

# **Children and Divorce: Healthy Transitions**

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Recently in one of my classes, several students discussed their experience of growing up in a divorced household. Such discussion compelled me to learn even more about divorce in the United States and to share my findings with my students. Overall, I am convinced that while divorce may increase the chances of poorer outcomes for children; an unhealthy marriage, and likewise, an unhealthy divorce, pose even greater challenges.

So what do we know about divorce and its impact on children? Since the early 1970's, researchers have recognized that divorce is a complex phenomena, with several mitigating factors of divorce-related outcomes and short- and long-term effects on children. The fact that the process of divorce takes place in relation to a complex network of social, cultural, legal, economic, and psychological variables makes it difficult to determine and specify a total net effect on children of divorce. Not surprisingly, studies on the effects of parental divorce on children are mixed and controversial. This requires our careful consideration given divorce is a common occurrence in children's lives. People marrying today have a 50% chance of divorcing (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004), with most divorces involving children; more than 1 million children are affected by divorce each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003) and 40% of children in the United States will witness the divorce of parents by age 18 (Barker, Brinkman, & Deardorff, 1995).

Among childhood outcomes, evidence suggests that children who experienced a parental divorce before the age of 18, as compared to children of intact non-divorced families, are more likely to experience a range of psychosocial, behavioral and educational outcomes. While these outcomes may in part be specific to the age and developmental level of the child, the overall consensus is that divorce is a marker characterizing a period of upheaval, distress, and decline in well being. The distress experienced by children involved in a divorce often includes feelings of isolation, anxiety, helplessness, anger, guilt, confusion and ambivalence.

Among young children, Wallerstein (1983, 1984) and Hetherington and colleagues (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978) have found they are more likely to become irritable, tearful, and aggressive, display neediness and clinging-type behaviors, have greater sleep disturbances and play less in response to the parental divorce. Additionally, school-aged children and adolescents whose parents have divorced are also at risk for lowered academic performances and various problems of social development, including interpersonal conflict, lower self-esteem, depression, and increased delinquency (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Estimates are that one-quarter of children develop mental health disorders following parental divorce (Hetherington, Bridges, & InSabella, 1998). And, there is strong evidence to suggest that these behaviors may be indicative of long-term lifestyle patterns influenced by the experience of divorce during childhood (e.g. Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Doherty & Needle, 1991). Longitudinal investigations show that parental divorce in childhood is a strong predictor of adulthood depression (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Palosaari & Aro, 1996) and even greater mortality risk, as compared to those whose parents remained married (Friedman, Tucker, Schwartz, Tomlinson-Keasey, Martin, Wingard, et al., 1995).

Childhood experiences of divorce have also been found to be a strong predictor of engaging in more risky health behaviors during adulthood, such as smoking (Tucker et al., 1995) and vulnerability to alcohol problems (Landerman, George, & Blazer, 1991; Russek & Schwartz, 1997). Finally, experiencing divorce in childhood is also associated with lower levels of education (Amato & Keith, 1991; Keith & Finlay, 1988), risk of marrying at younger ages (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988) and greater risk of divorce as compared to adults from intact families (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Glenn & Shelton, 1983).

The above findings indicate that divorce has long-lasting, negative impact on children; however, other studies document salutary effects of divorce. It has been found, for example, that divorce can benefit children by teaching them a greater sense of responsibility and less gender-role stereotyped occupational aspirations and family values (Barber & Eccles, 1992). Furthermore, a web of protective and risk factors, for example, shape and form the longevity of divorce outcomes on children, including individual factors; (e.g., gender, temperament, coping styles) (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), family factors (e.g., quality and quantity of contact with noncustodial parent, parenting styles) (Rickard, Forehand, Atkeson, & Lopez, 1982; Partridge & Kotler, 1987), and community support (e.g., contact with adult caretakers, group therapy). In fact, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) have found that children are more resilient than once believed. In their study of over 1400 children, it was found that the majority of children were doing quite well six years after divorce.

Moreover, the impact of divorce may not be as severe as an unhealthy marriage. Research indicates that children of high-conflict parents tend to do better, not worse, if their parents divorce, as compared to parents who stay together and continue to fight and expose their children to harsh, conflictual family environments (Amato & Booth, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Thus, if a divorce is pending, engaging in mediation needs to be a priority for both parents. Mediation is a non-adversarial and confidential process in which a neutral facilitator helps a couple negotiate a mutually satisfactory resolution to all of the issues in their divorce. Most important, is the need for parents to commit to assisting their children through this major life transition and to the critical role of maintaining strong parent-child ties, especially during marital conflict or divorce (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

Marriage is hard and requires constant development and application of skills, such as communication, conflict-resolution and financial management (Olson & DeFrain, 2006). Divorce too, if it is to be a healthy one, requires such skills and commitment. It does not have to be a battle involving the children. It does however require dedication to maintaining healthy and consistent communication, and especially support and nurturance for one's children.

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