

The Effects of Divorce on Children

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The effects of divorce on children have been hotly debated for decades, both because it is particularly difficult to isolate effects and also because the possibilities affect deeply held concerns people have for the welfare of children. Here, we review some of the reasons why it is difficult to gauge the effects of divorce on children and present some of the understandings that have emerged in recent years.

The Gordian knot: Understanding Child Outcomes Associated with Parental Divorce

Divorce research is plagued by methodological problems concerning samples, measurement, and the interpretation of findings. This can be illustrated in perhaps the most well known work on the subject, the research of Judith Wallerstein. She argues that parental divorce has far reaching, serious, and relatively common long-term consequences that even affect children's relationships as adults on such dimensions as security and trust. However, these conclusions emerge from the study of 131 mostly White upper-middle class children in California whose parents divorced in 1971. In addition to its small size, lack of representativeness, and the lack of a control or comparison group, her sample has been criticized for selecting families experiencing significant problems prior to divorce. Sampling issues in divorce research are not limited to representativeness. Given changed cultural attitudes towards divorce, generalization across time (cohort effects) as well as samples must be considered. Finally, because families self-select into the divorce population, they might differ from families that do not divorce in ways that could account for the presumed "effect of

divorce" on children. Causality cannot be isolated from selection because family process is difficult to separate from family structure changes.

Two measurement issues greatly affect findings and interpretations in this field: the form of measurement and the selection of constructs to measure. Wallerstein, for instance, relies exclusively on interviews that yield rich observations rarely seen in the work of others. Others, such as Hetherington and Cherlin, have used standardized measures, accepting some lack of depth for the benefits of standardization and large samples. Sociologist Paul Amato, while noting methodological concerns with Wallerstein's research and favoring the use of standardized measures, has recognized the potential in the depth of her work for the development of ideas and hypotheses for further testing. For example, Wallerstein found many children of divorce have strong resentment of fathers who stopped providing financial support when no longer legally required to provide it, with many not helping to pay for college for their offspring. This could be a relatively common, negative effect of divorce that is not captured by standardized measures used in this literature.

As important as what is measured is what is not measured in divorce research. This is especially true when results can have personal, and sometimes painful, meanings—where there is an understandable tendency to favor null findings. To find that children who are affected by parental divorce are not likely to have lives much different from those from intact homes could be reassuring to many. Yet thin measurement, or the absence of measures of some constructs, favors finding no differences. A recent article by Lawton and Bures (2001) highlights the fact that important differences can be found when attention is turned to dimensions often overlooked. They looked at the long-term correlates of parental divorce on religious identification and practice using the NSFH data set. Among a variety of findings, they found that children of divorce from various faith groups were roughly 2 to 2.7 times more likely to reject faith and religious involvement as adults when compared to those whose parents had not divorced. The authors conceptualized their

findings in terms of community connection and continuity; that in many cases parental divorce lowers such continuity via decreased religious involvement. Not only is this study interesting for identifying an outcome rarely discussed in this literature, but it enriches theory as to why children of divorce are more likely to divorce as adults: they are less likely to become embedded in groups that can provide ongoing social support for couples in marriage.

A central challenge for researchers in interpreting data on divorce outcomes has been to tease out effects that can be attributed to parental divorce per se from pre-existing characteristics. For example, Cherlin et al. (1991) use national, longitudinal studies in both in the UK and USA to show that the effects of divorce on academic performance and ratings of child behavior drop by about 50% when pre-divorce functioning is considered (The degree of effect explained by pre-divorce functioning may be more or less than this 50% in other important domains.)

There is compelling evidence that both pre- and post divorce parental conflict is strongly associated with child maladjustment. Such findings are important because if parental conflict is the chief damaging element for children of distressed and divorce prone parents, it makes it easier to argue that children of high conflict parents may be less likely to be harmed, and may even benefit, from parental divorce. This view that conflict explains of the most negative effects usually attributed to divorce has come under increased scrutiny as a number of sociologists who were once skeptical about negative effects of divorce per se, who have more recently concluded that there is evidence of negative effects over and above the effects of conflict or other pre-existing problems.

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin has been a strong proponent of the belief that most of the effects attributed to divorce were really reflected pre-existing problems in the family, and that children were not very likely to be harmed if parents dissolved their marriages. In his more recent work, he concludes that there is evidence of increased risk from divorce in and of itself (see bullets below). Likewise, sociologists Paul Amato and Allan Booth have changed their views based on what is widely regarded as one

of the most extensive, well conducted studies of the long-term outcomes of children of divorce. Whereas they used to talk about such things as the negative stereotype that it is better for unhappy couples to remain together for the sake of their children, they more recently conclude that in up to 70% of the cases where parents divorce, the children would be better served if their parents remained together until they were grown.

“Spending one-third of one's life living in a marriage that is less than satisfactory in order to benefit children—children that parents elected to bring into the world—is not an unreasonable expectation.” (Amato & Booth, 1997)

This is all part of their reasoning behind the concept of the “good-enough” marriage for the average adult and child; that there are many marriages that are not deeply gratifying, yet nevertheless functional to the point of providing many of the key benefits of marital and family stability in the lives of the family members.

Norval Glenn and Maggie Gallagher have noted a further complication in interpretation of the effects of divorce (personal communication, April, 2002). The examination of pre-existing effects is often based on the assumption of divorce as a point in time event rather than a process often preceded by divorce proneness. In other words, to what degree can pre-divorce variance be apportioned into an element that would have been there whether or not divorce had ever been considered versus an element that resulted from talking and thinking about divorce? Are some effects of divorce occurring pre-divorce?

Over a decade ago, Norval Glenn (1987) suggested there was a change occurring among social scientists. Many who had initially believed that changes in family trends and structure were simply the normal unfolding of cultural change were becoming more likely to conclude that something deleterious might be occurring on a large scale. Yet, the data remain complex and feelings about their meaning run deep. While knowledge in this field has emerged over decades, we may be watching a field of study that is still in it's infancy.

Notwithstanding the all too frequent gross simplification, and overstatement or understatement of the effects of divorce on children, there is a solid foundation of what might be called first generation research, or research documenting the existence of a phenomenon—in this case the child outcomes associated with parental divorce. The challenge for the field is to develop more fully the second generation research, or research that explains the phenomenon by identifying direction of effect, causal mechanisms and so on. What do we know from first generation research?

Child Outcomes Associated with Parental Divorce: A Synopsis

Broadly speaking, there are increased risks for children that can be attributed to divorce per se, yet present knowledge suggests that most children of divorce do not suffer long-term dysfunctions. In other words, the risks seem to be increased but the effect sizes are rather small (discussed in Fincham, 2002) for commonly measured outcomes. The following bullets summarize what seems clear:

- While 10% of children from intact homes had serious behavioral problems, roughly 30% of the children from divorced homes show such problems (Hetherington, 1993).
- As adults, 18% of children of divorce scored above a key cutoff on Rutter's index of mental health compared to 13.7% of those with intact parental marriages (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). Cherlin concluded that 82% of children whose parents divorce will not experience lasting difficulties, though many will experience shorter term disruptions and problems in the two years post parental divorce.
- Level of parental conflict is a key determinant of the effects of parental divorce on children. Children of parents who engage in regular, high levels of conflict tend to do better psychologically and socially if their parents divorce. The types of conflict with clear, long-term negative effects includes jealous behavior, quickness to

anger, criticalness, moodiness, and stonewalling (Booth & Amato, 2001). Children of parents in low conflict, but unsatisfying marriages, are likely to do better if their parents remain together (Amato & Booth, 1997), and somewhere between 50 to 70% of divorces occur in low conflict marriages.

- Overall, the negative effects of both divorce and inter-parental conflict (without divorce) influence both boys and girls and all age groups.
- Divorce increases the risks of depression for boys, regardless of mediating factors, due to the common scenario of the father leaving the home (Simons, Conger, Lorenz, Gordon, & Lin, 2000). Non-custodial fathers are less likely to discipline effectively and train their children, and have significantly less contact with their children, which may more adversely affect boys.
- When one partner is a child of divorce, the chances of a couple divorcing are doubled. When both partners are children of divorce, the chances of the couple divorcing are nearly tripled. There is evidence that these effects are linked to factors such as parental modeling, lower educational attainment, lowered stigma about divorce, and lower age at marriage (Glenn & Kramer, 1987).
- 70% of children from divorced families see divorce as an acceptable solution to an unhappy marriage, even when children are present, compared to 40% of children of from intact families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).
- The relationships between children and their fathers are more often negatively impacted by divorce, with 70% reporting poor relationships with fathers compared to only 30% for children from intact families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).
- Children of divorce have lower levels of educational, occupational, and financial attainment—findings more attributable to changes in family structure than pre-

existing differences in families (e.g., McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

All things being equal, the children most likely to suffer the greatest, and longer term consequences, are those who experience the following (based on Amato's work; for a summary see www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/divorce/effects.htm):

- Greater loss of the skill and resources of parents as a result of loss of contact, and/or diminished parental competence as a result of the turmoil of the transition following divorce; e.g., emotional support and help in life.
- Greater loss of economic resources because of the divorce.
- Greater life stress connected with the divorce.
- Greater levels of exposure to ongoing inter-parental conflict.

Although most children of divorce do not manifest dysfunction, the relative risk for increased negative outcomes appears to be in the neighborhood of 2 to 3 times the comparable risk for children from intact homes for a number of important outcomes. So, if a child from an intact home has a 10% risk for some negative outcome, that risk for the child of divorce might be 2.5 times greater, at 25%. Some people conclude that these are huge increased risks while others focus on the 75% who are showing little evidence of long-term risk on currently measured variables of functioning. While children are not, on average, doomed by parental divorce, the effects can be substantial for a small minority when it comes to measurable dysfunction. Moreover, even if the outcome for a child of divorce is not outright clinical dysfunction, more common outcomes such as "distress," reduced opportunity for education and financial attainment, or a greater likelihood of having a difficult relationship with the father remain concerning because of the large number of children affected by the increased risks.

What can parents who divorce do to help their children cope?

- Continue effective, involved parenting, and avoid hostile interchanges (Simons, Conger, Lorenz, Gordon, & Lin, 2000).
- Realize that the greatest negative effects occur in the two years following the divorce, especially for boys. This is the period of greatest disorganization for the children. More support, contact, and structure during this time when it may be most difficult to provide all three can likely mitigate some of the negative effects.

Conclusion

We have tried to convey how complex it is to advance understanding of the impact of parental divorce on children. Our goal was, in part, to provide an antidote to the oversimplified rhetoric that too often appears on this topic. With divorce (or the lack of parental team formation in the first place) being a prevalent experience in the lives of children, the stakes remain high. Significant funding for ongoing research as well as the development and refinement of preventive interventions is warranted. Although the effects of divorce on children remain controversial, primary and secondary prevention of risks is an endeavor least tainted by such controversies. Much of the work we all do is either directed at lessening the risks for marital distress and divorce in the first place, or the lessening of negative impacts of marital dissolution for adults and children in the second place. There is much work for us all to do.

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