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Divorce

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Changing economic and social conditions at the beginning of the twentieth century created public concern about family breakdown and ushered in the scientific study of marriage and the family. Central to this emerging science was identification of the causes, correlates and consequences of marital dissolution. Increased divorce rates over the course of the century has ensured continued focus on this topic and resulted in a large body of research on the impact of divorce on children.

Divorce Rates and Demographics

US divorce rates have shown an upward trend over the last century, rising from 0.3 divorces per 1,000 population in 1867, the first year for which national data are available, to a peak of 5.3 per 1,000 population in 1979-81. In the 1980s the divorce rate stabilized and has since trended downward to 4.4 divorces per 1,000 population in 1995. It is projected that approximately one half of the first marriages of the baby boom generation will end in divorce but that the rate will decline to 4 out of 10 for cohorts born more recently. The median length of a first marriage that ends in divorce is 8 years and three out of four men and two out of three women remarry. Divorce is a more likely outcome for second marriages; approximately 60% end in divorce after a median length of 5 to 6 years.

Several factors increase the probability of divorce. Briefly, divorce rates are almost twice as high for black as for white families, two to four times higher for individuals who marry while in their teens, about 50% higher for couples who lived together prior to marriage, and about 25% higher for individuals whose own parents were unmarried at their birth or were separated prior to age 16. Higher education levels are related to lower divorce rates, which is due in part to the tendency for more highly educated individuals to marry later and to have been raised in intact

families. Families with one or two children are less likely to divorce than those without children or those with more than two children. Divorce rates in families with a preschool child are about half of those for childless families and lower than those for families with school-aged children; however, this protective effect may be limited to firstborns. Thus, the likelihood of a child experiencing a divorce depends on a number of social and demographic factors.

Impact of Divorce on Children

Researchers have consistently found that children from divorced families score significantly lower on a variety of indices of well-being compared to children from two-parent families. However, a meta-analysis of 92 studies involving 13,000 children found that the differences (effect sizes) are small ranging from .08 of a standard deviation for psychological adjustment (e.g., depression and anxiety) to .23 for conduct problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency). Intermediate sized differences were found for academic achievement (.16), social adjustment (.12), and self-concept (.09). Similar differences emerged across 30 studies conducted in the 1990s.

These findings may not appear to justify the strong public concern expressed about the deleterious effects of divorce on children. But these small differences should not obscure the fact that some children experience serious problems following parental divorce. For example, in large nationally representative samples, children whose parents divorce are twice as likely to see a mental health professional compared to children from two-parent families (e.g., 13% vs. 5.5%; 21% vs. 11%, see Emery, 1999). But receipt of mental health services may over- or underestimate psychological problems. It is therefore worth noting that on a widely used measure of child adjustment approximately 20% of boys and 25-30% of girls who had experienced parental divorce showed clinically significant problems compared to approximately 10% of children from two-parent families. These data show that children from divorced families are at risk for serious

problems but that resilience is the normative outcome. In fact a handful of studies even document positive outcomes for children when their parents divorce.

The impact of age. Various theories of child development suggest that children younger than age 5 or 6 are particularly vulnerable to the effects of parental separation. The disruption of attachment relations, combined with the child's limited cognitive abilities to understand divorce, is central to this vulnerability. Although most children are young when their parents separate because divorce risk is greater earlier in marriage (of all children who experience divorce by age 12, 66% experience it by age 6), preschoolers and infants are the least studied groups in the divorce literature. In fact, data on developmental differences in response to parental separation are surprisingly limited.

The meta-analysis described earlier, found roughly equal effect sizes in preschool, elementary and high school aged samples for most outcome measures. But analyzing studies that assess children of different ages at a single point in time confounds children's age at the time of divorce with the amount of time elapsed since the divorce, both of which could account for the results. Data from a large, nationally representative sample of children have been used to avoid this problem. These data demonstrated that children showed greater adjustment with increasing age (0-5, 6-10, and 11-16 years of age) with the youngest age group being the most severely affected by divorce. Importantly, however, age differences were only statistically significant on 1 of the 19 measures used. In sum, robust age-at-separation effects, like gender effects, have not been empirically demonstrated. Clinical observations, however, show that children's concerns resulting from parental separation and how they express their concerns do vary with age.

Although on average, children from divorced and continuously married homes differ, more striking is the considerable overlap in the distribution of functioning in these two groups. Perhaps the most salient feature of extant findings is individual variability in the impact of divorce on children. To gain a deeper understanding we therefore must go beyond group

comparisons to investigate the time course, moderators, and mediators of children's adaptation after divorce and clearly recognize that divorce is a process that begins prior to the physical separation of parents and may continue long after. Although the separation may be the single most salient event in the divorce process for children, it represents just one of a long series of events that may challenge their adaptation; the nature and number of events as well as what children bring to them is likely to account, in part, for variability in child outcome.

Time-course. It is common for children to experience sadness, anxiety, anger, sleep disturbances, and other symptoms in the months following a parental separation. Indeed for the first one to two years after divorce both boys and girls tend to show sub-clinical behavioral and emotional distress and are likely to be more oppositional, do more poorly in school, and have difficulties getting along with peers. After this "crisis" period abates, however, adjustment problems tend to decline but the gap in psychological well-being between offspring in divorced and continuously married families remains and may increase over time. Indeed, parental divorce continues to affect individuals into adulthood and is associated with multiple problems, including marital distress, low socioeconomic attainment, and poor subjective well-being. Individuals whose parents divorce are also more likely to get divorced themselves, which may reflect difficulties in developing satisfying interpersonal relationships or simply a greater tendency to see divorce as a viable option when marital difficulties arise. It is possible that divorce shapes children's attitudes and expectations about close relationships that in turn influence their behavior in these relationships.

Moderating and mediating variables. Many variables mediate or moderate the impact of divorce on children, including a conflicted relationship with the (especially custodial) parent, inept parenting, post-divorce economic hardship, interparental conflict, inadequate social support, and number of negative life events experienced (e.g., moving, changing schools). Children who use active coping (e.g., seeking social support) and who do not blame themselves for the

separation adjust better than those who cope via distraction or avoidance or who engage in self-blame. A recent meta-analysis of 63 studies suggests that contact with noncustodial fathers who exhibit authoritative parenting is related to beneficial child outcomes. There is mixed evidence on whether parental remarriage benefits children.

Ameliorating the impact of divorce on children

Access to therapeutic interventions, especially school-based support programs, is associated with improved post-divorce adjustment. Perhaps the greatest effort to help children has occurred through programs targeted at parents. A growing number of states are offering (or mandating) education or mediation programs for divorcing parents. Divorce mediation leads to speedier dispute resolution, greater compliance in payment of child support, and greater involvement of the father in children's lives. Although parties who participate in mediation and in education programs tend to be satisfied with them there is little evidence to suggest that they benefit children. But absence of evidence is not equivalent to evidence of absence. The need for evaluation research is acute if we are to improve efforts to help children whose parents separate.

Unfortunately, we do not know whether the findings described in this entry can be generalized to all children whose parents separate. This is because studies that include racial and ethnic minorities or nonmarried, cohabiting parents are exceedingly rare. The need to study samples representative of the broader US population is urgent.

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