

Effect of Parental Divorce on Adult Children's Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Objective: This article examined the impact of parental divorce on adult children's romantic relationships. **Background:** Parental divorce has been found to have several negative consequences on children's general well-being. For instance, previous studies have identified negative impacts on socioeconomic status, psychological health and roles in various relationships. **Results:** The most prevalent consequence of parental divorce was adult children's decreased confidence in their personal romantic relationships. Social learning was identified as a main contributor to the children's learned behavior associated with their own relationship problems. **Conclusions:** The negative consequences of parental divorce on children can be lessened with psychotherapy interventions. Additional research could lead to more effective treatment measures.

Introduction

Many families have been or will be affected by divorce. The percentage ever divorced was highest for men and women ages 50 to 59, which translates to 41 and 39 percent, respectively (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 2005). Approximately 1.5 million American children will be impacted by their parents' divorce each year (Zill & Nord, 1993, as cited in Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998). Amato's 1999 study highlighted the consequences of divorce on children. These consequences include fewer years of education, less money earned and higher unemployment rates (as cited in Shulman, Scharf, Lumer & Maurer 2001, p. 473). Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) utilized a longitudinal study, which followed 131 children of divorce over a 25 year period. The negative impact of divorce on children was demonstrated through the following: decreased engagement in extracurricular activities, lower financial standing, relocation, new schools, terminated relationships, decreased parental availability and increased worry about parents' well-being.

The adolescent period, for children of divorce, is marked by fewer rules and less reinforcement of rules than for children of intact families. In addition, research indicated adolescent girls of divorced parents were sexually active with multiple partners during high school, whereas the majority of girls from intact families reported sexual relationships within a defined relationship during the end of high school or early college. Adolescents from the divorced families also reported more drug use. Further, 57% of the divorced group achieved their

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bachelor's degree as compared to 90% in the comparison group (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

The developing adolescent is particularly vulnerable to the divorce-related consequences. Developmental theorist, Erik Erikson outlined specific stages in which the developing person interacts with the social world. Erikson identified adolescence as a time of identify versus role confusion. While identify formation is present throughout earlier stages, it is most crucial during adolescence. In addition to pubertal changes, adolescents become preoccupied with their future and their place in the larger social world (Crain, 2005). This heightened level of stress combined with the obstacles caused by divorce could interfere with this developmental milestone and lead to confusion (Erikson, 1982, as cited in Devaris, 1995).

Regardless of the age of the child during parental divorce, the impact of parental divorce is particularly salient during young adulthood when the children of divorce first begin to establish their own romantic relationships (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990). Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae reinforced this finding in their longitudinal research, which indicated an increase in emotional problems associated with divorce when offspring reach young adulthood (as cited in D'Onofrio, Turkheimer, Emery, Heath, Madden & Slutske, et al., 2004). After the adolescent stage of identify versus role confusion, Erikson characterized the young adult as entering a stage of intimacy versus isolation (Crain, 2005). Due to an unhealthy early introduction to intimate relationships, the young adult offspring of divorced parents enters this stage of development with a disadvantage. If children have suppressed feelings over their parents' divorce, these feelings can resurface during this period.

Crain (2005) identified an example of a young man who was preoccupied with his level of masculinity, which prevented him from losing himself in the relationship with his partner. Security of romantic attachments during young adulthood was found to be related to parental divorce (Summers et. al, 1998). Crain (2005) posited that genuine mutuality is crucial to achieving intimacy. Indeed, "Mutuality involves a shared sense of relationship that transcends the immediate and reciprocal exchange of benefits" (Genero, Miller, Surrey & Baldwin, 1992, p. 37). When the young adult has a preoccupation, including the consequences of their parents' divorce, they could fail to achieve mutuality and end up in isolation.

Relationship Confidence

Research has identified parental divorce as a predictor of offspring's confidence toward their own romantic relationships (Franklin, 1990; Sanders, Behrens, & Halford, 1999; Summers, 1998; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Weigel, 2007; Whitton, Rhoads, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found a third of the adult children of divorce were openly pessimistic about

marriage and divorce and sought to avoid both. The study identified subjects with a fear of marriage in addition to a fear of an established marriage breaking up. Forty two percent of the men had never married or cohabited for longer than 6 months, compared with 6% in the comparison group. On the other hand, women displayed sexually promiscuous behaviors. Promiscuous behaviors suggest a decreased chance of engaging in a committed relationship.

Besides promiscuous behaviors, other factors contribute to decreased relationship confidence. Franklin et al., (1990) found children who were repeatedly exposed to a strained parental relationship exhibited decreased trust in parents and decreased optimism about dating and marriage in addition to a general negative world view. Amato and Deboer (2001) found offspring to have a weak commitment to the idea of a lifelong marriage (as cited in Weigel, 2007). Additionally, Weigel (2007) stated people from divorced parents were more likely to remember more negative messages from their family of origin, including “Relationships Are Not Permanent, Approach Relationships With Caution and Relationships Are Beset by Lack of Trust and Fidelity” (p. 24). Conversely, people from intact families recalled more positive messages. Franklin and colleagues stated that children from divorced families thought they would be less likely to have long and successful marriages and thought parental divorce was more acceptable than did those in the intact family control group. In addition, children from divorced families believed the benevolence of others was a predictor of marital optimism whereas children from intact families believed self-worth was the greatest predictor of marital optimism (Franklin et al., 1990). This finding suggests children from divorced families believe they have less control over the outcome of the relationship, which is suggestive of a decreased confidence. Despite the intention to marry and belief in romantic love, two thirds of the respondents were apprehensive about the possible breakup of their own future marriages (Wallerstein, 1987, Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, as cited in Franklin, 1990).

Women More Vulnerable to Parental Divorce

Research indicates that daughters are more vulnerable to their parents’ divorce than sons (Franklin et al., 1990; Sanders et al., 1999; Whitton et al., 2008). Whitton et al., (2008) found women whose parents divorced are more likely to enter marriage with relatively lower commitment to and confidence in the future of those relationships, which potentially raises the likelihood of divorce. Significantly higher rates of negative verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors were observed in couples in which the woman’s parents had divorced. They also found lower rates of positive problem-focused behavior and reported higher rates of negative self-referent, and lower rates of positive partner-referent, cognitive self-statements. Men demonstrated no difference from the non-divorced sample. Women who experienced parental divorce had a 60% higher divorce rate than women without such a history, whereas men with a history of parental divorce had a 35% higher divorce rate as compared with men from non-divorced families. Couples where the woman’s parents had

divorced showed more negative behavior as compared to the other couples (Sanders, 1999). Additionally, Wallerstein found that 16-18 year old children of divorce, particularly young women, repeatedly mention a sense of vulnerability and a fear of being hurt in romantic relationships (as cited in Franklin, 1990). The heightened impact of parental divorce on daughters is suggestive of a gender socialization difference with women being more expressive than men.

Observational Learning

The transmission of divorce can be accounted for to an extent by observational learning. Social cognitive theory suggests that in social situations we learn more rapidly simply by observing the behaviors of others (Bandura, 1962, as cited by Crain, 2005). Children learn a variety of interpersonal behaviors through the observation of adult models (Bandura, 1973; O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998, Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999, as cited in Amato & Booth, 2001). Parental divorce is likely to be associated with children's exposure to maladaptive conflict management behavior (Sanders, 1999). Amato and Booth (2001) cite Conger, Cui, Bryant and Elder's (2000) study in which warm and supportive behaviors between parents predicted offspring's warm and supportive behaviors, and this resulted in better relationship satisfaction among offspring. Wallerstein (2004) identified a previous study, which found adults raised in divorced families were more likely to have a deficit in social skills and had problems in handling conflicts in their own marriages.

Children of divorced, but remarried parents can learn positive relationship behaviors through observation of their new parental model. Yu and Adler-Baeder (2007) cited two studies (Bray & Kelly, 1998, Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), which found that children in successful stepfamilies do not differ on a measure of well-being from children of non-divorced families. Yu and Adler's (2007) study reinforced the finding. Adult children of divorced/non-remarried parents and adult children of divorced/remarried parents differed on the degree of relationship standards being met in their relationships, whereas adult children of divorced/remarried parents did not differ from those of non-divorced parents on the same measure. Shulman et al., (2001) found maternal remarriage to be related to higher levels of intimacy and passion and fewer problems in the adult children's romantic relationships. The better relationship outcome could be attributed to the child having an observable model of a relationship.

Research demonstrates that social learning contributes to the intergenerational transmission of divorce through imitation of the parents. However, according to Bandura, symbolic models, which are models from television or books, can also be a source for social learning (Crain 2005). This could have positive implications if children of divorce were exposed to positive relationships in television. Bandura explained the observer can see the probable consequences of new behavior through watching others (Crain 2005). After children witness

their parents' parental interactions they can learn not to perform a specific behavior if it has a negative consequence. This is an area that deserves greater research.

In addition to learning not to perform in certain ways, children of divorce develop other ways of becoming resilient. Some children gain coping skills to deal with divorce and are seemingly exempt from negative consequences. A more integrative perception of divorce contributes to higher levels of friendship, enjoyment and trust in romantic relationships, and to a lower level of relationship problems (Shulman et al., 2001). The integrative perception of divorce is measured by the subject's awareness of its complexity, ability to understand it from mother, father, and children's perspective and coherent view of the divorce. Some children are unable to effectively cope with parental divorce as shown through their difficulties in remembering details of the divorce, which contributed to less trust in their romantic partner (Shulman et. al, 2001). In Wallerstein and Lewis' study (2004), half of the subjects reported memory fragments during or after the divorce, which intruded into their adult relationships at crisis points. This report suggests that half the subjects in the study did not have an integrated perception of their parent's divorce, which could explain the negative responses of the children.

Some children of divorce were found to be accelerated academically and socially. The acceleration of these adolescents could be due to the greater responsibility and independence paired with their ability to deal with the experiences constructively (Franklin et., al, 1990). Children, who obtained education, were successful in the workplace. They combined their formal education with their early independence and lifelong experience of taking responsibility for themselves and others (Wallerstein, 2004). These findings suggest the importance of children learning techniques to effectively cope with divorce.

Implications for Psychotherapy

Lee, Picrard and Blain (1994) identified three major post-divorce treatment interventions including, adult-focused treatment, child-focused treatment and family-focused treatment. For child-focused interventions, several studies were reviewed. The researchers found most of these programs attempted to decrease the children's feelings of isolation, encouraged the children to explore their feelings related to the divorce, taught problem solving strategies and assisted children in building social supports. The results of the child-focused interventions yielded modest evidence for children's improvements in levels of anxiety, self-esteem, and decreases in internalizing behaviors.

The adult-focused interventions addressed individual adjustment, communication skills, financial planning, parenting issues, social support and dating. The findings suggest moderate beneficial effects in terms of lowering depression and overall distress. No studies were found, which evaluated the

efficacy of family-focused or individual psychotherapy, which offers further research opportunities. The limited benefit of child-focused interventions is indicative of the importance of parental involvement in treatment (Lee et al., 1994).

In addition to parental involvement in treatment, Devaris (1995) identified several crucial factors associated with healthy functioning for adolescent children of divorce. These factors include: financial stability within each family unit, clear definitions of power and autonomy between and within each unit, fair visitation, safety from verbal or physical abuse, adequate protection of the teen from parental alienation attempts, support and supervision for the teen, respect for the teen's desire to be in contact with both houses, and adaptability for the evolving family units.

Stolberg and Mahler (1994) identified school-based programs as advantageous, since they serve the most children. Pre-existing interventions include Stolberg and his colleagues Children's Support Group and the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) by Pedro-Carroll and her colleagues. These programs address issues such as anger control, relaxation, skills for communication and developmental tasks. Stolberg and Mahler's program used these interventions while adding therapeutic home workbooks for children and parents and an increase in game-like activities to engage participants. The intervention was broken into a skill building component, skills transfer, and the skills-and-support condition. Skill building focused on teaching children to label feelings, associate them with casual events, and combine feelings and events into statements to others. The skills transfer component comprised of workbooks tailored toward parents or toward children to facilitate further practice and implement skills. Additionally, children were taught self-control and problem-solving skills especially relating to divorce-related problems. For the support condition, sessions were tailored toward support topics.

Participation in the skill-building components yielded significant, adjustment beyond the divorce controls. They found the skills and support condition yielded the most immediate gains, in reducing internalizing and externalizing behaviors and total pathology in the home as well as greater improvements in clinical symptomatology than children in all other conditions. Stolberg and Mahler identified a limitation in time and resources for school interventions and reinforced the importance of continuous intervention by parents. As noted earlier, children learn through their parent's modeling behaviors, which could be reversed through these interventions.

The research has demonstrated several negative consequences of parental divorce on the children. Divorce was found to decrease the adult children's confidence in their personal relationships. Some children showed resilience after parental divorce due to finding successful coping strategies. Additional research focusing on more effective psychological interventions could increase

resiliency in the families faced with divorce. Psychological interventions for children, parents and the family as a whole should be encouraged immediately following divorce.

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