The Impact of Divorce on Child Well-Being

National Healthy Marriage Resource Center Webinar
October 22, 2008 12:30 pm-2:00pm (EDT)

Presenters:
Patrick Patterson, National Healthy Marriage Resource Center
Paul Amato, Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University
Robin Deutsch, Ph.D., Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School
How to Ask a Question…

1. Click on the "Q&A" tab.
2. Type your question in the top box.
3. Click on the word "Ask" to submit your question.

Type your question here.
Learning Objectives

• To provide the latest findings from research on how divorce affects child well-being.
• To learn and discuss the impact of divorce on parents.
• To provide information on the differing outcomes of divorce on children from low-conflict and high-conflict homes.
Divorce and Children’s Well-Being

Paul R. Amato
Department of Sociology
Pennsylvania State University
Percentage of Marriages Ending in Divorce
Divorce is Linked with Negative Outcomes among Children

- externalizing problems
- internalizing problems
- low self-esteem
- academic problems
- problems with peer relations
Divorce is Linked with Negative Outcomes among Adult Offspring

- less education
- lower income and job status
- increased risk of depression
- increased risk of marital conflict and divorce
- weak long-term bonds with parents
Are All Children Affected Similarly?

- Some children exhibit lifelong increases in serious problems

- Some children show only minor, short-term distress

- Some children are better off following divorce if their parents had an overtly hostile relationship
Distributions of Psychological Well-Being for Offspring with Divorced and Married Parents

Graph showing distributions of psychological well-being in offspring with divorced and married parents.
Distributions of Psychological Well-Being for Offspring with Divorced and Married Parents

High risk range

Psychological Well-Being (Z Scores)

-3 -2.5 -2 -1.5 -1 -0.5 0 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 3

% Cases

Divorce

No Divorce
How Does Divorce Lower Children’s Well-Being?

- Economic hardship
- Poor parenting
- Feeling caught in the middle
- Multiple stressful transitions
- Interactions with genetic risk
What Helps?

- Economic security
- Competent (authoritative) parenting from both parents
- Cooperative co-parenting
- Stability
- Parent-child communication
- Social support for children
What Can Practitioners Do?

- Encourage parents to talk with children
- Teach parents to separate their distress from child-rearing practices
- Help parents to engage in cooperative coparenting
- Assist children in garnering social support
The Effects of Divorce on Children

Robin M. Deutsch, Ph.D.
Children and the Law Program
Massachusetts General Hospital
Factors that harm children:

• Diminished parenting after divorce

• Being in the middle
Diminished parenting after divorce

- Conflict between parents associated with poorer parenting
- Parents more preoccupied with own life and changes after divorce
- Parent looks to child for support and companionship
Diminished Parenting after divorce

• Compared to married parents divorced parents more prone to depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, psychosomatic complaints

• Mothers less warm, more rejecting, use harsher discipline

• Fathers withdraw more from and engage in more difficult interactions with children
Children caught in the Middle

• Exposure to anger and rage toward other parent is damaging to children

• Having child carry hostile messages, asking intrusive questions, creating a need for secrets place children in the middle
Planning the divorce: what do children need
Initial Separation Stress

- First year or two most stressful time
- Adequate preparation and information reduces isolation and confusion
- Ongoing contact with leaving parent important
- Predictability regarding new schedules, another home, absences from other parent
Preparation for Preschoolers

- Tell children together

- Tell children shortly (no more than a few days) before a parent moves

- Let children know that you will always be their mommy and daddy and that you will always be there for them
Preparation for Preschoolers

- Let them know it is not their fault
- Have a room set up in new home with some familiar toys; invite non-moving parent into the new space
- Let children know when they will see the other parent and show them a calendar with days color coded
Preparation for School-aged Children

- Tell them together

- Let them know that this is an adult decision and they had nothing to do with it

- Both parents love them and always will
Preparation for School-aged Children

• Let them know where the other parent will live and show them the house, apt. Ideally other parent will see the new place as well

• Let them know the schedule

• Take them with you to choose sheets for their bed in the other house
Preparation for adolescents

- Ask for their thoughts about a new schedule and consider their input

- Let them know that their personal schedule matters and parents will work with that

- Let them know that as parents you will communicate about any schedule changes, issues
Protective Factors

• Minimal conflict between parents

• Continued love and support from both parents
Protective Factors

- Good relationship with their parents
- Sense that each parent respects the other’s relationship with the child and the child does not have to enter and re-enter different compartments because parents are so negative about each other
- Feeling known and understood by both parents
Child adjustment linked to parent adjustment

- Effective parenting mediates impact of divorce

- Effective Parenting style: warm, authoritative discipline, appropriate expectations, involvement, monitoring of activities
Children’s adjustment: conclusions from the research

- Divorce creates stressors for children and families
- Divorce is a risk factor for psychological problems among children
- BUT resilience is the normative outcome of divorce for children
- Children still have painful feelings and memories
- Individual differences in children’s post-divorce outcome are influenced by post-divorce family life and family process variables
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The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center is dedicated to helping your marriage education program succeed.

Please email us at info@healthymarriageinfo.org if there are other areas of research you would like the resource center to address in the future.

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Webinars are held the FOURTH Wednesday of each month.

A recording of today’s Webinar will be available on the NHMRC Website in 7 to 9 days.

Please visit the website at:

www.healthymarriageinfo.org

Thank you and have a great afternoon!