

The Effects of Divorce on Children

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INTRODUCTION

Probably the most frequently asked question over the last two decades has been, "Is divorce harmful to children?" While this may seem like a very important question, I would like to suggest that it is time to examine a more important question which is-- "what are the factors in divorcing families that contribute to children having difficulties and what are the factors that foster children's adaptation?" In this session I will review several explanations for why children have difficulty and the scientific evidence regarding these factors.

ARE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE WORSE OFF THAN CHILDREN IN MARRIED TWO-PARENT FAMILIES?

Since there is so much discussion of the effects of divorce on children, I want to begin by addressing whether there are really any differences between children who live in divorced families and children who live in married two-parent families (I will call them "intact."). In 1991 Amato and Keith examined the results of 92 studies involving 13,000 children ranging from preschool to young adulthood to determine what the overall results indicated. The overall result of this analysis was that children from divorced families are on "average" somewhat worse off than children who have lived in intact families. These children have more difficulty in school, more behavior problems, more negative self-concepts, more problems with peers, and more trouble getting along with their parents.

Despite this general finding across many studies, there are important qualifications of these findings. Overall, the children are more alike than different. Amato (1994) reminds us that average differences do not mean that all children in divorced families are worse off than all children in intact families. In the 1994 article Amato presents an illustration of how much the children in both groups overlap. Thus, while there are average differences between both groups of children, there are more similarities than differences.

Another way to examine this issue is illustrated by findings of Mavis Hetherington (1993). Hetherington, like many others, finds these average differences, but she also looked at some of her measures and examined the degree to which children in divorced and intact families were more severely impaired. Here we find some important variations. On a measure of behavioral problems, Hetherington (1993) reports that 90% of adolescent boys and girls in intact families were within the normal range on problems and 10% had serious problems that we would generally require some type of help. The percentages for divorced families were 74% of the boys and 66% of the girls in the normal range and 26% of the boys and 34% of the girls were in the problematic range.

The implications of these findings for practitioners are two-fold. On the one hand, the majority of children from divorced families did not have serious problems requiring professional help. On the other hand, a larger percentage of children from divorced families than intact families did have serious problems. Another way to say this is that MOST children in divorced families do not need help, but MORE children in this group than in intact families are likely to need help. This is a complicated

message for all of us to deliver and it is why researchers, practitioners and the media often errs on the side of one or the other of these two types of findings. Increasingly, it is important to make both kinds of points.

WHAT CAUSES THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF FAMILIES?

As I said in the beginning of this session, the general question of differences between children in different types of families is less important than what causes these differences. In the remainder of this session, I am going to talk about what we know about what causes these differences. For most of this discussion, I am going to rely on Paul Amato (1993). He has suggested that there are several major hypotheses regarding the causes of children's difficulties. These are:

1. **PARENTAL LOSS**-- divorce often results in the loss of a parent for the children and with this loss children also lose the knowledge, skills and resources (emotional, financial, etc.) of that parent.
2. **ECONOMIC LOSS**-- another result of divorce is that children living in single parent families are less likely to have as many economic resources as children living in intact families.
3. **MORE LIFE STRESS**-- divorce often results in many changes in children's living situations such as changing schools, child care, homes, etc. Children often also have to make adjustments to changes in relationships with friends and extended family members. These changes create a more stressful environment for children.
4. **POOR PARENTAL ADJUSTMENT**-- generally how children fare in families is due in part to the mental health of the parents, this is likely to be true for children in divorced families as well.
5. **LACK OF PARENTAL COMPETENCE**-- much of what happens to children in general is related to the skill of parents in helping them develop. The competence of parents following divorce is likely to have considerable influence on how the children are doing.
6. **EXPOSURE TO INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT**-- conflict is frequently part of families and may be especially common in families that have undergone divorce. The degree to which children are exposed to conflict may have substantial effects on children's well-being.

In his article Amato identifies and summarizes the results regarding each of these hypotheses. While some issues have received more attention than others, we can begin to come to some conclusion about how each of these factors is affecting children.

PARENTAL LOSS

Mothers and fathers are important resources for children. They provide emotional support and practical assistance as well as serve as role models for their children. Overall, Amato concludes that there is some support for this general hypothesis.

One finding that emphasizes the importance of parents, as a resource to children is that children who lose a parent due to death are somewhat similar to children of divorce. Generally, children who lose a parent due to death suffer some of the same problems as children of divorce. However, the effects of death are not exactly the same as the effects for divorce as studies suggest that children of divorce have greater problems than children with a deceased parent. Another finding that fits with this hypothesis is that children of divorce who have other adults who take over the function of the absent parent will fare better. There is only a little evidence to support this, but the evidence does support this. That is, having other supportive adults is beneficial for children.

There are other findings that do not seem to fit well with the "parental loss" hypothesis. For example, it would seem that older children should be better off than younger children because they would have had more contact with both parents. Most of studies do not support this hypothesis. Age is often confounded in this research with time since the divorce and other transitions in children's lives. In terms of which children are better off the findings suggest that children between 5 and 12 years of age may do the best and children younger and older may have more difficulties. Another implication of the parental loss hypothesis is that frequency of contact with non-custodial parent should be associated with children's well-being. The evidence is mixed for this hypothesis. Contact in and of itself is not associated with better health for children. The critical factor may be whether contact results in conflict between the parents or not.

ECONOMIC LOSSES

Due to limited economic resources children in single-parent families may have more difficulties. It is very well documented that single parent families headed by mothers have less income than most two-parent families and there is a common belief that many of the difficulties experienced by children are the result of the economic difficulties experienced in these families. The overall evidence is not as strong in support of this hypothesis as might be expected. Generally, family income is positively associated with children's well-being, but some studies have not found that income improves children's well-being. Also, researchers have statistically controlled for income differences between intact and divorced families and all of the differences between children in these two types of families do NOT disappear. In other words, there are still some other factors affecting children's well-being above and beyond money.

It might also be expected that since fathers typically have more economic resources and because getting remarried usually results in higher incomes, children in these families would be better off, but they are not automatically healthier.

LIFE STRESS

This hypothesis suggests that it is the accumulation of multiple stressors that creates problems for children. There are only a few studies that have explored this hypothesis, but the results do seem to support it. In general, the more stressful experiences that children encounter during divorce the more difficulty they will have. There is also evidence that indicates that children whose parents divorce more than once are worse off than children whose only experience one parental divorce.

PARENTAL ADJUSTMENT

The psychological adjustment of parents is a significant factor in children's well-being. There have been many studies examining the relationship between divorced parents' psychological well-being and children's well-being. Of the 15 studies that have examined this relationship 13 found that there was a positive relationship between the mental health of parents and children's mental health. That is, children whose parents are better adjusted fare better than children whose parents are not adjusting well. There is some evidence to suggest that when the divorced parent's adjustment is taken into account that some of the differences between children from intact and divorced children disappears. Despite the general support for these conclusions, there is at least one important caution. The causal relationship between parents and children's adjustment is not clear. It could be that having better adjusted children improves the well-being of the parents.

PARENTAL COMPETENCE

The skills that parents have in dealing with children have a profound influence on children's well-being. Overall, the evidence indicates that many parents report diminished parenting practices immediately following divorce, which appears to contribute to some of the problems that children experience. Many studies have also examined the relationship between child-rearing skills and children's well-being. There is overwhelming research evidence that indicates that parenting skills and the types of relationships between parent and child are strong influences on how well children are doing.

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

Another major hypothesis regarding the causes of children's difficulty is that conflict between parents prior to, during and after the divorce contributes to lower-well-being. There have been a number of studies examining this relationship. Generally, it has been found that children in high conflict families (either intact or divorced) fare worse than children in low conflict families. Some studies have found that children in non-conflictual single parent families are doing better than children in conflictual two-parent families. There is also evidence that children begin to have difficulties prior to divorce and that some of these difficulties are associated with the conflict present prior to divorce. Post-divorce conflict has a strong influence on children's adjustment. Children in those families that can cooperate and reduce conflict are faring better than other families.

SUMMARY

The overall results of these studies suggest that while children from divorced families may, on the average, experience more difficulties than children in intact families, there are more similarities than differences. The most important question is not whether children from divorced families are having difficulties, but what particular factors cause these differences. Current evidence suggests that the loss of parents, economic difficulties, stress, parental adjustment and competence, and interparental conflict all contribute at least to some degree to the difficulties of children. These results provide significant implications to practitioners interested in designing interventions for children and adults in divorcing families.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Write one or more news releases that address the effects of divorce on children. Discuss how you tried to handle the findings that there are differences between children in divorced and intact families, but that these children are more alike than different.
2. Based on the types of factors that influence children's well-being following divorce, outline a program for parents. In this discussion describe what issues you would include and give some examples of how you would teach these ideas.
3. Look for news releases for articles on the effects of divorce on children. Provide one or two examples and discuss the degree to which these articles do or do not reflect the research evidence.

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