressed. Buffers that can protect children in high conflict marriages include a good relationship with one parent or caregiver, sibling and peer support, and parental warmth.

Healthy Post-Divorce Adjustment: Key factors that contribute to healthy adjustment post-divorce include appropriate parenting, access to the non-residential parent, custody arrangements, and low parental conflict. Appropriate parenting includes providing emotional support, monitoring children's activities, disciplining authoritatively, and maintaining age-appropriate expectations. Fortunately, visitation of fathers post-divorce has increased over the past two decades. Although the research generally finds that there is no relationship between frequency of father contact and child adjustment post-divorce, the quality of visits does impact child well-being. For example, children of divorced families with fathers who assist with homework, provide emotional support, and listen to their children's problems have more positive academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems. Joint legal custody (often resulting in shared decision making) is often associated with more father-child visits, regular child support payments, and more satisfied and better adjusted children. As is the case pre-divorce, children in low-conflict post-divorce families have fewer emotional and behavioral problems. Finally, the research demonstrates that the best predictor of child adjustment following divorce is the parents' psychological health and the quality of the parent-child relationship.

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