

Examining Divorce from a Developmental Perspective

The Legacy of Divorce on Children

by

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With approximately fifty percent of marriages today expected to end in divorce (Gottman, 2014), the outcome of divorce on children has become a major topic of concern in the past few decades. Hundreds of research studies have attempted to identify how divorce impacts children, but the results are quite varied. Each child has a unique reaction to his or her parents' divorce based on the degree to which numerous risk and protective factors play a role. Many studies have identified trends that exist among children whose parents divorced, but most children do not fall neatly into groups. Because divorce is such an individualized experience, we might best be able to understand its outcome on children by using known trends as a rough guideline, interspersed with individual case studies that might help illuminate how divorce and the events surrounding it manifest in particular children.

I will begin by discussing the more general literature on divorce which attempts to find commonalities across all children of divorced parents. Because the impact of divorce appears to increase over time and peak in adulthood, it is experienced differently at each developmental level (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). For this reason, I will then examine divorce as it affects children's outcomes at various developmental stages. It is here that individual case descriptions will become most useful to help create a clinical picture of how divorce impacts individual children at different levels of development. I will then synthesize the research and clinical literature to better understand how children at different stages manage following parental divorce.

How Does Divorce Impact Children?

Many divorce researchers argue that it is not the divorce per se which negatively affects children's outcomes; rather, it is the mediating role of secondary problems and stressors that accompany parental divorce which help to account for various outcomes (Aseltine, 1996). The Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective posits that the process of marital dissolution typically causes stressors which increase the risk of negative emotional, behavioral, and health outcomes in children. Such stressors may include the decline in parental support, the lessening of contact with one parent, conflict between parents, economic hardship, changes in custody, relocation, and disorganization of family life. Any combination of these mediating variables will tend to cause adjustment problems in children. The severity and duration of these negative outcomes varies from child to child, depending on the child's age and the presence of certain moderating protective factors (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010).

Protective factors help to weaken the connection between the divorce and children's experience of stress, lessening the likelihood of negative outcomes. Resources available to the child may be internal or external. Some resources that might come from within the child include coping skills, self-efficacy, and social skills. External resources like social support might come from parents, siblings, neighbors, or other important adults in a child's life (Amato, 2010).

While the Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective model may be useful for conceptualizing some divorce-related factors that may impact children's well-being, the model itself is of course an over-simplification. Each child and each family is a unique unit which has its own complex mix of risk and protective factors which may interact to influence children's experience of parental divorce.

What Does the Broader Research Tell Us?

Dozens of cross-sectional studies in the past few decades have examined the well-being of children with divorced parents as they compared to children whose parents remained married. A meta-analysis was conducted of 92 such studies, looking broadly at children's outcomes (Amato & Keith, 1991). Because the majority of the studies examined did not consider the age of the child at the time of divorce, the researchers were not able to come to conclusions about divorce at various stages of development. Although their effect sizes were small, Amato and Keith found some support for the family conflict perspective, which says that conflict between parents before and during the separation period is the mechanism by which divorce affects children's well-being. Specifically, they found that children in intact families with high conflict were considerably worse off than those in low-conflict intact families. They concluded that it was ratings of conflict which were significantly related to children's outcomes, rather than family status (divorced or intact). They also found that child well-being was inversely related to the level of post-divorce conflict between parents (Amato & Keith, 1991). It is important to note that a major limitation of these studies is the absence of data prior to the parents' divorce. Without baseline family information, one cannot rule out the possibility that children's outcomes are the result of family conflict prior to the divorce (Aseltine, 1996). Because these studies rely on cross-sectional findings, one must be cautious when interpreting the results (Demo & Acock, 1988).

Looking at Divorce Across Developmental Stages

A child's developmental level plays an important role in how he or she experiences the process of divorce, as different stages come with different cognitive and social competencies and strategies for coping. Younger children have more limited cognitive abilities, making them less able to understand the divorce and its implications and thus more vulnerable to the effects of parental

conflict and family disruption. Furthermore, younger children are more dependent on their parents, and they are less able to turn to peer relationships and school activities as an escape from parental conflict. Not to mention, the younger the child at the time of parental divorce, the more time typically spent in single-parent environments, which are often less supportive than two-parent homes (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

Infancy

A child whose parents divorce while he or she is an infant does not have the cognitive capacity to understand what is happening at the time. However, although infants cannot understand the divorce cognitively, they can easily pick up on conflict between parents, and this will invariably cause them stress. Infants may respond to the events surrounding parental separation through crying, disorientation, and disruptions in biorhythms such as changes in eating and elimination as well as sleep and wake patterns. In some severe cases, children may respond by failing to meet developmental milestones or by experiencing growth faltering, when a child stops growing at a normal rate. Infants who undergo frequent changes in their environment due to parental custody arrangements will often become disoriented (Solchany, 2007).

Although mothers traditionally provide infants with early care and are crucial to their development, a father's influence is also very important for optimal development. Parental divorce may lead to separation from the father, which is one factor that can negatively impact an infant following parental divorce. However, when the father is present in a faltering marriage, there are often high levels of conflict and hostility between the parents, which can be extremely stressful for the infant.

Another factor that might play a role in an infant's response to parental divorce is maternal depression and anxiety, which is often present in mothers of infants who have recently divorced. Because infants are so attuned to their mothers, maternal depression disrupts the relationship between the mother and infant, which can compromise the ability of the mother-child dyad to mutually regulate their interactions (Tronick & Weinberg, 1997).

A Case Summary and Analysis of Divorce in Infancy

Cameron's parents divorced when he was eight months old. His parents decided that he would live primarily with his mother but would visit his father five times a week, often in a public place or at a friend's house because his father's new home was two hours away. Within weeks of instituting the visitation schedule, Cameron started refusing to eat anything but his mother's breast milk. He became very emotional when separated from his mother, and became clingy

upon reunion. Doctors compared his growth prior to and after his parents' separation, and they found that he had experienced growth faltering as a result of the divorce, dropping from the 25th to the 10th percentile over the six months prior to the separation, during which his parents were constantly fighting. He briefly improved following separation, jumping to the 20th percentile. But once visitation began, Cameron dropped dramatically to the negative 5th percentile. After some changes were made to the visitation policy to make it less stressful for Cameron, he stabilized at the 10th percentile (Solchany, 2007).

Although Cameron's parents were committed to their child, Cameron experienced their separation as highly stressful and dysregulating. Cameron found the conflict surrounding his parents' separation and the change in environment due to visitation to be very disruptive, and as a result he refused any food but his mother's breast milk. Cameron's food refusal took a great toll on his body, preventing him from growing at a normal rate. Cameron's case is a rather extreme instance of the impact of parental divorce on an infant, but it demonstrates the extreme vulnerability of an infant to disruption, hostility, and conflict (Solchany, 2007).

Early Childhood (Age 2-6)

The experience of divorce is far different for preschool age children than it is for infants, primarily because they have much greater cognitive development and have some understanding of what is happening. Preschoolers can talk, make friends, and use play to help them understand what is going on in the world. Although in many ways preschoolers appear to be quite grown up, they do not have the cognitive capabilities to understand abstract concepts like time, fantasy versus reality, or cause and effect. Furthermore, they are not able to comprehend the long-term ramifications of the divorce. They have a tendency toward magical thinking, and they may believe that they were the cause of their parent's divorce or that they can wish the divorce away (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996).

A study by Zill and his colleagues (1993) examined a nationally representative longitudinal sample of American youth and found that children whose parents divorced when they were in early childhood were at greater risk for later psychopathology and problems with interpersonal relationships. Compared to children whose parents divorced when they were older, children whose parents divorced when they were preschoolers had poorer relationships with their fathers, were more likely to drop out of high school, had more behavior problems in adolescence and adulthood, and received more psychological help. However, despite the higher incidence of problems among this group, the majority of the sample was within the normal range on most measures of well-being. They concluded that parental divorce before age six poses a greater risk

to a child's social and emotional development than does divorce occurring later on in their childhood (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

A qualitative 25-year longitudinal study of divorce conducted by Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) found that children between 2 1/2 and 6 years of age at the breakup (their youngest sample) were most vulnerable because they had the greatest need for emotional warmth and physical care within the family unit. Of this group, very few remembered living in an intact family prior to their parents' divorce or the actual marital rupture. They tended to remember the abrupt decrease of nurturance and protection and internalized a sense of loneliness. The only children in that age group who had vivid memories of events at the time of divorce were those who witnessed abuse or violence between their parents. Wallerstein and Lewis found that these children became sexually promiscuous and prone to early drug and alcohol use in adolescence. The majority of the group did not receive financial support from their parents to attend higher education, and over half ended up with less formal education and of a lower socioeconomic status than their parents.

At the 25-year mark, when all of the participants in this group were adults aged 27 to 32, they found that many feared their own relationships would fail like their parents' relationships had. Despite this general trend, several of them were in happy, caring marriages with loving partners who helped them allay their fears of abandonment and improve their self-confidence. In addition, the heavy drug and alcohol use that had begun for many in this group during early and mid-adolescence was nearly entirely gone (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

A Case Summary and Analysis of Divorce in Early Childhood

Dana's parents divorced when she was four years old. Directly following the divorce, Dana refused to speak to Dr. Wallerstein, a psychologist who observed her play. During her first two visits when she was four, Dana played with a dollhouse, acting out scenarios of a happy intact family. At her third visit, she put everyone in the bathtub, then moved them to the roof and piled them on top of one another before she bit and punched them. Dr. Wallerstein interpreted this as Dana's way of expressing her despair over not being able to repair her broken family. Following the divorce, her parents reported that Dana would alternate between intense temper tantrums and periods of withdrawal, and she had severe night terrors for six months. Within a year she had calmed down and was doing well in school. When Dana came for her ten-year follow-up, she was fourteen years old and excelling academically and socially. She could talk about her parents' divorce in a realistic way. She couldn't say why the divorce happened, but she said she would advise other children not to hate their parents for divorcing. She was very close with her mom who she greatly admired. She visited her father once a month during the school year and spoke to him on the phone three times per week. Her father was re-married and Dana got along well with

her stepmother. Dana had plans for the future and hoped to get married and have children of her own. Despite her initial severely negative reaction, Dr. Wallerstein found that later on, Dana was one of the best-adjusted children in the study (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

Dana is a good example of a child who was able to use internal and external resources to her advantage in helping her to cope during the post-divorce years. Several protective factors likely played a role in Dana's positive outcome. For one, Dana's parents both prioritized her needs and were able to contain their anger toward one another. In addition, Dana was able to maintain a strong relationship with each parent. She did not lose her father after the divorce as many children do, and he continued to support her financially. In addition, Dana's life was highly structured in terms of her visits with her father and family meals with both parents, which likely helped her to establish a routine. Dana developed a strong sense of self-confidence, which helped her cope with the many difficulties of adolescence that are often harder for children with divorced parents. Dana's close relationship with her mother, who is a great role model to her, also certainly contributed to her positive outcome. Dana's stepmother did not attempt to replace her mother, which may have helped Dana to get along well with her. Lastly, Dana had three sets of grandparents who were all loving and supportive, which may have helped to reinforce her vision of a healthy marriage in addition to providing a sense of stability (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

Middle Childhood (Age 6-12)

Children of elementary school age have a difficult time adjusting to any change in their lives, particularly to a big and life-altering event like parental divorce. Many children whose parents divorce when they are in middle childhood have a hard time concentrating in class. In recently-divorced families in which mothers begin working for the first time, children often feel rejected. In a time when children are quite needy, the typical decrease in attention that accompanies a mother's transition from staying at home to entering the work force may be interpreted by a child as rejection. In addition, because children are older and typically had relationships with their biological fathers before the divorce, they often come to resent their stepfathers and feel intense loyalty conflicts. They worry about how a relationship with their stepfather might impact their relationship with their biological father. For this reason, elementary school age children often have a hard time accepting stepfathers as authority figures. Stepmothers, on the other hand, typically engender fewer loyalty conflicts, likely because most children do not live primarily with stepmothers nor do they see them as often as their mothers, and thus they do not consider them to be serious rivals for the love of their mother (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

Boys of elementary school age tend to either withdraw from their peers or act aggressively, starting fights and name-calling. Dr. Wallerstein posited that this may be related to a young boy's anxiety over being left in his mother's custody at an age when he is developing a strong identification with his father and establishing his sense of masculinity. Many boys of this age resent being disciplined by a woman (their mother), as they fear it challenges their masculinity (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996). Surprisingly, there is a dearth of literature on the outcomes of divorce for youth in middle childhood, despite this being a particularly important period in a child's life.

A Case Summary and Analysis of Divorce in Middle Childhood

Denise was eleven years old when her parents divorced. At the time, she was a charming and well-rounded youngster who was an honors student, a gifted oboe player, and an athlete. At the time, she said that the divorce didn't upset her and that little had changed since her father moved out, mentioning that both of her parents seemed happier. Ten years later, when she was 21-years-old, Denise came in for her interview and immediately declared "I'm into pain." After a successful freshman year at UCLA, she explained that everything began to fall apart when she met her "first true love." On her way to see her boyfriend during the summer, she said that her courage failed and instead of going to see him, she hitchhiked across the country to New York. At that time, Denise became depressed and stopped eating, and she became severely underweight. When a friend forced her to see what she was doing to her body, she came to realize that she was very angry at her parents for not acknowledging their emotions around the divorce and thus making it difficult for her to acknowledge her own. She realized that she had been denying and burying her feelings for years as a means of coping with her parents' divorce. For the first time, Denise was able to express herself, and she acknowledged that she was afraid to love her boyfriend for fear that she would lose him (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

When Denise was first interviewed, at age eleven, Dr. Wallerstein thought she was the best adjusted child she had met. Very little at that age could have predicted her outcome ten years later. The only clue to her later problems was the fact that Denise was not very open to talking about her feelings early on. It appears that Denise felt a strong need to conform at the time of her parents' divorce in order to protect her parents and hold her family together. It wasn't until many years later, when Denise had her first experience with love and intimacy, that the effects of her parents' divorce truly manifested. All of her suppressed feelings came to the surface and it was too much for her to handle, causing her to become depressed. Perhaps her anorexia was an attempt for her to maintain control during a time when she felt she couldn't manage. In Denise's case, she had a delayed reaction to her parents' divorce which did not manifest until many years following the divorce (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

Adolescence

The period of adolescence is difficult for any child. Adolescents grapple with the realization that they are no longer children but are not yet adults. For this reason, divorce can be very painful for an adolescent and can make the transition to adulthood a lot more difficult. Adolescents work toward separating themselves from their parents, but divorce often makes this separation difficult, as adolescents may find themselves needing to care for siblings or even a troubled parent. This may intrude on their academic and social lives, causing them to be preoccupied during class or to forego activities with friends to help out at home (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

A major developmental task of adolescence is that of independence, in preparing to leave the home and live responsibly without the help of a parent. Some adolescents whose parents undergo divorce choose to detach from their parents rapidly, often before they are emotionally prepared, while others remain close and delay the psychological departure for as long as possible (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

One of the most difficult tasks faced by adolescents is to establish intimacy with another person and hold the belief that one can both love and be loved. This task is especially difficult for adolescents whose parents are divorced or are undergoing divorce, because it requires turning away from the template set by their parents who could not stay committed to each other. Adolescents with divorced parents tend to experience great anxiety surrounding intimacy and attachment (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1996).

A longitudinal study by Summers and his colleagues (1998) found that parental divorce during adolescence was linked to lower attachment security with romantic partners in young adulthood. This finding is understandable, as they were exposed to parental divorce at a period in their lives when romantic relationships typically start to develop. This provides some support for the notion that the effects of divorce are transmitted intergenerationally. It is important to note that the outcomes of other variables (internalizing problems, externalizing problems, interpersonal relationships, and education level) did not yield significant results (Summers et al., 1998), suggesting that perhaps the outcome of divorce on adolescents is less severe in some respects than the impact of divorce at earlier stages.

A Case Summary and Analysis of Divorce in Adolescence

Kedric was sixteen when his parents divorced following his father's infidelity. Kedric was the oldest of three children and he had always planned to follow in his father's footsteps and become an Air Force jet pilot. When his parents divorced, his mother was distraught and tried to lean on

Kedric, but he distanced himself from her. Kedric went on to major in aeronautical engineering and became one of the most promising candidates at his flight school. When it came time to complete the interview, the last step in joining the Air Force, he gave intentionally outrageous answers and sabotaged his chances of being accepted into the Air Force. He was subsequently asked to leave the program. When he turned 22, Kedric called up a woman he had been dating for several years who was very different from his mom and asked her to marry him. She said yes, and he treated her with love and dignity, though he worried often that he wasn't a good enough husband. He felt that he wasn't able to get in touch with certain feelings related to his parents' divorce, and thus he didn't know if he would ever want to have children. Two years later, his wife reported that they had a baby girl and that Kedric was a loving, doting father. Kedric said that the birth of his daughter helped him reach his suppressed feelings. His interest in airplanes never ceased, and his wife encouraged him to renew his pilot's license, which he did. As an adult, Kedric opened a pilot school, and he reported to Dr. Wallerstein that he was the happiest he'd been in his life.

Kedric had a very strong sense of right versus wrong, and he considered his father's infidelity to be intolerable. This left him highly conflicted about his intention to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pilot, and he ultimately made a conscious decision to separate from what his father represented by getting himself kicked out of his flight program. Because Kedric was older when his parents divorced, he was already fairly mature and he had already begun to separate emotionally from his parents. This likely served to protect Kedric from some of the harm often caused by parental divorce. He deliberately chose to marry a woman who was dissimilar from his mother, which was a step toward redefining his own life values, expectations, and relationships. Further, Kedric's strong self-esteem helped to serve as a buffer from the negative impact of his parents' divorce. Additional protective factors include his mother's recognition that Kedric needed space following the divorce, as well as his capacity to love and be loved (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996).

Taken Together, What Does the Clinical Material and Research Tell Us?

The literature has shown that parental divorce is not an isolated event in a child's life. Rather, the effects of parental divorce stay with a child throughout his or her life, at times existing at the forefront of a child's experience and at other times operating in the background. Growing up, children with divorced parents come to realize the fragility of relationships. They often struggle with loneliness and fears of abandonment and rejection. Many children of divorced parents enter adulthood worried and angry at their parents. Children do not take divorce lightly, and many find that divorce makes it harder for them to form romantic relationships in adulthood because their own parental model was marred by divorce. The anxiety from parental divorce has the

tendency to carry over from the previous generation and threaten a young adult's ability to establish his or her own loving relationships. Furthermore, once love and intimacy is established, the child of divorce feels vulnerable to the possibility of his or her own relationship ending in divorce. Some children may go on to make the same mistakes their parents made, perpetuating the problems that plagued them throughout their early lives to create a "legacy of divorce" (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

As the experiences of Cameron, Dana, Denise, and Kedric demonstrate, children experience divorce in vastly different ways at different times, with the effects of divorce culminating in adulthood and impacting their expectations about relationships in addition to their coping abilities. Younger children are more vulnerable to the immediate impact of divorce, as they haven't yet developed adaptive coping mechanisms to help them come to terms with the psychological loss, and they are more dependent on parental support. While younger populations may be more susceptible to the immediate effects of divorce, the lasting impacts are just as significant for children who experience divorce during later stages of development. Each individual child's experience of parental divorce, and his or her reaction to the divorce, is unique and cannot be pre-determined. Some children may be naturally more resilient to divorce and related stressors than others. Some children may bury their feelings until later whereas others may manifest them immediately. Some children may have more social support and internal resources to help them cope, while others may not. One thing is clear: children vary in their responses to parental divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996).

Despite the challenges faced throughout the divorce process, many children emerge in adulthood as empathic, competent, and sometimes courageous, thanks to some combination of their own inner resources and supportive relationships with parents, grandparents, siblings, or mentors. Some are able to do this by following the example of parents who were able to rebuild their lives following divorce or by looking to role models in loving romantic relationships. Other children are able to persevere in forming their own secure attachments by making a conscious effort to turn away from the example set by their parents. In many cases, divorce presents children with an opportunity for growth and a chance to defy the odds, to learn from their parents' mistakes, and go on to be happily married and to live productive lives (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996).

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