



The Psychological Consequences of Children of Parental Divorce

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Introduction

Divorce is the poignant, straining, and permanent legal action that tears families apart. As the source of separation can stem from monetary issues, mistrust, or physical abuse (Ghoreishi, 2013) —just to name a few— such causes can be difficult for a child of the family to comprehend and render them confused and frustrated. Divorce or separation has inimical effects on the partners involved, creating an environment of stress and potentially antagonism, and as many people would consider the effects of such a separation within the lens of the partners that it entails, much research has also been done on the effects of a parental divorce on children. As a child of high school sweethearts who maintain a great relationship, I was curious to research such a topic that I had not encountered in my privileged life. I postulate that children of parental divorce typically exhibit symptoms of psychological concerns from the impact of the separation, specifically in terms of alterations of their relationship with their parents, a decline in their academic achievement, and a diminution in their self-esteem after the separation of his or her parents.

Alterations in Parent-Child Relationships

Having a stable, reliable relationship with a parent is crucial during development, as children rely on their parents for a support system, a role model, and protection. They thrive in situations that are predictable and relatively unchanging, so in the midst of a divorce or clear separation within the family, this period can be confusing and detrimental to the child. Not only does this great change impact his or her home life, but it can also have effects on their relationship with either parent.

Çaksen (2021) states that “the most important way to minimize emotional harm to children involved in a separation and divorce is to ensure that children maintain a close and secure relationship with both parents” (p. 81). However, with the stress and complexity of divorce and separation, this is easier said than done. For example, a study by Hetherington et al. (1977) determined that one-year post-parental divorce, children became more dependent, aggressive, and

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demanding while they became less obedient, affectionate and obedient towards their parents (as cited in Peterson & Zill, 1986). But children's behaviours were not the only ones that were altered by the divorce: parenting behaviours were less consistent and affectionate while being less able to control their children's behaviour. These negative behaviours can most definitely harm the relationship between a parent and child, a bond that is crucial in childhood development and feeling loved and secure. Having a wiser adult to help guide you through life and act as an emotional support system is urgently needed in childhood years, yet this study proves that even if the relationship prior to the divorce was strong, both the child and the parents' behaviours are affected, which in turn destabilizes the relationship when they need it the most.

In research conducted by Donnelly and Finkelhor (1992), a nationally representative sample involved 160 children whose parents were divorced, separated, or unmarried to determine if there was any benefit to shared custody agreements post-divorce. Results showed that children in sole custody agreements had a higher degree of parent-child support and affection compared to those in shared custody. An offered exclamation for such puzzling results comes from Steinman (1981) who suggested that children in shared custody partook in less sentimental activities with each parent in fear of breaching loyalty to the other (as cited in Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1992). On the contrary, children of shared custody were more likely to pit each parent against each other as they feel their parents are more disposable with frequent contact. However, as Poussin and Martin-Lebrun (2002) explain, only 20% of children visiting the noncustodial parent found the interaction to be happy highlighting how noncustodial parental relationships suffer greatly with the occurrence of divorce and limited contact. In either case, it appears there are negative consequences for parent-child relationships of divorce, only varying in how that disturbance is manifested.

While Donnelly and Finkelhor illuminated the threats of shared custody, complications arise just as so in sole custody of children post-divorce. Noncustodial parents—typically the father—after divorce were found to restrict time with their children, and often feel awkward and unnatural if they do visit their child; which eventually led being less involved with their children overtime (Stewart et al., 1986; Furstenberg et al., 1984; Seltzner, 1991, as cited in Donnelly and Finkelhor, 1992). In fact, Poussin and Martin-Lebrun (2002) state that 23% of children involved in their study had never met with his or her father after the parental divorce. As the relationship with a child's noncustodial parent is often harmed after divorce, the custodial parent often feels overwhelmed with single parenting demands such as emotional, financial, and time demands, which also harms the parent-child relationship as they have limited free time to spend it with the child (Folberg, 1984, as cited in Donnelly and Finkelhor, 1992). In addition, Kalmijn (2013) determined that among children of divorced parents, relationships between the child and both the mother and father are more likely to be "poor" in ways pertaining to contact with the parent, support from the parent, and perceived quality of the relationship itself. These results can be seen as a consequence to divorce since children have less time see and support both parents or because children blame their parents for the divorce and feeling anger toward them, and therefore feel detached from both parents. In addition, during contact with the child post-divorce, the parent may negatively disclose information about the other parent, further increasing a child's sense of guilt towards being loyal to both parents (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018, as cited in van Dijk et al., 2022). For the reasons listed above, it can be said with confidence that a psychological consequence of parental divorce on children is a decrease in in their relationships with their parents.

The Plummet of Children's Academic Achievement

The disruption of a cohesive family system interferes with much more than family life itself. Emotional turmoil associated with parental conflict or separation affects a broad array of aspects of a child's life, including academic performance and achievement. This is logical as home life impacts almost all aspects of a child's life, and with this disruption of a support system, it can be difficult to focus on academics, or it may seem of lesser significance compared to the situation occurring at home. According to Kelly and Emery (2003), "children of divorced families have lower academic performance and achievement test scores compared with children in continuously married families" (p. 356). What's more is that children with divorced parents are two to three times more likely to drop out of school compared to children with intact families. This evidence illuminates the further psychological consequences of a child of parental divorce than that of the emotional turbulence of the separation itself.

Portnoy (2008) found similar findings. Concisely put, children from divorced families scored lower on academic tests, had lower educational aspirations, and actually achieve lower education levels compared to children of married couples (Amato & Keith, 1991; Sun & Li, 2002; Mirowsky, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 1999, as cited in Portnoy, 2008). These findings can be explained by the notion that such a separation can negatively affect a child's motivation, learning-related behaviours, engagement in the classroom, and therefore lower academic performance (Anthony et al., 2014). Another finding is that of Abd-El-Fattah (2006) who suggests that broken family structures like parental separation correlates with lessened parental involvement, which ultimately leads to a reduction in student engagement (as cited in Anthony et al., 2014). Regardless, the most negative effects of divorce on children, such as those listed above, occur when the child is in early childhood (Jeynes, 2002, as cited in Anthony et al., 2014).

Anthony et al. (2016) determined that children of parental divorce achieve less growth in mathematics and that parental separation has an association with a weakened approach to learning, and hence, parental divorce weakens a child's academic engagement with material and motivation. Regarding gender differences, girls of parents of divorce struggled more on mathematic achievement tests compared to boys of divorced parents, as the authors argue that parental divorce and the disturbances surrounding it exacerbate girls' vulnerability in difficulty in mathematics as assistance at home with homework is often lacking or abated. From their research, the authors determined that children who were ten years old at the time of their parental divorce achieved less growth in reading and mathematics compared to peers who had an intact family structure.

As siblings are also a vital part of children's lives and typically are involved in the same family issues, Sun and Li (2009) performed a study to analyze if the number of siblings a child affects his or her academic performance post-parental divorce. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey from 1988 that consisted of 19,839 eighth grade students and their parents, they determined that children of disrupted families score respectively 1.03 and 2.09 points lower on reading and math tests than children of intact families, consistent with the findings of Anthony et al. (2016). Furthermore, they also determined that this gap is higher for those children with many siblings and have divorced parents. Therefore, children with a large sibship-size already disadvantaged with parental divorce further contributes to poor academic performance. The authors' findings also determined that the reason for such an academic disad-

vantage stem the fact that a high level of parental resources promote academic advancement, and as the higher amount of children one has dilute parental resources for all children along with the fact that divorce is a messy and expensive process, children of divorce with multiple siblings are likely to suffer even more compared to those of parental divorce and fewer to no siblings and shared resources. Based on previous academia, parental divorce evidently psychologically affects a child's ability to thrive education-wise.

Vicissitudes in Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a highly valuable trait that affects how we see ourselves and the environment around us. A high self-esteem aids in maintaining relationships, protects against desolation and pessimism, and generally contributes to well-being. Without it, then, feelings about the self and interpretations are seen through a negative lens. In this section we will discuss how parental divorce on children psychologically harms them by diminishing their self-esteem.

Cooper et al. (1983) conducted a study to investigate the differences in self-esteem between children with varying levels of family cohesion. Within their analysis they determined that children of parental division had higher degrees of parent-parent, parent-child, and total family conflict. Accordingly, children of divorce were included in less supportive homes compared to two-parent cohesive, one-parent cohesive, parent coalition, and isolated child family subtypes. This may be the case as children are often urged to take sides in the divorce process of their parents or often be ignored as parents become preoccupied in divorce/separation hassles and their own conflict; ultimately deteriorating a child's self-esteem in the process. Lower self-esteem can be expected from children who perceive conflict either between their parents or between themselves and their parents, and the authors argue that "the quality of family life is crucial to the psychological well-being of the child" (Cooper et al., 1983, p. 157). As it was also found that a strong relationship with one parent helps protect against the deterioration of children's self-esteem in the parental divorce process in this study, classic work done by Rosenberg (1965) supported this finding as he noted that conflict between a child and his or her parent can make a child feel worthless (as cited in Cooper et al., 1983).

Positive home relationships provide children a sense of security in their relationships and learn how to interact with others positively, however, children of divorced or separated home who do not witness positive social interactions at home may be uncertain of how to resolve conflict themselves (Hoffman and Zippco, 1986). As noted previously, children's attitudes toward their academics and their motivation are correlated with their sense of home stability. Poussin and Martin-Lebrun (2002) confirmed that children with parents who have separated have overall worse self-esteem and self-image compared to children with unified parents, yet it improves once parental conflict diminishes, using a sample of 3,098 French children aged 11 to 13 who were administered a questionnaire. Further reasons for a decrease in self-esteem can arise from the fact that "children [feel] invisible due to parents' preoccupation with the conflictual situation and the other parent in general" (Dallos et al., 2016, as cited in van Dijk et al., 2022). Lowered self-esteem can also arise when so called "bad-mouthing" the other parent to the child can cause the child to internalize the negative evaluation from the parents as the he or she is both genetically and

relationally attached to that parent, feeling ultimately rejected. A drop in self-esteem is also prominent in children of parental divorce who began internalizing problems during the divorce. Therefore, as parents manipulate their children, the children are more likely to be conflicted with the loyalties to both parents which declines their self-esteem, ultimately increasing the action of internalizing issues around them (van Dijk et al., 2022).

Conclusions and a Final Note

Divorce has become more common and accepted in society within the last few decades. Personally, I am on the other side of that fifty percent and luckily have not had to experience the pain and confusion of a breakdown of my family. Therefore, I took it upon myself to investigate the impact that divorce has on a child and came across striking findings. I hypothesized that there are great psychological consequences unto a child who has experienced parental divorce, specifically in the form of weakened parent-child relationships, a decline in academic performance, and a collapse in their self-esteem. Regarding damaged relationships with the parents, children were concluded to be more reliant on parents, hostile, and difficult while affiliations weakened as they felt guilty participating in meaningful activities with either parent in fear of breaking loyalties to the other (Hetherington et al., 1977, as cited in Peterson & Zill, 1986; Steinman, 1981, as cited in Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1992). But as both relationships tend to suffer, the noncustodial parent, or typically the father, tends to suffer exponentially after a parental divorce (Poussin & Martin-Lebrun, 2002). Secondly, we can see the magnitudes of parental divorce on children as their academic performance had been reported to drop. Turmoil occurring at home often affects a child's motivation and engagement, while their attitudes or behaviours to learning cease as their focus becomes primarily on home life (Anthony et al., 2014; Portnoy, 2008). Lastly, my hypothesis is confirmed since children are often ignored by their parents post-divorce and conflict between their parent and child increased, both of which thus contribute to the increase of feelings of worthlessness in children, attributing problems they encounter as created by themselves (Cooper et al., 1983; Poussin & Martin-Lebrun, 2002; van Dijk et al., 2022).

Whilst much research has been conducted in the 1980s and early 2000s regarding the mental outcomes of parental divorce on children, I suggest future research to examine if children of parental divorce exhibit altered or varying coping mechanisms to issues regarding personal connexions. Determining if children with divorced parents altered their coping mechanisms would provide academics insight to the further implications of parental divorce on children. Longitudinal efforts would be an excellent approach to understanding changing coping styles regarding failed associations, while illuminating the differences between coping styles in those of divorced and non-divorced parent children may provide scholars with understanding as to how perception of relationships and management with hardships is altered with parental divorce. Nonetheless, it can be stated with certitude that children are psychologically impacted negatively, at least in one way, with the separation of his or her parents, assuming that abuse done unto the child by a parent is absent.

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