

## The Effects of Divorce on Children

Robert Hughes, Jr., Ph.D.

Department of Human and Community Development

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

January 4, 2005

Probably one of the most frequently asked questions over the last two decades about family life has been, "**Is divorce harmful to children?**" Although this may seem like a very important question, I would 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 paper 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. A more recent update of the findings indicates that this pattern continues in more recent research (Amato, 2001).

Despite this general finding across many studies, there are important qualifications of these findings. First, the actual differences between the two groups are relatively small (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). In fact, the children in the two types of families 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. These results mean that **as a group** children from divorced families have more problems than children from intact families.

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 had more severe problems. 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 professional 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. Amato (1999) estimates that

about 40% of the young adults from divorced families were doing better than the young people from nondivorced families.

The implications of these findings are two-fold. On the one hand, the majority of children from divorced families do not have serious problems requiring professional help. On the other hand, a larger percentage of children from divorced families than intact families are likely to 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 and the media often errs on the side of one or the other of these two types of findings. Both findings are important.

### **What causes the differences between children in divorced versus intact families?**

As I said in the beginning, the general question of differences between children in different types of families is less important than what causes these differences. Now let's look at what we know about what causes these differences. One way to think about this is to consider the risks that may cause difficulties for children. Paul Amato (1993) and Kelly and Emery (2003) indicate that there are several types of risks that may contribute to children's difficulties. These are:

1. **PARENTAL LOSS**-- divorce often results in the loss of contact with one parent 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 CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS**-- 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.

### **What evidence do we have about how each of these factors affects children in divorced families?**

*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. Kelly and Emery (2003) report that on average, nonresidential fathers see their children only 4 times per month following divorce and about 20% of children have no contact with their fathers 2-3 years after divorce. In contrast, non-residential mothers visit their children more frequently and are less likely to cease contact.

The amount of contact between the nonresidential father and their children is not the determining factor; it is the quality of the father-child relationship that matters. There is a growing body of evidence that illustrate how nonresidential fathers affect their children. First, when a nonresidential father has frequent contact and there is minimal conflict, children are faring better; however, when there is conflict, frequent visits are related to poorer adjustment of children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In a study that looked at results across a broad range of factors, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that when fathers helped with homework, set appropriate limits and expectations and demonstrated warmth, children fared better. In other words, good parenting by noncustodial parents matters. In short, children benefit from continued relationships with nonresidential parents.

*Economic losses.* Due to limited economic resources, children in single-parent families may have more difficulties. Following divorce, custodial parents (mostly mothers) generally have less income than most two-parent families. 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. It is important to note the divorced families economic circumstances do not account completely for the well-being of children. 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. One of the ways that lower income may impact children is through disruptions that may result from less money. Many divorced families change residence which may result in changes in schools, child care, friends, and other supportive relationships. In short, less money often leads to more disruptions which may lead to more problems for children.

*Life stress.* In general, the accumulation of multiple stressors and changes create difficulties for children. There are only a few studies that have explored this hypothesis, but the results seem to support it. Recently, Crowder and Teachman (2004) found that the

more often children in single parent families moved the more likely they were to drop out of school or become pregnant during the teen years. 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 who 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 (Amato & Keith, 1991). 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.

*Conflict between parents.* Another risk that causes children's difficulty is conflict between parents prior to, during and after the divorce that contributes to lower well-being. There have been a number of studies examining this issue. 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.

*Summary.* There are a number of factors that account for why children in divorcing families may have difficulties—loss of contact with a supportive parent, fewer economic resources that lead to multiple changes, more stress, poor parental adjustment, lack of parental competence and conflict between parents. When these risks can be reduced or overcome, then children will fare better.

## **Why do children and young adults from divorced families still seem to be more distressed than children from intact families?**

Even though this review has shown that children from divorced families are not overwhelming worse off psychologically, anyone who has a conversation with a child or young adult whose parents have divorced will tell you that these young people still seem to experience considerable distress about the breakup of their families and that these feelings linger. Some new work with these children indicates that while children may not be significantly impaired as a result of the divorce, they do carry painful memories. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) report that young adults in the early 20s who experienced the divorce of their parents still report pain and distress over their parents' divorces ten years later. Feelings of loss about the relationship with their fathers was the most common report. Those young people who reported high conflict between their parents were even more likely to have feelings of loss and regret.

There is also some evidence that young adults whose parents divorce feel as if they had little control over their lives following divorce including the transitions between households. Less than 20% of children report that both of their parents talked to them about the impending divorce and only 5% say that their parents tried to explain why the divorce was occurring and were given a chance to ask questions (Dunn et al., 2001). Children report more positive feelings and less painful memories of household transitions when they were given some chance to voice their ideas about visiting or living arrangements (Dunn et al., 2001).

These continuing painful memories and feelings of helplessness help us to further understand the experience of children following divorce and provides some useful ideas about ways to reduce these painful situations.

### *Overall Conclusions*

The overall results of these studies suggest that while children from divorced families may, on average, experience more major psychological and behavioral problems 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 contact with parents, economic difficulties, stress, parental adjustment and competence, and interparental conflict all contribute at least to some degree to the difficulties of children. Some new findings shift our attention from major problems to milder but important long-term painful memories and feelings of helplessness. These feelings can continue well into young adulthood which reminds us that there are many things we can do to help children. These results provide significant implications to practitioners interested in designing interventions for children and adults in divorcing families.

## REFERENCES

- Amato, P. R. (1993). Children's adjustment to divorce: Theories, hypotheses, and empirical support. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *55*, 23-38.
- Amato, P. R. (1999). Children of divorce parents as young adults. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage* (pp. 147-164). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Amato, P. R. (2001). Children and divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *15*, 355-370.
- Amato, P.R. (1994). Life-span adjustment of children to their parents' divorce. *The Future of Children*, *4*, 143-164. Available from: [http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=75582](http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information_show.htm?doc_id=75582)
- Amato, P. R., & Gilbreth, J. (1999). Nonresident fathers and children's well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *61*, 557-573.
- Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *110*, 26-46.
- Crowder, K., & Teachman, J. (2004). Do residential conditions explain the relationship between living arrangements and adolescent behavior? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *66*, 721-738.
- Dunn, J., Davies, L. C., O'Connor, T. G., & Sturgess, W. (2001). Family lives and friendships: The perspectives of children in step-, single-parent, and nonstep families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *15*, 272-287.
- Hetherington, E. M. (1993). An overview of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage with a focus on the early adolescent. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *7*, 39-56.
- Hetherington, E. M., & Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or worse*. New York: Norton.
- Kelly, J. B., & Emery, R. E. (2003). Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resiliency perspectives. *Family Relations*, *52*, 352-362.
- Laumann-Billings, L., & Emery, R. E. (2000). Distress among young adults in divorced families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *14*, 671-687.
- Citation for this document: Hughes, R., Jr. (2005). *The effects of divorce on children*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Extension. *Permission is granted to copy this document for educational purposes.*