



The Effects of Parental Divorce and Separation on Children

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Introduction

Recent data shows that, in Canada, over 40,000 married couples get a divorce yearly (Statistics Canada, 2020). There is no doubt that many couples end their relationships for various reasons. However, when relationships end, shared children are sometimes involved and may be affected by this in different ways. Just under one-fifth of Canadian children have divorced or separated parents, suggesting this is an important childhood issue worth addressing (Statistics Canada, 2022). Although parenting practices may differ across cultures, there is no doubt that children need parental guidance throughout their development to become well-adjusted children and eventually adults (Albanese, 2020). Children who lose one or more of their parents may face challenges throughout their childhood and perhaps even in adulthood. Children with divorced and separated parents may face different – possibly adverse – outcomes in areas of life as compared to their peers with intact families. It may be reasonable to hypothesize that negative outcomes may be seen in academics, peer relationships, familial relationships and the mental health of children as affected by parental divorce and separation.

Mental Health

It is fair to say that when individuals face difficult life changes, including loss and divorce, there may be adverse psychological effects. In the literature, Sorek (2019) contends that to fully understand the effects of divorce on children, we must look from a child's point of view. Based on subjective self-reports, self-blame was one of the most significant risk factors for lower well-being in children who are coping with parental divorce. On the other hand, children may also display protective factors, such as resiliency, contributing to better-reported well-being and less risk for depression. Clearly, there will be differences in a child's response to divorce and separation depending on their own personal tendencies and coping ability (Sorek, 2019). However, other external factors still affect a child's perceived well-being. A negative correlation was found between children's overall reported quality of life and parental conflict, meaning that children who

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witnessed high levels of parental conflict in their parents' divorce had an overall poorer sense of well-being (Sorek, 2019). This suggests that children of divorced or separated parents will fare worse if the breakup is high conflict, as compared to low conflict. Galbraith & Kingsbury (2022) also found that children who experience parental separation or divorce are nearly twice as likely to experience mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Other research shows that children who experience parental divorce at younger ages face more negative outcomes – such as lower reported well-being – because they have had to cope with the change for more time (Kravdal & Grundy, 2019). Concerning age, adults who experienced parental divorce at a younger age had higher rates of depression and pharmacological treatment for mental health conditions, suggesting that the effects of divorce on children may translate throughout their lifespan. Literature on the effects of divorce on children is mixed on sex differences; however, one study shows evidence that boys face a higher risk for poor well-being than girls do (Kravdal & Grundy, 2019). This may be because they are highly influenced by their father, who is usually the one to be absent from his children's place of residence post-divorce. Although divorce is a stressful event for every family member, other changes may contribute to declines in well-being, too. The crisis model proposes that the changes that come along with divorce, such as changes in finances and place of residence, contribute to stress and a decline in well-being (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). Similarly, the resource model proposes that divorce brings both social and economic changes which pose a risk to well-being (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). These two models acknowledge that divorce brings about many other life challenges that may risk a child's mental health.

Educational Outcomes

Aside from the family, school is another important area of socialization where most children spend their time. Educational achievement is consistently lower in children affected by divorce, and the effects may be long-lasting (Anthony et al., 2014). Academic achievement was found to be consistently lower in children with divorced parents, regardless of sex; however, girls with divorced parents showed lower achievement in mathematics than boys. However, this outcome for girls may be due to factors such as gender stereotypes and expectations rather than just divorce. Interestingly, children who experienced parental divorce at an older age showed poorer performance in reading and mathematics, perhaps because of higher academic demands at older ages (Anthony et al., 2014). A different study similarly found that children of divorced parents, compared to their peers with intact families, scored consistently lower in reading and math (Potter, 2010). Behaviours beyond grades are present in the classroom, too. In a study of preschool students, researchers found that children with divorced parents displayed higher aggression and less positive behaviours in the classroom, suggesting that the effects of divorce are present in young children in early education (Amca Toklu, 2022). Beyond early education, the effects of divorce span into the college and university years of young adulthood (Guetto et al., 2022). Interestingly, children of divorced parents overall have lower educational attainment and are less likely to attend college or university. This effect is particularly true for those of higher socioeconomic status because there is a higher risk of losing established resources that may contribute to higher education, as compared to those of lower socioeconomic status. Children have

a variety of different living situations post-divorce, which may also have implications for educational outcomes. Research shows that children who reside part-time with both of their parents have better-evaluated classroom engagement than children who just live with their mothers post-divorce (Havermans et al., 2017). In addition to managing custody arrangements, parents also have to manage communication when children are moving between two different households (Kay-Flowers, 2021). This becomes a problem for a child's educational outcomes, especially at a young age, because of challenges with homework. These challenges include forgetting work at the other parent's home and one or more parents being unaware of due dates because of poor communication. On a side note, school is a positive experience for many children when the environment is supportive and welcoming (Kay-Flowers, 2021). A warm and supportive school environment serves as a protective factor for children of divorced or separated parents. Overall, children of divorced or separated parents fare worse in educational achievement and are less likely to attain higher education (Guetto et al., 2022; Anthony et al., 2014; Potter, 2010).

Peer Relationships

Although children spend considerable amounts of time at home, relationships outside may be just as meaningful. Social support for children is a key component of healthy development and life in general, and for children who are coping with parental separation or divorce, this is especially true. Peer relationships provide a distraction from distress due to parental separation or conflict occurring in the home environment and provide the opportunity for play and positive socialization. Children of divorced or separated parents benefited significantly from friendships where the other child was also going through the same experience because this validated their feelings. On the other hand, some children may experience social isolation because they do not share their experience with divorce due to possible rejection from their peers (Kay-Flowers, 2021). Kunz (2001) found that children and adolescents of divorced parents have more negative relationships with peers, including dating partners. It is fair to conclude that a child's relationship with peers post-divorce may depend on the context of these relationships. Other research found that positive relations with peers in preschool students had to do with a child's healthy attachment toward their mother, suggesting that home life has an influence on relationships with others' (Page & Bretherton, 2001). It may be reasonable to say that healthy attachment to a mother figure following parental divorce is a protective factor for children. Page & Bretherton (2001) also found that the father played a significant role in a child's peer relationships post-divorce but in a different way. Authoritative parenting style – that is highly supportive and provides a moderate degree of discipline – in fathers is a significant predictor of positive relationships with peers in children. The literature summarized shows that peer relationships can serve as protective factors, although it is unfortunate that children of divorced parents generally fare worse interpersonally.

Familial Relationships

Another relationship that changes following parental separation is the one between mem-

bers of a family. Post-divorce, many families become blended with a mix of biological relatives and step-parents and siblings. Research shows that children of divorced parents who reside with their mother and a stepfather have a more negative relationship with both of their parents than children living with a single mother (Havermans et al., 2017). The opposite is found for stepmothers, who positively impact child-parent relationships. However, having a stepfather in the post-divorce residence is shown to have positive financial effects and, therefore, may reduce conflicts or tensions around money. Secure relationships with both parents, as evidenced by shared custody in both residences, are shown to be helpful in children accepting the presence of stepparents in general (Havermans et al., 2017). Sibling relationships may be affected by divorce, too. In one study, general findings showed that siblings from separated or divorced families exhibited more hostility than those from intact families who exhibited more warmth (Sheehan et al., 2004). However, through meta-analysis, another study concluded that siblings with divorced parents actually had a more positive relationship, possibly due to bonding over the experience and giving each other support when parents are unavailable (Kunz, 2001). Related to social learning theory, other literature shows that children tend to model parental behaviour and, therefore, will act accordingly from what they learn through social interaction (Frank, 2008). For example, sibling-to-sibling and parent-to-child relationships are likely to be more positive if more positive interactions between the parents are present. Therefore, if parents display high conflict behaviours during a divorce, any witnessing children would likely learn similar conflictual behaviours. Another perspective, parental absence theory, suggests that children fare much better when they have two parents than one – or none (Kunz, 2001). During a divorce or separation, parents often fail to provide as much care, support and attention as they did before, which may contribute to adverse outcomes in the parent-to-child relationship and other interpersonal relationships. Kunz (2001) found that although divorce negatively affected both parent-to-child relationships, this was especially true for father-child relationships. To conclude familial outcomes of children affected by divorce, Kay-Flowers (2021) contended that a significant protective factor is maintaining a good relationship with one – and ideally both – parents. This emphasizes the importance of maintaining consistent parenting practices even through times of marital turmoil and conflict.

Other Findings

Upon researching divorce and children's mental health, educational outcomes, peer relationships and family relationships, some other findings are worth noting. Divorce is more likely to happen in low-income families, suggesting a link between marital tension and economic situation (Galbraith & Kingsbury, 2022). In a study on divorce, family and interpersonal relationships, researchers found that negative effects on divorce-related relationships were more pronounced for mixed-race samples than strictly samples of white children, perhaps suggesting differences due to culture (Kunz, 2001). Another study found an increased prevalence of negative health implications – including asthma and migraines – for children of divorced parents, as compared to children with intact families (Bayaz-Öztürk, 2022). The same study also concluded that lower-income families are more likely to face divorce, as are families who live in poor neighbourhood conditions, which may suggest the role that socioeconomic status plays in divorce.

In the study, these health effects began approximately one year following parental divorce and persisted long-term throughout childhood and adulthood. Bayaz-Öztürk (2022) suggested that families of higher incomes were a protective factor health-wise for these children because of the resources allotted to finance healthcare and treatment. In summary, not only are low-income couples more likely to break up, but also more likely to have children facing adverse health outcomes due to divorce stress and lack of financial resources, suggesting an interrelationship between these variables.

Conclusion

To summarize, children of divorced and separated parents are more likely to face negative mental health outcomes, as evidenced by a lower reported sense of well-being and higher rates of anxiety and depression (Sorek, 2019; Galbraith & Kingsbury, 2022). This is the case especially for children of parents who had a high-conflict divorce, as well as for younger children coping with divorce compared to older children (Sorek, 2019; Kravdal & Grundy, 2019). It is important to note that mental health and well-being declines in children affected by parental divorce may be due to other changes, such as changes in housing and social and economic changes that accompany breakups (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). In terms of education, children of divorced parents are less likely to attain higher levels of education and also exhibit lower academic achievement in reading and mathematics compared to peers with intact families long-term (Guetto et al., 2022; Anthony et al., 2014). Preschool students with divorced parents also showed more negative classroom behaviours than their peers (Amca Toklu, 2022). Classroom engagement is associated with post-divorce living arrangements, and children who reside with both parents fare better in this sense (Havermans et al., 2017). Literature on sibling relationships is mixed, some suggesting that divorce results in sibling hostility, while others suggest that divorce provides an opportunity for sibling-to-sibling support and positive interactions (Sheehan et al., 2004; Kunz, 2001). However, the general findings show that a child's interpersonal relationships, overall, are negatively affected by parental divorce and that children are better off with having two present parents (Kunz, 2001). Mental health, school, family, and peer relationships all go hand-in-hand with one another and may be interrelated. For example, children with divorced parents face a higher risk for anxiety, which may affect school performance (Kay-Flowers, 2021). Additionally, high-conflict family relationships – related to divorce – pose more negative mental health outcomes for children, which in turn contributes to school stress. The literature discussed in this paper shows that it is true that children of divorced and separated parents fare worse in mental health, physical health, familial relationships and educational outcomes. The hypothesis that peer relationships would be negatively affected is unclear as per the literature in this paper, and the results are mixed. Although not included, findings on Indigenous and LGBTQ families and children would be useful to examine in future papers. In conclusion, although children show resiliency, there is no doubt that parental divorce has negative effects on children.

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