

## Divorce Effects on Children

An Exploration of the Ramifications of Divorce on Children and Adolescents

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### Initial Reactions of Children to Divorce [3]

- Divorce is an intensely stressful experience for all children, regardless of age or developmental level; many children are inadequately prepared for the impending divorce by their parents. A study in 1980 found that less than 10% of children had support from adults other than relatives during the acute phase of the divorce.
- The pain experienced by children at the beginning of a divorce is composed of: a sense of vulnerability as the family disintegrates, a grief reaction to the loss of the intact family (many children do not realize their parents' marriage is troubled), loss of the non-custodial parent, a feeling of intense anger as the disruption of the family, and strong feelings of powerlessness.
- Unlike bereavement or other stressful events, it is almost unique to divorcing families that as children experience the onset of this life change, usual and customary support systems tend to dissolve, though the ignorance or unwillingness of adults to actively seek out this support for children.

### Developmental Considerations in the Response of Children [3]

- A major focus of the scholarly literature on divorce is the grouping of common reactions of children by age groups.
- **Preschool (ages 3-5):** These children are likely to exhibit a regression of the most recent developmental milestone achieved. Additionally, sleep disturbances and an exacerbated fear of separation from the custodial parent are common. There is usually a great deal of yearning for the non-custodial parent.
- **Early latency (ages 6½-8):** These children will often openly grieve for the departed parent. There is a noted preoccupation with fantasies that distinguishes the reactions of this age group.



Children have replacement fantasies, or fantasies that their parents will happily reunite in the not-so-distant future. Children in this developmental stage have an especially difficult time with the concept of the permanence of the divorce.

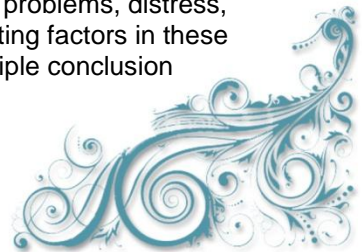
- Late latency (ages 8-11): Anger and a feeling of powerlessness are the predominate emotional response in this age group. Like the other developmental stages, these children experience a grief reaction to the loss of their previously intact family. There is a greater tendency to label a 'good' parent and a 'bad' parent and these children are very susceptible to attempting to take care of a parent at the expense of their own needs.
- Adolescence (ages 12-18): Adolescents are prone to responding to their parent's divorce with acute depression, suicidal ideation, and sometimes violent acting out episodes. These children tend to focus on the moral issues surrounding divorce and will often judge their parents' decisions and actions. Many adolescents become anxious and fearful about their own future love and marital relationships. However, this age group has the capability to perceive integrity in the post-divorce relationship of their parents and to show compassion for their parents without neglecting their own needs.

## Effects of Divorce on the Parent-Child Relationship

- Diminished parenting: In the wake of a divorce, most custodial mothers exhibit varying degrees of disorganization, anger, decreased expectations for appropriate social behavior of their children, and a reduction of the ability of parents to separate the child's needs and actions from those of the adult. While diminished parenting is usually an expected short-term consequence of divorce; there is a serious potential for these changes to become chronic if a custodial parent does not reconstitute the relationship with the child or becomes involved in a new relationship which overwhelms the relationship with the child. [4]
- The overburdened child phenomena: approximately 15% of children interviewed at the 10 year follow-up point in a 15 year study showed significant effects from taking on the role of holding a custodial parent together psychologically. In a change that goes deeper than a simple reversal of the care-taker role, the child oftentimes becomes responsible for staving off depression and other threats to parent's psychological functioning, at the cost of their own needs. [3]

## The Impact of Paternal Involvement on Post-Divorce Children [2]

- When the divorce rate began to rise exponentially in the 1970s, it was thought that absence of paternal contact was a critical factor in the poor adaptation of some children to divorce. Several studies, including the National Survey of Children, have shown that paternal participation has a negligible effect, if any, on the well being of children (academics, behavioral problems, distress, and delinquency). However, it is important to note that there are several limiting factors in these studies (low overall level of paternal contact with children) and that the principle conclusion





derived should be that increased paternal contact does not correlate to increases in positive outcomes.

## Long-term Outcomes

- 10 and 15 year longitudinal studies show that divorce is not to be considered as an acute stress/crisis in the lives of children but rather, it is an event that can have long term consequences on psychosocial functional of children, adolescents, and young adults. The long-term outcomes of well-adjusted or poorly adjusted children draw heavily on the child's post-divorce quality of life and on the post-divorce or remarried parent-child relationships.
- The most frequent delayed onset negative consequences center around anxieties and fear of the child that s/he will repeat the failed marital or love relationship that the child observed during the divorce. [4]
- Wallerstein's 'sleeper effect' is a piquant example of the far-reaching effects of one such long-term consequence. Up to 66% of the women between 19-23 that were interviewed during 10 years post-divorce had a resurgence of anxiety, fear, guilt, and anger that they had suppressed for many years. These feelings tended to resurface when the adolescent and young adult women were attempting to make major life decisions (such as marriage). [3]

## Conclusions

- Divorce and its ensuing ramifications can have a significant and life-altering impact on the well being and subsequent development of children and adolescents.
- The consequences of divorce impact almost all aspects of a child's life, including the parent-child relationship, emotions and behavior, psychological development, and coping skills.
- There is a significant need for child mental health professionals, along with other child specialists, to be cognizant of the broad spectrum of possible fall-out from a divorce and then to provide sufficient support for children of divorced parents in all the necessary psychosocial aspects of the child's life.

## References

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