



**national
healthy marriage
resource center**

NHMRC October Webinar Transcript

The Impact of Divorce on Child Well-Being

Moderator: Patrick Patterson

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The Impact of Divorce on Child Well-Being

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen thank you for standing by. Welcome to the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center October 2008 Webinar conference call.

During the presentation all participants will be in a listen only mode. If at any time during the conference you need to reach an operator, please press star 0. As a reminder, this conference is being recorded Wednesday October 22, 2008.

I would now like to turn the conference over to Patrick Patterson, Project Manager for the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. Please go ahead sir.

Patrick Patterson: Thank you (Franklin). Good afternoon. And welcome to the October National Healthy Resource Center's Webinar entitle the Impact of Divorce on Child Well-Being.

This Webinar starts a new fiscal year for us. We're trying as best we can base on feedback from grantees and our Webinar audience to devise and develop Webinars specifically meeting the needs of the field at large.

My name again is Patrick Patterson. I'm the Program Manager for the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. And I'll be moderating today's Webinar.

Our presenters for today are Dr. Paul Amato, distinguished Professor of Sociology, Demography, Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

Our second presenter is Dr. Robin Deutsch, Psychologist and Direct of Forensic Services for the Children's (MR) Program in the Department of Psychiatry at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School.

A few housekeeping notes. For this Webinar, many of you might be taking notes or want to keep up with the presentations. Two things I'll mention. One is that the presentations have been sent to you guys in advance of today's Webinar.

The second thing is this Webinar is being recorded. And so materials, the actual recording will all be posted on the Resource Center's Web site after today's Webinar. Approximately seven to nine business days.

If you want to go to our Web site following, the Web site address is www.healthymarriageinfo.org. I'll repeat - www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

With our Webinar technology, while presenters are presenting you will continue to have a chance to submit questions. And just for a brief 101 on how you submit questions, I'll ask (Jen) to walk us through that process.

(Jen)?

Jen: Great. Thanks Patrick. Just so you guys can check. On your screens you'll see at the top left in your toolbar, there is a Q&A button. If you click on this, it'll open up a window for you where you can type in a question.

Type that in, hit either enter or ask. And that'll send the question out to us. We'll send back to you a response. So something like, thank you for your question it's been submitted to the moderator.

This is for two reasons. The first is that it is that it lets you know that we got your message, and we sent it on to Patrick. And he'll be able to ask at the end of both our presenters.

It also gives you the chance to ask another question. So if you have one really good question somewhere around Slide 3, and you come up with another question.

You know, somewhere around Slide 8 in this next - the next presentation, please feel free to ask both. And ask as many - as many questions as often as you'd like.

Also, if for some reason you're screen looks too small. You can hit the F5 button, and that'll take the presentation full-screen. You will have to go back to the original view to ask the question again. And you can do that by hitting F5 a second time, or the escape button.

Again, the Q&A button at the top will give you a chance to ask a question. And we'll collect those for the end. Thanks. Patrick?

Patrick Patterson: Thank (Jen). For today's Webinar, the way that we'll moderate our presentations, but also our Q&A, after each presenter presents, I will do a specific Q&A for a short period of time following their presentations.

At the very end, when Dr. (George) completes his presentation, I'll open it up for our general Q&A. And so I just - a reminder again, if you have question as they're presenting, please feel free to submit those then. And then also during the general Q&A portion you can also continue to submit questions.

So it should be an exciting Webinar. A lot of folks are exciting about this topic. We're very excited about the implications of what this will lead us to moving forward. And we'll begin our Webinar.

Objectives for today's Webinar are three-fold. The first is to provide the latest findings from research on how divorce affects child well-being.

Many of us understand the implications of family stability, but also divorce on our children. So we plan to share data from those findings during this Webinar.

The second is to learn and discuss the impact of divorce on parents. The angle most often taken is the impact on children. But this time we'll talk also about the impact on parents regarding divorce.

And then the third is to provide information on the differing outcomes of divorce on children from low conflict and high conflict homes.

A fourth that's not listed here, but that we'll address also either by questions or either by what you guys have submitted. Will be the impact of the research and the findings on the marriage education field and your day at work.

With that said, I'll introduce our first presenter, Dr. Paul Amato. Dr. Amato is a distinguished Professor of Sociology, Demography, Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

He is also co-investigator of the National Longitudinal Study on Marriage. A 20 year survey of married men, women and children funded by the Pennsylvania State University Population Research Institute.

His research interests include marital quality, the causes and consequences of divorce and parent/child relationships over the life course.

He has published over 100 journals, articles and book chapters, along with five books. Including *Alone Together - How Marriage in America is Changing*. Dr. Amato?

Paul Amato: Hello. Thank you. I hope that everyone can hear me adequately. I want to thank the members of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center for inviting me to speak today.

I have never participated in a Webinar before. So this is a new, but very interesting experience for me.

I'm going to be spending the next 20 minutes or so talking about divorce and children's well-being. Trying to draw basically from the accumulated academic and scholarly research that's been done on this topic for the last two or three decades.

So I'm going to start off by just showing you a slide, which reveals the percentage of marriages ending in divorce in the United States.

Now many people ask questions about the divorce rate. What is the divorce rate? And how is it changing?

The divorce rate is actually a very confusing statistic, because there're several different versions of it. There's accrued divorce rate. There's defined divorce rate.

But most people really want to know when they're asking this question, I believe, is what percentages - what percentage of marriages will end in divorce?

And we have some data here going from 1960 to 2000. These estimates were calculated by my colleague at Penn State, (Robert Shulen). Who is a demographer who specializes in studying statistics like this.

What we see in this figure is that in the year 1960, approximately 1/3 of marriages that took place in that year would have ended in divorce.

And you can see that the projected percentage of marriages ending in divorce rose during the next couple of decades. And it reached its peak around 1990. And has been relatively flat since then.

Currently, we predict that about 45% of all marriages will end in divorce.

Now if you take into account the fact that some couples will permanently separate and not divorce, and you add them to this 45%, then you will reach approximately 50%.

So the claim that about 1/2 of all marriages end in divorce or permanent separation is basically correct. That's the figure that we often hear, and it really is probably the best estimate to give people a feel for the real level of marital instability in the US today.

Now, we know from several decades of research that divorce is linked with a number of negative outcomes among children.

And what we mean by this is that if you compare children who grew up in divorced families, with children who grew up with two continuously married biological or adopted parents.

We find that children of divorce have a greater risk of exhibiting externalizing problems. This would include aggression or misconduct or delinquency. Internalizing problems such as sadness and depression.

They have a tendency to experience low self-esteem, not think very highly of themselves. They tend to experience more academic problems. Especially lower scores on standardized tests, as well as lower school grades.

And they have a greater risk of experiencing problems with peer relationships. That is forming friendships with other children.

And it appears that they tend to be somewhat aggressive in dealing with their peers. Or they may be loners and have difficulty just relating to talking with and establishing bonds with children of their own age.

Now we know that divorce is also linked with negative outcomes among adult offspring. And what we mean here is that if we compare young adults who grew up in divorced families with young adults who grew up with two continuously married parents.

Young adults from divorced families of origin reach adulthood with less education, lower income and job status and increased risk of experiencing depression.

An increased risk of experiencing marital conflict and divorce in their own marriages. And of having weak long-term emotional bonds with their parents. They tend to report being less close to their parents.

So we see that the implications of growing up in a divorced family, for at least some children, do and often can persist well into adulthood. So we're not necessarily talking about short-term effects that quickly dissipate.

Now all of this sounds pretty negative. But let me make a very important qualification. Question, are all children affected similarly? And the answer is no. Definitely not. Instead what we see is a great deal of variability in how children adapt to divorce.

It's true that some children exhibit life-long problems that appear to stem from the disruption and the conflict and the turmoils surrounding their parents divorce.

Other children show only minor short-term distress that goes away after a period of time.

And our research has shown that some children actually show an improvement in adjustment following divorce. And this occurs in particular in families in which the parents had an overtly hostile relationship.

Now we're not talking about parents who just had the occasional fight. We're talking about parents who had - who seem to be locked into a chronic pattern of overtly fighting and arguing in front of their children, in an atmosphere of hostility. And these arguments never seem to get resolved. And there may even be violence in the relationship.

Now this is actually sort of a toxic environment in which to raise children. And so we found that our 20 year study, that when these marriages end in divorce, children actually show improvements in well-being.

Because it's better for them to be in a well-functioning single parent family, than a dysfunctional two parent family.

So, there's really a very wide range of outcomes that we see among children from divorced families.

Now just to demonstrate that, I'm going to show you this next figure, which comes from some of my own research. It takes a little bit of time to understand what's going on in here. So let me explain it to you.

What we have here are data from young adults. These are young adults in their 20s. Who we have followed over time. And when they were in their approximately mid-20s we gave them a series of questionnaires and tests.

We gave them a checklist of various psychological or psychiatric symptoms they might be experiencing. We gave them an inventory of life satisfactions, where they described how satisfied they are with various facets of their lives.

We asked them questions about their level of self-esteem. Whether it was high or low and so on.

And then we put all of these different measurements together to create an overall score for each child. Which reflected their overall of psychological well-being in early adulthood.

Now we have in this figure data from about 150 young adults who experienced divorce. And an equal number of children who grew up in two parents families.

And we matched these two groups, so that the two groups are perfectly matched in terms of parent's education, parent's income, parent's religiosity, parent's attitudes about marriage and divorce.

In fact we matched them on 40 different variables. The two groups are really very very similar except for the fact that one group of children came from families that divorced. And the other group of children did not.

In almost every other respect, these two groups of families are very very similar.

Now, if you look at the horizontal axis on the graph. You'll see scores ranging from -3 up to +3. Zero in the middle means average adjustment.

Positive numbers mean positive adjustments. The higher the number the better the adjustment. And the negative numbers indicate poorer adjustment or poorer well-being. With the larger the negative number the poorer the outcome.

And we have simply the distributions of these two groups. With the solid line representing children who came from families where the parents were continuously married, and the broken line showing you the children who grew up in a family where they experience divorce as a child.

Now there are two things to note about this figure that are quite interesting. The first is that there's a great deal of overlap between these two groups.

For example, if you look at the distribution of children who grew up without a divorce. You can see that there are some children over on the far right, which indicates that they are very well adjusted. They're doing just great.

And there are some children on the far left of the figure, indicating that they are experiencing some fairly serious problems in adulthood.

You see the same thing among the children from divorced families, indicated by the patched line - the broken line. You'll see that it extends all the way to the far right of the diagram, as well as all the way to the far left.

So, in both groups we're getting the full range of child outcomes. Or young adult outcomes.

In other words, there are some children in divorced families - from divorced families that reach adulthood, and they're doing very well. They report very few symptoms. They are happy with their lives. They are satisfied with what they've got. They have high self-esteem and so on.

And correspondingly we have some children from two parent families who are not doing well at all. Who are reaching adulthood with quite a few problems.

So, the point here is that family structure is not destiny. All right? It's simply one factor among many that can increase the risk of various problems.

Now, you will note however that the broken line, the distribution for children from divorced families is shifted to the left. And in particular, you'll notice that it's shifted to the left on the very far left side of the diagram.

And in fact, this the range of high risk. This represents about the 10% of children who are not doing very well in adulthood. They're reported lots of symptoms, low self-esteem. They're unhappy with their lives. These are troubled young people.

And you can see that in this particular range, where we see children not functioning well at all. That there are quite a few more divorced children than children from - or children from divorced families, than children from two parent families.

So within this range - this high risk range, you could say that divorce pretty much doubles the risk the children are going to fall into this range of scores that are linked with a lot of problems.

So on the one hand, you can see how divorce increases the risk of problems. And yet at the same time, there's a great deal of variability in outcomes for children irrespective of family structure.

Now, what are the mechanisms? How does divorce actually lower children's well-being?

Well, we actually know quite a bit about this. We know that most children live with their parents - their mothers following divorce. And the mother and her children tend to experience a decline in standard of living following divorce.

In fact, divorce pushes many mothers and their children below the poverty line. And so economic hardship and the stress that arises from that is part of the explanation for why children from divorced families may experience more problems.

Poor parenting is another issue. Now, again, we're going to say a few things about parents here. Most single mothers following divorce, you know, are trying very hard. But they are a group under stress.

We know that divorce is a stressful experience for parents. Even for those parents who initiate it. It's still a stressful experience.

There is a period of time when people are just sort of obsessed with the divorce. They're focusing on their own pain. They may feel anger at the ex-spouse. They may feel betrayal. Whatever.

But when parents are focused on their own pain, it tends to make them less effective parents. And so we find that among single mothers following divorce, their parenting skills often decline.

That is they tend to exhibit less warmth toward their children. They tend to be more harsh when they dispense discipline. And they also are more inconsistent in the way that they dispense discipline.

So, poor parenting from stressed mothers - and often from stressed fathers for that matter, helps to explain some of this effect.

Now another factor is this feeling caught in the middle between the two parents that have divorced.

Many parents find it very difficult following the divorce to continue to be cooperative with one another in terms of raising their children. Because their feelings of anger or hurt or betrayal and so on kind of just get in the way.

And so, during the divorce process, and in the years that follow, many of these parents continue to fight with each other, to disagree with each other and not surprisingly, they're often disagreeing about the children.

Children who are exposed to this constant bickering between parents feel caught in the middle. Because most children want to maintain close ties with both mothers and fathers following divorce.

And when they hear their parents arguing - or see their parents arguing about them. When one parent belittles the other parent in front of the child, or calls the other parent names or says bad things about the parent, children feel like they're really being torn in half. And this is a very very stressful situation for children to be in. We also know that divorce is frequently followed by multiple transitions that children often experience as stressful.

For example, it's very common to move residences following divorce. Often the mother and her children have to move out of the family home and into an apartment which is less expensive, for example.

When - moving is not really a good thing for children at this point in time. Because it often means that they're moving to different neighborhoods where they lose touch with their neighborhood friends.

And it often means if it's a big move over a longer distance, that they may have to change schools. And if children go to a different school, it means they're out of sync with their classmates and the curriculum. Which makes it more difficult for them to catch up academically, and so on.

And so, this whole post-divorce period is often a time of great change for children - children's lives. Children thrive on stability. Not instability.

And the cumulative results of all these things going on in children's lives, like moving, changing schools, parents starting to date and bring new partners into the household can really overwhelm children.

And finally, we are beginning to understand, just in the last couple of years. And I think this is quite interesting. That there appears to be an interaction between divorce and certain genetic factors.

We know that - what we're beginning to find out that there are certain variations of certain genes. That tend to predispose children to, for example, anti-social behavior.

In other words, if children have this gene - this particular gene variant, they are at increased risk for exhibiting aggression or delinquency or other forms of anti-social behavior.

However, we find that this gene is only activated if children experience stress during childhood. And that could include going through a divorce.

Or it could include being exposed to parents who have a high conflict marriage. Or just being exposed to very poor parenting, abuse or neglect.

But, a stressful home environment appears to activate these genes. However, if children are raised in a harmonious, stable, two parent family and there's no divorce, this gene never gets activated. It just lies dormant. And children will not exhibit those problems.

So, we're just beginning to see now some interesting collaborations between family psychologists and family sociologists and geneticists in terms of trying to understand how the genetic factors that children are born with interact with their early home environments. In terms of either making these children resilient or vulnerable.

So what helps? Well, we know that economic security helps. And this is one of the reasons why fathers payment of child support, assuming the children are in a single mother family, is associated with children's adjustment. They tend to do better when fathers pay child support and pull the full amount, and pay it consistently.

Also, competent authoritative parenting from both parents helps children to adjust to divorce. And by authoritative parenting I'm mean parenting in which parents exhibit both warmth and support to their children. But also are firm with them, and ensure the children follow the rules.

Cooperative co-parenting is good if parents can put their differences aside and cooperate as parents. In other words, separate the spousal role - the ex-spouse role from the parent role. And exchange information about the children. Try to have some consistency in the rules across households.

Not argue in front of the children. Not belittle or disparage the other parent in front of the children. If they can be responsible co-parents, this helps children.

We know that stability in children's lives following divorce helps them to adjust. Good parent child communication, which means that parents need to let children know what's going on.

They need to make sure the children are in the loop about the important decisions that parents are making. Including the decision to divorce.

And we also know that social support is good for children. The more adult and other children the children can go to for companionship, for support, to talk about their problems with and so on. The better children seem to do in the years following divorce.

So, this lead us directly to a few issues for practitioners. What can they do? Well these things are easier said than done obviously.

But, one important thing is to encourage parents to talk with their children. We have found in our studies, when we've spoken directly with children from divorced families or young adults from divorced families.

That the majority of these young people tell us I never once talked with my parents about the divorce. My parents never once told me what was going on, or explained what was happening.

A lot of people tell us that they just came home one day, you know, they were in the 8th Grade or something, and they just - they came home from school one day and their mother said, you know, your dad's moved out. We're getting a divorce.

And that was about as close as they came - ever came to, with respect to a parent/child talk. Children need to understand why parents are divorcing.

What the divorce is going to involve. What it's going to mean for them. And, you know, how this is going to affect their lives.

This is an incredible change for them. And yet parents, because of embarrassment or their just too focused on their own problems often do not talk with children.

But when they do talk with them, and explain clearly and lovingly what's going on, children adjust much better. So we need to encourage parents to talk to their kids.

Even their young children. You know, even pre-school children need to have some kind of understanding of what's going on.

We need to find ways to teach parents to separate their own personal distress from their child-rearing practices. You know, we have the mother who's going through some depression and distress because of the divorce. Because she can't make ends meet.

Because, you know, she's lonely. Or she's dealing with residual feelings of anger and betrayal and so on from the divorce.

If we can get parents - fathers as well as mothers, to learn to compartmentalize those negative feelings. And not let it spill over and affect how they relate to their children, that would be great.

Because we know that parental distress interferes with the quality of child-rearing. So we need to teach parents how they can separate their own negative feelings. And not inadvertently take it out on their children.

Another point, we need to help parents to engage in cooperative co-parenting. This is probably going to require some education. Most parents don't know how to do this.

We need to teach parents perhaps techniques, communication techniques, some conflict resolution skills. Teach them how not to escalate disagreements into major arguments. How to be civil with each other when you're having a disagreement, and so on.

And encourage them to work together as a team to raise their children. Even though they no longer are married to each other.

And finally, we need to find ways to assist children to garner social support. And there are a number of - in fact quite a large number of programs in schools for divorce children, or children from divorced families rather.

Where children come in for a class period or perhaps after school sessions, and they talk with - in groups. And they talk with the school psychologist. And they might see a video.

But the most important part of these programs is that it gives the children a chance to talk with each other. That is the children come together in groups of, you know, six or eight.

And they get to talk to each other and share their experiences. And they realize that they are not alone. That there are other kids experiencing the same problems.

And this support they get from other children appears to be perhaps, you know, one of the most, if not the most important aspects of the program that helps children get over their - their problems that they're going through because of their parents divorce.

Well, those are my final comments. I'd be very happy to take questions now or later. And I think I will turn the presentation back to our coordinator. Thank you very much.

Patrick Patterson: Thank you Dr. Amato. Very resourceful presentation and sharing those facts. I think the graphs were pretty telling also. I've got a number of questions that have come in. I'll pose a few of them to you now. And then I'll share some of the others at the very end of our Webinar.

The first one I'll start with that has come in is - I'll read it as it's written. We know that divorce of married parents and separation of non-married parents are different. What does the research say about how these two different forms of parental breakup affect children?

Paul Amato: Okay. That is a really excellent question. Because even though the divorce rate in the US has sort of flattened out, there are an increasing number of children who are being born outside of marriage.

And in 40 to 50% of these cases, children are actually born to - to cohabiting parents.

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: In other words, these children are living in two parent families. With both biological parents, but the parents are not married.

No unfortunately, we also know that these unions tend to be quite unstable. They're much less stable than marriages.

And within a few years, the majority of them will break up. Some of them will transform into marriages. But a larger proportion will break up.

Now, the question, how do these kinds of break ups - these informal divorces. How are they different from formal legal divorces?

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: And I think, you know, we really don't know the answer to that question yet. Because we haven't done enough research yet on children in these circumstances.

I've only seen a couple of studies myself. And it's, you know, you can't really base much on a couple of studies. You need a large mass of studies to get the big picture.

So I think we're going to be seeing a lot of research on that topic in the next few years. But, here's how I would see it. If I had to take an educated guess.

Patrick Patterson: Okay.

Paul Amato: From a child's perspective, do they really care if the parents are legally married? I mean, do they even know if their parents are legally married?

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: I would think from a child's perspective, it's not that important. So, if you have a situation where you have two co-habiting parents. And you've got a five year old child. And the parents decide to split up.

I would strongly suspect that the risks for the child are going to be very similar...

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: ...to the risk for a child who experiences divorce. Because from a child's perspective, a lot of the same issues are going to be relevant.

It's conceivable it could even be more difficult. Because these children, you know, are probably going to be poor. Because, you know, the cohabiting parents tend to be more poor - or more likely to be poor...

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: ...than married parents. And they may not get as much support from other people. From in-laws, from, you know, peers, from the community, from neighbors. I don't know.

So, we really don't know yet. But I certainly don't think that - I see no reason why children under those circumstances wouldn't also be at-risk of a number of problems.

Patrick Patterson: Yeah. I think that's a question that we should probably ponder a little bit more. Because I think a lot of the families, particularly that a lot of our programs are serving are - it's a mix group.

You know, a lot of them are from non-married families. And so this question probably is one that directly affects how our programs deliver services also.

Paul Amato: Exactly. And I wish we had more research on it. There's been a lot of demographic research that's been going on recently. Trying to figure out well how many families are there like this? And how many children are being affected? And how stable are these families?

But we haven't yet done the research where we dig in and understand the family relationships. And how these kinds of family sort of circumstances affect children's development and well-being.

And that's really I think the next stage now that we've become aware of it. This is an important issue. Now we need to go in there and...

Patrick Patterson: Okay.

Paul Amato: ...find out in more detail how the children are faring.

Patrick Patterson: Second question for you. Is there a socio-economic divide in the percentage of marriages that end in divorce? I'll repeat the question. Is there a socio-economic divide in the percentage of marriages that end in divorce?

Paul Amato: Yes there is. And interestingly, it's becoming a larger divide over time. Historically in the US, well at least, you know, it's going back from the last 50 years.

People were more likely to - people are more likely to divorce if they are poor. Or in a low income category. Or if they have low levels of education.

People who are well educated with college degrees, or who have good jobs or high levels of income are less likely to divorce.

So in fact, poverty or low education is, you know, one of the things that predicts divorce.

Now curiously, that socio-economic divide has gotten larger in the last decade or so. And it looks like what's happening is in the US. You saw that that divorce rate, it kind of flattened out in the 90s.

Well what appears to be happening is the divorce rate is going down for people who have college degrees and good jobs. And is continuing to go up for people who don't have any kind of college degree, and may not even have a high school degree, and are poor.

So we're seeing that the trend lines are going in opposite directions. With marriages becoming more stable for the well educated, marriage is becoming increasing less stable for the poorly educated. So yes there is a divide and it's getting bigger.

Patrick Patterson: Okay. Thanks for that response. We'll move now to our second presenter. Dr. Amato there are a number of other questions that we have for you. And I'll try to get as many of those posed to you at the end of our Q&A session.

Paul Amato: Okay. Thank you.

Patrick Patterson: Yes sir. Our next presenter is Dr. Robin Deutsch. Dr. Deutsch is a Psychologist and Director of Forensic Services for the Children and Law Program in the Department of Psychiatry at the

Massachusetts General Hospital. And an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School.

As a therapist, consultant, custody evaluator, mediator and parenting coordinator, her work is focused on the application of child development research to children's adjustment to divorce and parenting issues. The evaluation of families involved and family change and management of high conflict (divorce) - divorce, excuse me.

Dr. Deutsch has published widely on issues related to child development and divorce. And she is co-author of *Seven Things Your Teenage Can't Tell You (and how about to talk about them anyway)*. Dr. Deutsch?

Robin Deutsch: Hello. Thank you. I'm very pleased to be part of this Webinar. And I also want to thank the members of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. And I'm happy to follow up from what Dr. Amato has already talked about.

When people divorce, they often feel hurt and pain, loss and anger. And their dreams of family as they knew it are broken. And they really must re-work their identity and their place in the world with friends and family. And of course they worry about their children.

When they divorce, they care about how they can do what's best for their children. How to talk to their children about their divorce.

And I'm going to review today what it is that harms children during divorce. How to talk to them. And how to provide concrete ways to best support children during and after a divorce.

So, looking at factors that harm children. I'm - are you able to change the slides? Yes. Looking at factors that harm children.

One of the factors that is so significant. And Dr. Amato mentioned is that parenting is really compromised after divorce.

And what happens is that people are not able to - their more preoccupied with getting on with their life. With the changes in their own life.

And often when there is conflict between the parents, that also affects how parents are able to parent their children.

Another thing that sometimes happens is because parents feel so vulnerable when they are in the process of divorce, or after a divorce. Is that they look to their children for some kind of support and companionship.

I'm going to sort of talk a little bit more about some of these parenting issues. And then try to translate into what we can tell parents to help them do what is best for their children. We know that - the research tells us, that

compared to married parents, divorced parents are more prone to depression, alcoholism, to drug abuse. And to having just general psychosomatic kinds of complaints.

We also know that mothers tend to be less warm and more rejecting. And to use harsher discipline.

On the other hand, fathers tend to withdraw more from children. And to have more struggles with children.

So children who are used to parenting in particular ways from their parents, now are living with an experience where not only has their family changed in a significant way. Their family structure has changed.

But they also are viewing their parents differently. The ways in which their parents dealt with them, behaved in the world are often different. Particularly for about the first year and a half or so after - after the separation.

So, what can we - what can we tell parents to help them do what's best for their child? Given that we know that parenting is often really compromised during this time?

Well one thing is we can try to help parents keep their focus on their children. And see things through the eyes of their children.

It's a difficult thing to do. When you're dealing with the kind of stress that parents are dealing with when they're going through a divorce. It is a major stressor.

Another thing that we can do is to keep children out of the middle. When the children have to carry hostile message between their parents, or when they're asked in truth of questions about what they did or what their father's doing, or what their mother's doing.

Or when they feel like they have to keep a secret. I can't tell you how many times I hear, don't tell your father. Don't tell your mother.

We have children who are caught in the middle. And that is another one of the factors along with the diminished parenting that really significantly harms children.

It's also of course very harmful when children are exposed to anger and rage and hostility toward their other - toward their other parent.

So another thing that parents can try to do is to try to find ways to communicate with their ex-spouse, in ways that reduce conflict. And sometimes that means it can't be face-to-face.

Sometimes that means it can't even be on the telephone. Sometimes that means it has to be via email, or through another professional, when things are really bad. But the children really cannot be exposed to that kind of conflict between their parents.

Now, another thing that parents can do so they don't rely on their children for getting support is to get their own support. To get their own support from family and friends and clergy and professionals, or divorce groups. But not to get it from their children.

A fifth thing that parents can do is to get professional help if they need to. If their mood is consistently sad, if they feel they may be using substances too much, if people have brought that to their attention, that's when professional help is really important.

It's also important for parents to get help and support with parenting. There are many parenting groups that will help parents learn how to parent effectively. Particularly when their in the middle of a stressful kind of situation.

So, when - we know these are the things that can be damaging and harmful for children. And we know some of the things that may help a child. And we know that it really is that first year, year and a half or two years that is the most stressful time.

For children, what really helps is having adequate preparation and information about what is going to happen. Children need to know that they're not going to be abandoned. That there is going to be some predictability about how and when they're going to see both of their parents.

They need to know what's going to happen as concretely as possible. And that's really different. What children are told is different depending on their age group.

So for example, for pre-schoolers - first of all for all children. As much as possible, children should be told by both of their parents together. They need to - by telling them together, it sends a positive message.

That the parents are able to communicate together and to work together for the sake of the children. Because the children are the most important thing. That's the message that the children of all age groups need to know.

For pre-schoolers, it really is best to tell children just a few days before a parent moves. Because their sense of time is such, that they can't hold on to it if they're told weeks or months in advance.

They don't know what it means. They just know that it's tension and it's stressful. And they don't know what will happen to them. So it's really best to wait until just a few days before a parent might move.

And they need to know of course that their parents will always be their mommy and their daddy. They also need to know it's not their fault. Because pre-schoolers tend to blame themselves.

When a parent does move, it's important that they have room set up in whatever - wherever they're living, with some familiar toys and familiar items in it.

And they also should be able to - the moving parent, invite the non-moving parent into the new space. It gives the child a sense of security. My mommy, my daddy, knows where I am.

Because pre-schoolers think of course, that their parents know all their thoughts. And all that is going on. They need the security of knowing that both parents know where they are.

Because they don't typically understand days of the week, it's a good idea to have a calendar with days that are color-coded. To let them know what days they're going to see each of their parents. And actually that works for school age children as well as pre-schoolers.

But school age children, again, telling them together is important. But it's also important to let them know as much as possible, that it's a mutual decision. And it's an adult decision. They had nothing to do with it. And they can't make it change.

Because school age children are trying to get a sense of mastery over things. They like to have control over things. They will sometimes try to take sides. They may try to align themselves with one parent.

And they need to know as much as possible, that this really is an adult decision. But their parents are always going to love them. Both of them will.

They also of course need to know where the other parent is going to live. They need to see where that is.

And often it's a good idea to get them to sort of buy-in to the place. Is to take them with you to, for example, choose sheets for their bed in the other house. Or if you're able to paint, to paint - help them choose the paint color. So that there's something that they can do to get invested in the new space.

Like all children, they also need to know what the schedule is. And they need to know it very concretely.

Now for adolescents, we need their input. That doesn't mean adolescents make the decisions. But we need to know what their thoughts are about a new schedule.

And we need them to know that their own personal schedule matters. And that we're, as parents, going to work with that.

So if an adolescent has a job for example, we're not going to say you can't work on these days because these are "my days." We're going to say, you know, yes. We're going to follow your schedule as well.

At the same time, because adolescents can slip through the cracks pretty easily. We need them to know, more than any other age group, except for infants and toddlers. That as parents, we're going to be communicating about any schedule changes and any issues.

Because an adolescent is very savvy and able to say I'm going to stay at mom's tonight instead, but really have some other ideas in mind for example.

So we want to make sure that we are able to - that they know, that we are as parents communicating about schedule changes, and issues.

Now overall, what kids need is minimal conflict between their parents. And of course they need continued love and support from both of their parents.

So, overall, there are some protective factors that the research has shown us really help. One is that they have a good relationship with both of their parents.

Another is, and this can be so hard for parents. When they're really angry, when they're really hurt, but the children need a sense that each of their parents respects the other parent's relationship with the child.

Because otherwise what happens is the child feels like they live in two different compartments. And in order to move from one to the other, it's like crossing the great divide, because their parents are so negative about each other.

They cannot be put in the position where they have to reject the part of them self that is like the other parent, and that loves the other parent. They need to know that their relationship with each parent is respected and valued.

And of course they also know - need to know, that they are known and understood by both of their parents. And they're known through their eyes - the child's eyes. Not through the needs or the dreams or the - of the parent. Or the anger of the parent, but through who the child really is.

So we can tell the parents that we work with, that child adjustment - the adjustment of their children, when they divorce, is directly linked to their own adjustments. And that is a pretty heavy burden for parents to have.

But, they can get help with that. When they are stressed, they can get help with that. Because what we know is if they can effectively parent, then the impact of divorce is going to be reduced. And they're going to look like that big group of people that Dr. Amato showed in the middle of this very first slide.

And we know, the research is very clear, that effective parenting means warm. It means authoritative discipline. It means having appropriate expectations of children. Being involved with their children. And monitoring the activities of their children.

So, just to sort of conclude with some conclusions from the research about children's adjustment is that we know that divorce creates stressors for children and for families.

And we know that it can be a risk factor for psychological problems among children. But we also know that most kids do find, they may still have - matter of fact, they will have. They will always have some painful feelings and memories. But they in general should be able to do fine.

What determines, other than the genetic risk factor that Dr. Amato mentioned. What determines how well they do is what is going on in their family.

What that means is, what is the economic situation in their family? What is the - how are the parents parenting? How are they communicating? In ways that leave the children out of the middle?

And you know, cooperative parenting is the ideal. But if there is too much conflict between parents, they can parent in other ways. They can communicate in what we call parallel parenting. It's really the process of transforming that marital relationship into a really a business relationship. The business of raising our children, to be healthy kids.

The other thing that we know is that to the extent that kids have stability and predictability of their schedule and of their homes. They do better.

So that's the summary. And that's the end of my presentation. And I'd welcome questions.

Patrick Patterson: Thank you Dr. Deutsch. Very good presentation. Very informative. I could definitely hear some of your practical and also professional experience in many of your comments as well, so.

We also have a number of questions for you. I'll facilitate some of those for you directly now. And then shortly afterwards I'll start with the generic Q&A, where I'll ask both you and Dr. Amato a number of questions.

The first question that came in for you. Importantly, both of you mentioned - and this is you and Dr. Amato, in two different questions that were posed to you guys.

Looking through the eyes of a child as important as we think about how to deal with divorce. Why is that so important? Why is does that matter so much?

Robin Deutsch: Well, for one thing, we need to be looking at - we need to have an understanding of the developmental level of the child.

So, you know, part of what I'm talking about when I say looking through the eyes of the child is a pre-school child's view of the world and view of their parent's situation, and their family life is very different from that of an adolescent. And what we tell a pre-schooler is very different from what we tell an adolescent.

So that's one part of it. Is just really being mindful of how our child can process information because of their age. And what their sort of level of emotional sophistication is.

The other thing that I mean is that children will - children have different kinds of fears, depending on their age, when their parents divorce.

And it is so important that we try to understand those, that we give them room to ask questions without pushing it. Yet being available without sort of attributing our views onto them.

We don't want them - just because we're really mad, or we really think that their mother or their father is fill in the blank. We can't believe that our child believes that. We have to see things through their eyes, not through ours.

Patrick Patterson: One of the things I really enjoyed during your presentation, it was obvious that you have a very optimistic view of how to manage divorce, for both the parents and also the children.

I know from practical experience, and just even reading from things across the country. It's very tension-filled for a lot of people. So if you could explain more about how, and again, our audience is filled with folks who deal with couples who are either married, dating, engaged or, you know, in different relationship. That might have had previous troubles in the past.

How do you manage the tensions that some of these parents face? Even after they've moved on after the separation from their previous partner?

Robin Deutsch: That's a really good question. And it probably, we could do a - spend a lot of time on that question.

But just to sort of focus in one place with it, it is tension-filled. And generally parents feel a lot of tension with each other.

And you know, even when you have an infant who knows nothing. But you're holding that infant in your arms. That infant feels the tension when you are faced with your ex-spouse who you really want to do something nasty to. Because you're angry about it.

So part of what I think helps is the following. I think number one, I think people need help. We all need help. Transforming that relationship into a working effective post-divorce relationship.

Separating ourselves from the other person. We're no longer in a couple in the way that we knew it.

So we need to transform our thinking about it. And that's why I like to use the concept of a business relationship. It's different.

A second thing is to avoid any face-to-face contact that in places and at times when conflict is inevitable.

And sometimes that means that we have to make the transitions for our children at school, or daycare, or neutral places. So that we don't see the other spouse.

Another is to - I just think that divorce education classes are so helpful for people. And they really help people stay focused on transforming their relationship, managing anger, learning some conflict resolution skills and keeping the focus on the children.

Patrick Patterson: Okay. Sounds like you have a lot of emphasis on the skills to manage some of the tension or conflict that's present in many of these situations?

Robin Deutsch: Yes.

Patrick Patterson: Last question I'll pose to you directly, and then I'll open it up for our general Q&A, where I'll start giving questions to both you and Dr. Amato.

This is directly from a grantee. I'll read it as it's written. What about the children that live every other week in the other parents home?

They're constantly changing homes. They're being exposed to different parenting skills. How does this affect their well-being?

Robin Deutsch: The children who live every other week, you know, alternate week - a week in each home is that what you're saying?

Patrick Patterson: Yes. Yes.

Robin Deutsch: Well first of all, it's a very inappropriate schedule for a young child. And most courts know that. Most mediators know that.

So until a child is really of school age, it's not a good schedule. Because they miss the other parent too much.

But assuming that it's - that this is the kind of schedule that is happening for a school age child or an adolescent, it actually can work quite well. And it particularly works well for adolescents.

It works well for adolescents because they don't like carrying their stuff back and forth. They don't like making transitions. They want to be really grounded for periods of time in one home or another.

So it's the kind of schedule, assuming that both parents have been good - or at least adequate parents. It's the kind of schedule that can work quite well for adolescents.

Some adolescents need a home base. And feel like that they get their best parenting from one parent. And that's what they're going to need instead.

For school age children, particularly later school age children - 9 to 12 year olds. It can also work well for the same reason.

In that they don't have to be transitioning so many times. They don't have to go back and forth so much.

However, school age children generally benefit from a mid-week contact with the other parent. Because it's a long time for a nine year old, for example, to be away from one parent.

but again, let me say that this is the kind of schedule that really is best for kids when both parents have been very actively involved in their life.

Patrick Patterson: A quick follow up to that. You seem to have kind of a separation of how you treat the children at different stages of development. Is there anything that indicates there might be best practices for gender - that are gender-specific? How you treat boys versus girls, regardless of their developmental stage?

Robin Deutsch: I'm not familiar with any consistent research about that. That, you know, there are certainly - at different developmental stages...

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Robin Deutsch: ...times when girls are more connected to their mothers, or boys to their fathers. But I don't know of any research that suggests gender informs the parenting plans.

Patrick Patterson: Okay. Okay. Well I am now going to begin asking questions of both you guys. I have a full list. A couple pages of questions that have come in during both your presentations. And so I'll try to work my way through as many of those as we can.

So I'll start with the first question. And this for both of you to answer if you'd like. How would you describe the divorce culture in previous generations, as compared to today? How would you describe the divorce culture in previous generations, as compared to today?

Robin Deutsch: You want to start Paul?

Paul Amato: Okay. Sure. I'll jump in. Well there's no doubt that if you look at attitude surveys, that people have become more tolerant and accepting of divorce. Certainly since the 1950s.

Even in the 1950s, divorce wasn't that uncommon actually. The period wasn't quite as stable as you like to think. About 1/4 of all marriages ended in divorce back then.

But, nevertheless, there was a kind of stigma attached to being divorced. It was something that was, you know, a little bit improper. It was seen as being, you know, a problem.

And, you know, you had to go to court and prove fault. And prove that your spouse violated the marriage contract to get a divorce.

And so there was a guilty party and an innocent party. And it was all kind of messy.

And since then, we've become much more accepting of divorce. The stigma of divorce has largely disappeared I think.

And I think this is partly a result of the fact that as a culture we've become, well, you know, how should I put it? Perhaps more individualistic. I think marriage is not as central an institution in organizing our lives as it used to be.

And so, we've gone to this culture of divorce where couples - if legitimates divorce for virtually any reason. For example, I mean, you know, most states have unilateral no-fault divorce. I mean all states have no-fault divorce. Most states have unilateral no-fault divorce.

Which means that, you know, if one partner wants to get a divorce, he or she can do it for whatever reason they want to. I mean, it could be something serious like they're being physically or psychologically abused. Or it could be simply because they don't feel like they're, you know, being personally fulfilled and enriched and self-actualized in the marriage.

You know, the spouse is a nice guy, but they could do better with someone else. So they're going to...

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: ...you know, give it a shot. So, we do have a kind of a casualness about divorce that worries me a little bit.

Because divorce does have serious consequences for many children. Not all children of course. (Unintelligible) ability. But it does pose a risk factor for children. And sometimes parents don't realize that.

I know a lot of parents will say, well I'm going to be happier and then my children will be happier. But doesn't always follow that way.

And in fact, often - in fact usually doesn't. And often we see situations where couples get divorced and we follow them up five years later to see how they're doing. And they're less happy after the divorce than before the divorce.

Even if they're the ones that initiated it. Because the grass wasn't actually greener on the other side.

And a lot of people, a significant minority of people say that they wish that they hadn't divorced.

Patrick Patterson: Yeah.

Paul Amato: That they rushed into the divorce without thinking about it. Without thinking through the implications for themselves or their children.

And, you know, I think this is the kind of thing that people can sometimes slip into in a culture that is so tolerant of divorce. Partly my personal view, partly, you know, based on research.

Robin Deutsch: I would add two things to that as well. And that is, one is that in the 70s, we had a presumption of material custody. And that that was in the best interest of the child.

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Robin Deutsch: Was that mothers had primary custody. Things have really shifted. And my states have a presumption of joint custody.

The best interest standard has changed. So that we're now looking at the strengths and weaknesses of both parents.

So I think that is a big cultural shift in the past 40 years anyway. And I think that the shift that we're in right now has to do with how we now are really more accepting as a nation of different types of families.

I mean we now have three states that allow gay marriage for example.

Patrick Patterson: Okay. I've got another question for Dr. Amato, but I'll kind of go through this like a speed round. I'm going to read the question as it was written Dr. Amato.

We know that the risk of divorce increases with each successive marriage, i.e. second and third, so forth and so forth. As such, what is the risk of divorce for first marriages compared to late marriage, i.e. of the 50% of all marriages that will divorce and separate, how much of that 50% is accounted for by first marriages that end in divorce and separation? Does that make any sense?

Paul Amato: I think so. It's just the questioner's asking is there a difference between first marriages and subsequent marriages? Yes.

We know that second marriages are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages. And third marriages are more likely to end in divorce than second marriages.

The figure that I showed you, which suggests that 50% divorce rate is really based upon all marriages.

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: Including first marriages as well as higher order marriages. Is - did I get that? Or was there more

to it do you think?

Patrick Patterson: No. I think you did answer it. I think you did answer it.

Paul Amato: Okay. Okay.

Patrick Patterson: Another question for Dr. Deutsch. What role should extended family and other caregivers play during a divorce? What role should extended family and other caregivers play during a divorce?

Robin Deutsch: Well that's a really wonderful question. Because of course we get into what role should they play, and what role should they not play.

And one of the - I'm going to start with not. Because one of the things we know is that there are different reasons why people engage in high conflict when they're divorcing.

Sometimes it's because of their, you know, their inner feelings. Sometimes it's because of the relationship between the two people.

But, sometimes it's really because it's being fueled by extended family. In what has been coined in a book called, *Impasses to Divorce - Tribal Warfare*.

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Robin Deutsch: So one of the things that an extended family and significant others don't want to do is to fuel the conflict. What they can do that is really beneficial is number one, support in an empathic way by just being there, and helping someone with their parenting. The parent - their grandchildren, their nieces, nephews, whatever it might be.

And another is to be a sort of a neutral love zone I like to call it. Where the children feel like they will not hear negative things about their parents. They're not going to hear about bad things that either of their parents have done or might do.

That they are instead going to be held and nurtured by people who love and care for them. That's a role for extended family.

Significant others need to take a step back. And need to be there as source of support both for their significant other and for the children. But cannot get involved in the conflict that's going on. Or too involved in the parenting of the children.

Patrick Patterson: Thank you. Last couple of questions. I think we have time for two more questions. One is, and this is for both of you. And I will start with Dr. Amato responding.

The notion that people in conflict - high conflict marriages should stay for the sake of the children. How do you respond to that notion?

Paul Amato: Well people often ask me, you know, about this idea that well should couples stay together - should parents stay together for the sake of their children? And it really depends upon the type of marriage.

You know, based upon our research, and some other studies that have replicated what we found. I would say this. If the child is living in a family where the parents are openly hostile toward one another, they have - they engage in a chronic pattern of over conflict in front of the children. And there's a general atmosphere of hostility and tension in the household. If there's violence in the relationship.

Well, you know, these are not very good marriages. Let's face it. And these are not very good environments in which to raise children either.

So if you have parents in very highly conflicted relationships where they really just can't stand each other. You know, staying together for the sake of the children may not be a good idea. In fact, it's probably not a good idea.

Unless these parents can somehow, you know, get some sort of therapy or something that will help them resolve their problems. Which seems to me unlikely if they reach this sort of point of deterioration.

Then it's probably better, I think, for the parents to go their own way and get the child out of that toxic environment.

Patrick Patterson: Okay.

Paul Amato: But on the other hand, we know that not all divorces are preceded by a long period of chronic hostility and conflict and violence.

Patrick Patterson: Right.

Paul Amato: There are a lot of marriages where couples are thinking about divorce. But they don't hate their spouse. In fact, they think the spouse is a nice person. They just feel like, you know, maybe they made the wrong choice. The spark has gone out of their marriage.

The marriage - they're not getting as much from the marriage as they had hoped. It's not living up to their expectations. And they think that they might be happier with someone else. All right? And so they think about divorce.

And often these people do wind up getting divorced. Often because they wind up forming a relationship with someone else outside of the marriage.

Under these circumstances, I do not think - I think that's probably a good idea for the parents to stay together for the sake of the child. Because there's a lot of strength there. There's a lot to work on.

These kind of parents can get counseling. They can go to marriage retreats. They can have, you know, marriage enrichment experiences.

There are things that they can do to get that spark back. To make the marriage more satisfying to them.

And if they can do that and save their marriage, then that probably would benefit the children. Because that is not a bad environment in which to raise children.

Children don't care if their parents are being self-actualized by the marriage. What they just care about is having a stable home environment, access - and access to two parents who are providing good parenting and love to the child.

Patrick Patterson: Dr. Deutsch?

Robin Deutsch: I would just add that I think that the research, and it's really Dr. Amato's research, and then others. Is absolutely clear that conflict is - high conflict can be very very damaging for children.

We know that children who witness violence between their parents, and children who are exposed to high conflict between their parents are as likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, as kids who have been chronically and harshly physically abused.

So, being in an - for children to be in an environment where there is - it doesn't even have to be on-going. It can be intermittent. But where they are exposed to yelling, screaming, pushing, shoving, whatever it is. Is very bad for kids.

And I think that there - I would advise those parents, if they're not able to manage that, get some better conflict resolution skills, and anger management skills, that the children are better off if they're divorced.

Patrick Patterson: Okay. Thank you both. Let me be the first to say thank you to both Dr. Amato and Dr. Deutsch for excellent presentations. Providing us new information, but also in-depth resources regarding divorce and how it affects our children.

Thanks for the wonderful Webinar. As evidenced by the number of folks that were actually on it online. It was obviously one that was very popular among our listening audience on a monthly basis as well.

As we prepare to close today's Webinar, I'd like to take us through a couple of final reminders. But also, an evaluation process to find out what you thought went well today. And what might be improved.

I will go through a few pose slides, that you will have a chance to vote on, that indicate how successful we

were at achieving our objectives for today's Webinar.

We have five questions. The first question is I better understand the latest findings from the research on how divorce affects child well-being? I better understand the latest findings from the research on how divorce affects child well-being? We'll leave the polls open for a few seconds, and then we'll switch to our next question.

Next question, I am more informed of the impact of divorce on children? I am more informed of the impact of divorce on parenting - excuse me? I am more informed of the impact of divorce on parenting? Sorry about that.

Next question, I am more familiar with the differing outcomes of divorce on children from low conflict and high conflict homes? I am more familiar with the differing outcomes of divorce on children from low conflict and high conflict homes?

Our next question, I will be able to apply the research I learned today on divorce and child well-being to my work? I will be able to apply the research I learned today on divorce and child welfare to my work?

And our final question, I found today's Webinar to be informative and useful? I found today's Webinar to be informative and useful?

Are these poll questions are used largely to gather specific feedback on how well we presented, or what can be improved moving forward.

Additionally, I'd like to offer to each of our listeners the opportunity to email me directly. My email address is info@healthymarriageinfo.org. I'll repeat that - info@healthymarriageinfo.org to submit any other comments about today's Webinar and things we might do moving forward in the future.

Additionally, if you are a Federal grantee, you can also contact your Federal project office to share feedback on today's Webinar.

A few reminders, the materials and an audio recording of today's Webinar will be posted on our Web site. The Resource Center's Web site is www.healthymarriageinfo.org - www.healthymarriageinfo.org within seven to nine business days following this Webinar.

In the next couple days, we'll be announcing our next Webinar topic. One of the things we're looking to do in the next few weeks is talk directly to grantees, as well as potentially do a national survey as we did last year. To field what topics you guys would like us to focus on during the rest of this fiscal year.

We heard from many of you. We just want to confirm that. So that as we move forward, providing you what you've asked for.

So with that, I'd say thank you. And have a great night.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen this will conclude the conference call for today. We thank you for your participation and ask that you would please disconnect your lines.

END