



## **Parental Divorce During Childhood: Interparental Conflict, Socioeconomics, and Shared Custody**

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### ***Introduction***

The formation and dissolution of relationships demand a great deal of our attention, whether it is through our personal lives, the media, or entertainment. Marriage is a universal concept that transcends the wedding day, and reflects the love created between two people that exists along a continuum. The wedding day is a crescendo of sorts along the relational continuum and symbolizes the uniting of masculine and feminine energies. Then, the third is created, traditionally children but not always, and is reflected visually in the Vesica Piscis. Divorce signifies a deep depression made into the relational continuum—it is not a day-long event, or even a yearlong one—and the relationship continues in its new structural form. It is not, according to Patrizia Albanese, “the cause of family problems, but rather the product of them” (2020, p. 189).

Divorce is often portrayed as messy, leaving children in the wake to figure things out on their own. Often forced to grow up too soon, children of divorce hold great potential for becoming little messengers for the two adults who brought them into the world, and their carriers of undue emotional baggage (Albanese, 2020). However, as an adult child of divorce myself, one of my clearest memories upon hearing of my own parent’s separation was not of surprise and disappointment, but relief. As such, this paper seeks to explore the extent to which parental divorce effects children aged fourteen years and younger, both the negative ways many of us are well versed in as well as the unexpected positive outcomes divorce can have on both children and their parents. It is my hypothesis that the positive and negative effects of divorce on children are reliant upon factors that land outside the dichotomy of parental marriage and parental divorce: Factors such as familial structural change, gender and age difference of children, the addition of non-biological family members, external support from community or chosen-family, socioeconomic factors, and the quality of the post-divorce relationship of the parents. I suspect that it is this latter point which holds the most weight in determining the short-term and long-term effects, both positive and negative, on children of divorce.

### ***Literature Review***

*Parental Conflict*

As stated earlier, it is not a wedding which makes a relationship, nor does a divorce dissolve it. The relationship lives on when children are involved, forever binding two parents to each other and the family unit in one way or another. It could be as frequent as daily updates on their shared children, as infrequent as an annual holiday visit, or transactional by way of providing not much more than monetary support. Many other variations exist also, on how couples decide to co-parent and relate to each other post-divorce which undoubtedly effect children in a multitude of ways. Negative effects of divorce are often highlighted by those who abide by the “deficit model of divorce,” which indicates very broadly that a traditional marriage between heterosexual men and women yield greater well-being for their children, the absence of which creates behavioural difficulties and other negative outcomes (Albanese, 2020, p. 195). Behavioural traits such as prosocial behaviour are modelled by parents largely at home during the earlier years until kids are with their peers at school and is defined as “denoting or exhibiting behavior that benefits one or more other people, such as providing assistance to an older adult crossing the street” (American Psychological Association, 2022). Prosocial behaviour helps to create healthy peer relationships and develop a healthy sense of others apart from oneself. A study done by Hess (2021) focuses in on the effects that interparental conflict has on the prosocial behaviour of children, as well as their peer relationships. While it includes participants outside our targeted age range of children under the age of fourteen, this study showed no differences in the results between the three developmental states reviewed: ages seven to 10, 11 to 13, and 14 to 16. Therefore, the results of this study are important and applicable: Interparental conflict impacts both boys and girls in terms of their social well-being, specifically the amount of peer problems that occur and the frequency of their prosocial behaviour (Hess, 2021). Negative maternal communication holds more weight, effecting girls’ prosocial behaviour and boys peer problems whereas negative paternal communication held less weight overall, effecting girls peer problems only. What this means is that interparental conflict is positively associated with negative parental communication which reduces prosocial behaviour and altruism in kids and increases their peer problems (Hess, 2021). Prosocial behaviour and peer relationship problems are two out of five points on the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire created by Goodman in 1997 (Youth in Mind, 2012). It is worth noting that this study reflects the new sociology of childhood emphasizing where “children are in the present, rather than what they will eventually become” (Albanese, 2020, p. 32). However, reducing this to a problem in the present for these children discounts the importance of learning prosocial behaviours and altruism from other role models and the impacts this has later in life. Parents, as the first source of learning for especially before grade school, have a responsibility to provide children with the best possible behavioural examples as possible including reducing parental conflict, or to contain it at the very least (Hess, 2021). Parent-child conflict, too, tends to result in reduced well-being of children in the same way that interparental conflict does, and so it is imperative to address the factors that results in interpersonal conflict (Turunen, 2017).

Questionnaires answered by 1157 children, taken either twice, thrice, four or five times, from heteronormative biological families showed two measures of parental behaviour towards their children including emotional warmth, to which is better described as emotional availability, and negative communication which reflects an expression of parental tension and emotional stress (Hess, 2021). Both emotional availability and parental tension fluctuate as life unfolds, are ampli-

fied with interpersonal conflict, and do not necessarily level out with the decision to divorce or dissolve a relationship, although they could. As parental conflict occurs more frequently, parental warmth decreases and negative communication increases (Hess, 2021). The hope is in most cases assumably to reduce the frequency of parental conflict by divorcing, and if parental conflict in the home is the primary source of parental tension and the absence of emotional warmth then both the children and parents should expect to experience positive outcomes of the divorce. However, as mentioned earlier, the change of legal status between a couple does not dissolve the relationship entirely, but merely changes the rules of how the relationship continues. So long as children are involved, finances are also. Parental communication must be had, and mutual decisions must be made, especially in countries such as Canada where custody laws have changed significantly in the decades passed where the aim is joint custody whenever possible and appropriate (Albanese, 2020). Some argue a compensatory hypothesis which states that as interparental conflict rises, emotional warmth and positive communication increase to sooth and protect their children, offer reassurance, demonstrate emotional safety, and to compensate for the effects of the fighting. Although this would be nice if it were true, emotional warmth and positive communication are negatively associated with relational conflict between parents (Hess, 2021). The social well-being of children and their peer relationships are correlated with the changes in frequency to which their parents engage in conflict meaning that children need stability to thrive inside and outside the home (Hess, 2021). This implies that children are better off when they experience their parents' weekly fight on the same topic week-to-week, and when they utilize the same conflict techniques compared to couples who argue inconsistently about unpredictable topics in various, potentially escalating, ways. Ultimately, conflict is distressing for children, and conflict is a possibility so long as parents share custody whether cohabitating, married, or divorced, the latter of which parental conflict is most associated with in Canada and other Western countries (Albanese, 2020).

### *Sleep Quality and Socioeconomic Factors*

Stress levels and the quality of sleep one attains are intricately connected and correlated: Poor sleep increases stress levels and increased stress levels reduce sleep quality (Komarov et. al., 2020). This is not limited to adults and is likely a universal, human experience. When there is an excess of perceived stress, a person is susceptible to sleep disturbances: Reduced sleep hours, difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, nightmares, and waking feeling unrested are commonly experienced alongside increased stress levels (Sbarra et. al., 2022). Children, too, are affected according to Rudd et. al., and sleep quality is related to their parents' socioeconomic status (2021). Socioeconomic status (SES) undoubtedly changes upon parental relationship formation and dissolution whereby women are more likely to be at a disadvantage while recovering from the financial effects of divorce (Sbarra et. al., 2022). During the first year following divorce, mothers, not fathers, "experience a 33% decline" in household income (Sbarra et. al., 2022, p. 76). The financial and health disruptions are experienced more intensely by White women than Black women of divorce (Sbarra et. al., 2022) and according to Rudd et. al., "nine-year-old children from high SES homes" experienced more behavioural problems and sleep disturbances than those from low SES (2021, p. 2180). Rudd et. al. determined SES by evaluating educational levels of mothers and found that "mothers with a higher level of education were less likely to dissolve their relation-

ships, and their children had fewer symptoms of poor sleep, child behavior problems, and cognitive ability” (2021, p. 2184). Additionally, “at age 5 and 9, a relationship dissolution was associated with more problematic sleep for children of mothers with higher levels of education, but not lower” (Rudd et. al., 2021, p. 2184). This implies that children of mothers who are better educated with a higher socioeconomic status are experiencing greater stability, routine, harmony, and other environmental factors on a regular basis that result in lowered stress levels and improved sleep quality. Children in lower SES homes are likely accustomed to a certain degree of turbulence in their home environment and have adapted to a degree of instability whereby the effects of a parental relationship dissolution are not felt as intensely resulting in fewer changes in sleep quality and behavioural problems, but also reflect a poorer sense of well-being regularly (Rudd et. al., 2021). Relationship dissolution in this study refers to couples with children both married and unmarried pointing to the parental relationship quality, not the legal status, such as the uncoupling itself and the reasons that precede this (Rudd et. al., 2021). Parents who have not yet married upon the arrival of their children are more inclined “to dissolve their relationship than married parents” (Rudd et. al., 2021, p. 2182) and “compared to low-educated women, highly educated women are more likely to marry, more likely to have their children in marriage, much less likely to have a child outside of a coresidential partnership, and less likely to separate or divorce” (Jalovaara, 2018, p. 753). This indicates that children born out of wedlock are parented by individuals living less intentionally with greater degree of relaxation in their attitude towards marriage, birth control, commitment, finances, and communication potentially leading to greater instability in the home. Mothers in particular, their educational levels and the SES that follows, are essential in determining the quality of familial life both during marriage and afterwards as primary caregivers. Children born into homes of parents with less education and less seriousness overall results in lower SES and higher levels of parental conflict where children are predisposed to suffer the consequences of this, externalized through aggression and rule breaking, and internalized through anxiousness, depression, and becoming withdrawn (Rudd et. al., 2021). The research continually shows that “parental relationship instability” is intricately connected socioeconomic status, “problematic childhood sleep,” and “poorer child outcomes” where it is an adult responsibility to ensure one’s own readiness to lead a life that includes making decisions which both directly and indirectly influence the health, wealth, and well-being of the children of our future in a positive way (Rudd et. al., 2021, p. 2185).

### *Custody Arrangements*

A discussion of interparental conflict, divorce, socioeconomics and the impending sleep and social disruptions experience by would not be complete without touching on how post-divorce arrangements influence the health and well-being of children. As stated earlier, the relationship continues to exist between parents to some degree whereby “the legal dissolution of marriage (leaves) the partners free to remarry” (American Psychological Association, 2022). This structural change of the nuclear family often signifies the addition of stepparents, stepsiblings, or half-siblings, all factors that hold the potential to increase tension between biological parents and increase the stress levels of children. Researcher Turunen differentiates between legal custody “where decisions about the child’s upbringing, school choices, and religion” are mutually agreed

upon between the parents, and physical custody or where the child lives (2017, p. 371). Both shared legal custody and physical custody open the parental relationship up to disagreements about how things are done and when, limiting the influence of the other parent's presence when it is their time with the child. Different homes week-to-week means potentially learning to live by two separate sets of parental rules, in two living environments, with the addition of non-biological family members which is stress inducing for some children (Turunen, 2017). Stability is essential for children to thrive. Financial resources are split and reduced between two separate residences upon parental separation: Where having two bedrooms across two homes could initially feel fun and exciting to a child before the novelty wears off, previous toys and vacations are no longer affordable for either parent and their time during the holidays is split (Turunen, 2017). The splitting of time between two residences also means that each parent has less time with the child overall, even if the physical custody split is 50-50, and according to economic theory, this "weakens a parent's incentives to invest in that child" (Turunen, 2017, p. 372). Reduced financial resources invested in the child on the part of one or both parents can result in fewer advantages compared with children from higher SES homes where parents are frequently investing in the future of their children and experiencing the positive consequences of this. Living apart from a parent can weaken the child-parent bond and the authority the parent has over the child: Ensuring a stable rotation from the mother's home to the father's reduces the negative effects of this (Turunen, 2017). The positive effects of a post-divorce, split-living arrangement for the parents is that each parent has a built-in break from their parenting duties to which they can focus solely on themselves. In an ideal world, this time is used to further enhance the health and well-being of each parent across all domains so that a positive trickle-down effect to the child occurs directly, and indirectly, through enhancing their ability to better co-parent with their former spouse. We see SES status at play again here beyond that of sleep quality of and parental conflict, where higher SES "groups are more likely to be early adopters of new family behaviors," indicating that socioeconomic status reflects higher education, greater maturity, and better developed relational intelligence: All factors that contribute to how a child experiences and adapts to divorce (Turunen, 2017, p. 373). Shared custody is one such factor that holds great importance to the health and well-being of children despite the potential for complications: "Bauserman (2002) showed that children... were better adjusted than those in sole custody settings when it came to general adjustment, family relationships, self-esteem, and emotional and behavioral adjustment" (Turunen, 2017, p. 374). An increase in quality of life for families with shared physical custody arrangements is due to a higher level of socioeconomic status according to another study done by Bjarnason and others in 2012 (Turunen, 2017). Arguably, the quality of time spent by each parent with their child, as well as the quantity of it, could be more than it was when the family lived together in an emotionally tense environment, and the added fiscal resources of higher SES families mean less change overall for parents and their children (Turunen, 2017). Shared custody's overall advantages for children are illustrated in "fewer stress-related illnesses (and) less depression," despite parental separation when compared to sole custody situations (Turunen, 2017, p. 375). Negative effects of this type of arrangement for children include increased stress and depression while adapting to two separate parenting styles week-to-week, as well as in scenarios where one parent is coping unsuccessfully, and the child is parentified into taking care of his or her parent emotionally or otherwise (Turunen, 2017). Again, greater socioeconomic resources can help adults in meet their own needs as well as the needs of their children.

### *Reports of Stress*

Stress effects the body, mind, and spirit because of disruptions in the internal and external environment “influencing how people feel and behave” (American Psychological Association, 2022). While there are clearly positive and negative effects of divorce, stress is inevitably a part of the process experienced by both children and adults. “Parents over-estimate the emotional well-being of their children” frequently, indicating that it is not only important to include both parent-reported data on children and child-reported data on themselves, but to do a comparison of the two as well (Turunen, 2017). While there are certain indicators of stress in children that are reported accurately by parents such as sleep quality, self-reported stress by children eliminates the potential for parents to misrepresent their children and encourages children to speak freely about how they are experiencing something that is largely out of their control. Ideally, this could lead to a smoother transition for children while their parents make the necessary adjustments from married and cohabiting to living apart while co-parenting. Children’s reports of stress indicate that girls experience it more than boys and older children more than younger ones, especially in sole custody arrangements, while children in shared physical custody show reduced risk for high levels of stress (Turunen, 2017).

### *Conclusion*

While couples are predictably in hope of relief and solutions upon deciding to divorce, in actuality “marital dissolution is associated with increased risk for a range of health morbidities and early mortality” as high as 30% more than those who remain married (Sbarra et. al., 2022, p. 75). This effect of marital dissolution is “comparable with low levels of physical activity or being obese” (Sbarra et. al., 2022, p. 75). Reduced parental health and early mortality as consequences of divorce imply their own set of unique stressors on children of divorce in addition to the factors already discussed: Socioeconomic status and its relationship with interparental conflict, children’s sleep quality, parent and child stress levels, and shared custody arrangements. Girls and older children experience stress more intensely, especially when being raised by one parent instead of two and indicates the need to learn more about the psychosocial and emotional needs of girls and older children so that they are better supported to succeed in life (Turunen, 2017). As we can see, divorce is a complex event with many factors at play which affect the well-being of both children and adults in potentially positive but mostly negative ways, where we all share similar needs for attachment, autonomy, stability, creation, and love.

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