

THE EFFECT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

by

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THE NUMBERS ARE SCARY -

One half of marriages end in divorce in the U.S. This means that one million children each year have the experience of seeing the divorce of their parents. Most children now born will live in a one-parent household sometime in their lives. And soon, 20% of all 2-parent families will actually be blended or re-married stepfamilies. Half of the children whose parents divorce will have a step-father within 4 years of the parents' initial separation. Some 10% of children will see their residential parent go thru 2 divorces before the child reaches 16 years of age.

It seems that the divorced parents of these children are not rejecting marriage itself, since 75% of divorced men and 66% of divorced women go on to re-marry. And it does not seem that these adults are simply rejecting a particular first-time marriage partner, since second divorces occur even more often than first divorces- 10% more often. Remarried wives who have custody of their children are twice as likely to divorce again as are remarried husbands, probably due in large measure to the fact that remarriage in which there are children from a previous marriage present have a 50% higher rate of again divorcing.

Characteristics of people likely to divorce include struggles with depression, alcoholism, economic problems, and poor problem-solving or conflict resolution skills . People prone to divorce also tend to make more negative attributions concerning their spouse's behavior. That is, they often "know" why their spouse does certain things. They attribute negative motivations that the spouse intends harm or neglect, is mean or selfish, or "doesn't care" - and then they react accordingly. Rarely does such a spouse attribute or even consider other possible explanations for the other spouse's apparently negative behavior, such as:

1. the spouse's lack of skills in a certain area
2. the poor parental example they learned in their childhood
3. an absence of some useful or relevant information about the relationship or partner,

4. inappropriate or unexpressed expectations about how the marriage or family should function
5. the influence of outside stresses such as work, illness, financial worries, etc.
6. or the learned observation that even “good” behavior is still “punished” or unappreciated by a complaining spouse and so, effort is not acknowledged or rewarded

Although divorced women have higher levels of depression than nondivorced women, after 2 years post-divorce, women who have divorced show less depression and more psychological well-being than those women who remain in a heavily conflict-ridden marriage.

HOW ARE CHILDREN EFFECTED?

Overall, children from divorced and from remarried families have more problem behaviors and function less well psychologically. Divorce involves a series of negative social and economic changes as well as additional stresses and practical problems. The following highlights much of the current research on the effect of divorce or of re-marriage on children:

Children of divorce are more likely to have:

Conduct related problems, and feelings of depression (sometimes expressed as aggression), especially in the first 2 years after divorce

An increase in academic problems (especially boys) and more likely to drop out of school (especially girls)

Become less socially competent and more likely to associate with anti-social peers

An increase in the risk of substance abuse

Are sexually active at an earlier age

Any problems that were present for children before divorce are simply worsened during or after divorce

Boys have a harder time accepting divorce, especially if the father does not maintain

a strong relationship

Girls in early adolescence have the most difficulty accepting a re-marriage and living in a step-family

Girls often become very close with a custodial mother until the teen years, when this

closeness is broken

Girls often experience a “delayed reaction” to divorce because its effects are blunted

or ignored by the girl until she becomes involved in her own serious romantic relationship; then feelings of loss and mistrust emerge

Pre-adolescent boys in a step-family with a supportive step-father are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior

Most children report feeling closer to whichever parent has custody, whether this is the mother or the father

Children of divorce will feel less protected and less cared for simply by going through the process of their parents' divorce

Divorce is not a one-time event for children; the effects can last a lifetime

CUSTODY AND VISITATION –

About 80% of children of divorce reside with the mother after divorce. This almost

always is followed by about a 2 year period of disrupted parenting by the mother characterized by irritability, diminished communication and affection with the kids, and less effective discipline or monitoring of the children.

Even though these conditions may improve after 2 years, problems in controlling sons usually remain high, and relationships between mothers and sons may remain

less close even into the son's adulthood.

Daughters at pre-adolescence often have close and confiding relationships with their custodial mother, only to have this fall apart in adolescence. This happens to a much higher degree than in non-divorced mother-daughter relationships.

Custodial mothers report more problems with being able to control children and in assigning household tasks.

More than 20% of children have no or minimal contact with their father when the mother has custody. Only about 25% of children of divorce have weekly visits with

dad. Sometimes this is due to neglect, discouragement, or disinterest on the part of the father. His enforced marginality and irregular contact with the children may cause him to drift away from the pain of this situation. But it may also reflect a "gatekeeping" function of the custodial mother who will limit access or set conditions to visits of the children with the father, especially when anger or resentment is running high. When, however, high levels of conflict have been avoided by the parents- perhaps through the use of marital or pre-divorce psychological counseling or through mediation- and fathers feel they have some control and influence over decisions affecting their children, then parental contact and investment on the part of the father can be expected, as can more consistent child support payments. In those instances where mother is the non-custodial parent, mothers are still 2 times as likely to maintain contact with their children after divorce. Fathers who do not have custody often achieve a less "parental" and more "fun and companion-like" relationship with their children.

The frequency of visitation and contact with a non-custodial father is not as important to the adjustment of the children as is the quality of those visits. Fathers who do maintain their authority and responsibilities as parents and who engage in a variety of activities, including holidays, with children help to promote the well-being of their children. Such fathers may also help to offset potential negative consequences of an incompetent or minimally involved mother. However, the most important factor in successful visitation, as will be discussed shortly, is the avoidance of open conflict between the divorced or divorcing parents. This is crucial.

The custodial parent – whether mother or father – often complains of task overload in trying to juggle all the responsibilities previously divided between two parents, including child care, child discipline, and financial support. Most also complain of feeling socially isolated and find the prospect of renewing a dating life tedious. The non-custodial parent also has his or her difficulties in establishing a new residence, and perhaps a new social network, as well as feeling the loss of their children. They also face possible continued hostility from the ex-spouse, and the need to start dating again.

Fathers who have custody report less child-raising stress and fewer behavioral problems with their children. They seem to have fewer problems with child raising. This may be attributable in part to the higher economic status of divorced fathers compared to divorced mothers. But this advantage may result in a better residence in a better neighborhood with better schools, more family resources, etc. And even when income is similar between mother custody families and father custody families, children in father custody families – especially boys – show greater well-being. As a general rule, divorced mothers with custody lose from 25% to 50% of their pre-divorce income; divorced fathers with custody lose only 10% of their pre-divorce income.

Even when a divorced mother has a marked increase in income as a result of re-marriage, this economic improvement does not reflect an improved adjustment of children in step-families. The benefit of improved income may be offset by conflicts over how finances are to be used, stress regarding child discipline issues in the step-family, and resentment on the part of children toward the new step-parent.

Boys and older children are more likely to be placed in the father's custody.
Fathers

acknowledge more problems with communicating with the children (especially about themselves) and in monitoring their activities (especially of daughters). Although custodial fathers report fewer problems with parenting children, this may also be attributable to the generally more active and involved presence of non-custodial mothers when dads have custody.

SHOULD WE STAY TOGETHER FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILDREN?

The highest levels of conflict between married partners is associated with a wide range of problems for the children in such marriages, including childhood depression, poor social skills, conduct disorders, and poor academic performance. Children in high-conflict marriages have more problems in overall psychological adjustment. When a marriage is characterized by high levels of parental conflict, divorce can actually improve the well-being of children in such contentious households. An unhappy and highly conflictual marriage is just as harmful to a child as divorce. However, if the parental relationship is less openly conflictual, divorce does not improve the children's well-being. This would suggest that if the marital problem is marital *dissatisfaction* on the part of either or both spouses – and not high levels of open and contentious *conflict* between partners – then divorce is likely to do

more harm than good to the children.

Parental conflict can remain injurious to children after divorce if the children are placed in the middle between two warring adults who use the children to communicate their own dislikes, grievances, and negative regard (or even contempt)

for the other parent thru the children. When parents precipitate loyalty conflicts or fight openly about the children, it is very destructive to the well-being of the children.

Very few parents post-divorce are capable of the wisdom to allow and encourage a child to have the very best relationship possible with the other parent, as well as with

that parent's family, friends, and eventually, re-marriage partners. After divorce it is

easy to overlook the fact that children need as many good adults in their life as possible.

WHAT ABOUT RE-MARRIAGE?

The adjustment period to a remarriage by children of divorce is from 5 to 7 years! However, about 25% of remarriages themselves end in divorce in less than 5 years,

meaning that some step-families never even have a chance to stabilize. Also, in the first year following remarriage, custodial mothers engage in less affection and involvement with their children and have a more negative relationship with them – probably due in part to the demands of the new spousal relationship.

Children between the ages of 9 and 15 years of age at the time of a remarriage are most likely at this age not to cooperate with the new marriage. It is especially difficult for daughters to accept and adjust to a remarriage of a parent-whether of a father or a mother. And the siblings themselves are likely to get along poorly with one another if the parenting is harsh or if the step-parent undermines the authority of the biological parent in setting discipline.

The presence of a step-father can especially help boys who are not yet teens to make a better adjustment. However, the presence of a step-parent of either gender usually results in more problem behaviors for girls. The best chance for success comes if a step-parent does not directly discipline the children that are not biologically his, but instead supports the biological parent's discipline and simply concentrates on being a positive influence otherwise with the children. Later, he or she can take a more authoritative role with the children.

ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE -

Grown-up sons usually remain less close to mothers after divorce; this difference is not found with daughters. Even as adults, most children of divorce fare less well. Adult children of divorce continue to have more adjustment problems, especially related to marital instability in their own marriages which are characterized by increasing levels of belligerence, criticism, contempt, and less effective problem solving. They attain less economically. Women from divorced parents are 70% more likely themselves to divorce in the first 5 years of their own marriage. Even though most children of divorce can and do struggle through the problems they encounter and are not permanently blighted by the experience, it is harder for them.

CONCLUSIONS –

Divorce has numerous negative effects on children. Some of these effects last for many years; a few even into the adulthood or marriage of the children themselves. Plus divorce is no picnic for the parents either! It can truly be said that a family divorce has no winners – only survivors.

If the divorce process becomes unavoidable and inevitable, it is a sad irony that the number one factor in making the outcome as punishing and upsetting as possible for children is the hostility and open conflict between their parents at this time, and possibly, for years to come!

The need for effective psychological treatment by a psychologist or marital and family therapist specializing in working with issues of divorce and of remarriage, and the impact of these two major events in the lives of the children involved, is significant and obvious to anyone who cares about the effect of divorce on children.

This article is a compilation of over 50 research articles as summarized by Drs Mavis Hetherington, Margaret Bridges, and Glendessa Insabella and published in *American Psychologist*, February, 1998 as “What Matters? What Does Not?”