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Abstract

Children's adjustment to parental divorce is a complex interaction of: a) families pre and postseparation functioning b) the child's individual capacity for dealing with stress c) current values and beliefs as expressed through teachers and peers. Current research in each area is reviewed and discussed as are major themes in children's long term adjustment.

Children of Divorce: A Survey of Factors Related to Children's Adjustment of Parental Divorce

Divorce is a phenomena which has effected most of our nation's lives. It is estimated that by 1990, one third of all American children will have experienced divorce by the age of 18 (Kurdek, 1981). Accordingly psychologists in areas such as community, social and developmental have begun to attempt to reach a better understanding of divorce and the effect it has upon children, adults and societies.

The factors involved in the understanding of divorce are complex. The process of divorce itself incorporates economic, social and psychological factors. To understand the complex ways in which children cope with the stress of divorce, therefore, a multifactored approach must be taken. This paper seeks to present the current research on children's adjustment processes. To do so it will examine the family, the child and external influences on the child as complex yet integral parts of the child's global adjustment.

Child behavior and emotional problems have been conclusively linked to the marital discord of the predivorce and separation period (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; McDermott, 1968; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). More specifically the conflict content and processes have been found to have the most impact on a child's behavior (Emery, 1982). Emery found that open hostility is much more stressful for the child than encapsulated conflict. Lengthy

exposure to conflict served to increase behavioral problems and left the child at emotional risk (Emery, 1982). Conflict which continued post-divorce continued to maintain the child's behavioral problems (Emery, 1982).

Many researchers have found however, that behavioral problems are a common separation response in children. Research indicates that the separation responses are apparently time limited (Hetherington, 1979). Conflict responses however, are not, and thus maintain the problem behavior (Hetherington, et al. 1978). These conflict responses are primarily in the form of conduct disorders or undercontrol, and depression (McDermott, 1970, 1968; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Further, Hetherington et al. (1978) found that nonclinic samples of children of divorce were more disobiedient, dependent, aggressive, whining, demanding and unaffectionate than kids from intact marriages.

Many theories have been postulated to explain the conflict response in children. Modeling researchers argue that unhappy parents display more hostile and aggressive behavior which may be imitated by a child (Porter & O'Leary, 1982). In a study of conduct disorders in children, Becker et al. (1959) found a strong relationship between conduct disorders in children and the parents ability to resolve problems effectively. Becker found conduct disorders most prevelant in families in which both parents gave vent to "unbridled emotions" frequently and who tended to be arbitrary with the child. Furthermore, mothers were often tense and dictatorial and fathers tended not to enforce

rules. A senerio sometimes characteristic of the newly separated parents; a senerio in which conflicting reinforcement of a child's behavior by each parent is likely.

The picture, however, is not as bleak as it may seem. Hetherington et al. (1978) found that a good relationship with a parent with whom the child is living has a buffering effect on the child as have other researchers (Hess & Camara, 1979; Rutter, 1971). Hess and Camara (1979) found that a greater proportion of variance in child adjustment to divorce is accounted for by the parent-child relationship than by interparental conflict indexes.

Another important factor in child adjustment is parental adjustment. Kurdek and Berg (1983) found a significant relationship between a child's post-divorce adjustment and the mother's use of support structures, low levels of maternal stress and low levels of interparental conflict. Other researchers have had similar results relating child adjustment and such factors as custodial parents stress levels, parental adjustment levels, socioeconomic status and current degree of interparental conflict (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1977, 1980). In general the research points to several specific elements of parental behavior which are key factors in reducing post divorce trauma for a child. They are as follows: a decrease in interparental conflict (Kelly & Berg, 1979; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, 1976), cooperative parenting (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly,

1980), authoritative discipline (Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Hetherington, 1979) and regular visitation (Hess & Camara, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Thus considering a child's emotional risk on post-divorce trauma, the family unit must be considered as a key factor.

Children in divorcing families must make complex psychological adjustment. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) have found age to be the best predictor of children's adjustment process. There is a great deal of clinical support for this finding as many researchers have found cognitive factors to be an important factor in divorce adjustment (Hetherington, 1979; Kurdek, Blisk & Siskey, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In their benchmark study on the effects of divorce on children, Wallerstein and Kelly conducted interviews with and collected data on 131 children in 60 families. Their purpose was to document the effect of divorce on children's psychological and social development with particular emphasis on the parent-child relationship. A major outcome of this study was the delineation of outcome levels for the different developmental levels. These levels are preschool, early latency (children aged 7 and 8 years old), late latency (children aged 9 and 10 years old) and adolescents. Neal (1980) renamed these levels in a less psychodynamic manner as preschool, between ages three and six, early elementary school aged children, five to eight years old and older elementary school aged children aged nine to twelve. Preschoolers (Neal, 1980) typically view their world egocentrically.

Thus the child's perception of his parent's leaving home is of that parent moving away from the child. They assume egocentrically, that they must have done something wrong -- something bad, to have caused this reaction. Preschool children operationally define "good" and "bad" as what pleases or displeases a parent. Explaining to a preschool child that the "Divorce isn't your fault" is of no use, as it makes no sense to the preschooler.

The difference between the preschoolers and early latency or early elementary school aged group is striking (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Neal 1980). In their interviews with these seven and eight year olds, Wallerstein and Kelly found the most striking characteristic was sadness -- a pervasive sadness akin to grief. This was evident in their conversations and stories which seemed to concentrate on "death, damage, loss and emptiness." The children were also characterized as being silent and avoiding the interviewer; evidence, the researchers felt of a preoccupation with their own vulnerability. The children denied feeling sad and expressed concern about such peripheral issues as where daddy will live.

In follow-up sessions with the subjects, Wallerstein and Kelly, began to develop a more comprehensive idea of what the child was experiencing. They found the children afraid. Having lost the protective family unit, the children were afraid of having no safe place to go. With their whole world shaken they expressed panic about their loss of a parent.

Another theme the researchers noted was a feeling of deprivation. The children reported feelings of loss, insatiable hunger and increased possessiveness. The deprivation was reversed in play as the children reported fantasies of being an overindulged, "only" child. Wallerstein and Kelly interpreted this as a need to fill the emptiness caused by the parental split.

The fear of having been responsible for their parents discord was not a common response. The children tended to be polarized, accepting all blame or none. Neal (1980) observes that the dyadic focus of preschoolers perceptions has been replaced in the slightly older child by a more tryadic relationship. The child still feels some blame yet is able to understand that parents can be angry with each other.

All the children in the Wallerstein and Kelly study wanted their parents to be reconciled. None of the children were relieved by the divorce even after witnessing years of chronic conflict. All the children expressed a sense of loss over the absent parent. They felt abandoned and rejected with particular intensity noted in the younger boys. All the children desired more visitation with the absent parent. However, as the researchers note, most of the children were made to deal with each parents rage and bitterness on every visit. The researchers found a very real fear of antagonizing the custodial parent (in these cases the mother). Instead the children feel compelled to align with her at great emotional cost. One quarter of the children reported feeling pressured to hate and/or reject their fathers.

After one years time, Wallerstein and Kelly were able to reinterview 26 of the original 31 subjects. They found that most of the children had accepted the divorce as final yet continued to fantasize about a reconciliation. They also found that the children tended to view the world as a more difficult place. The children who continued to be battered about by the parental conflict after the divorce had lost trust in adults in general and they maintained a strong fantasy life. Overall, 50% were rated as at an improved level of psychological functioning or at least having maintained previous developmental strides. Twenty-three percent significantly worsened or deteriorated and 12% were not seen. Emery (1982) noted a similar process to the one outlined by Wallerstein and Kelly. He termed this process the Acute Distress Syndrome, a three phase process of acute upset followed by apathy or despression and finally a loss of interest in the parents.

The second group, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) observed were the late latency group, the 9 to 10 year olds. These older children reported an immediate feeling of panic accompanied by great anger. The researchers noted that one characteristic of this anger, was that allowed the child to endow one parent with all good qualities and to very moralistically, reject the other parent as bad and unworthy. A reaction, which is often encouraged by the one parent. This group however, seemed capable of genuine empathy and compassion. They all shared the sadness and loneliness of the younger group.

A boarder between childhood and adolescence is a very difficult one to cross for many. Coupled with a ruptured family, young adolescents are faced with a second major life change. To better understand what and how these adjustments occur was the purpose of a study by Springer and Wallerstein (1983). The children ranged in age from twelve to fourteen and were interviewed an average 7.9 months after separation occurred. The subjects were now old enough to make connections between cause and effect and to view the entire process within a framework. Thus these kids were rarely surprised by parental decision to separate and divorce. Throughout the process the children evaluated their parents behavior along dimensions of selfishness, fairness, self-control and restraint. As the researchers note, not only were these children capable of perceiving behaviors and consequences and cause and effect, they had also begun to see their parents as separate people whose behavior when evaluated may be found lacking.

After the divorce many adolescents were left with an acute sense of loss. They mourned for the happy family moments that were and for the moments they would never again share as a whole family. The children were also left with a fear of exposure, that the family conflicts would become public. Springer and Wallerstein noted the subjects preoccupation with the "inevitable" shame and embarrassment of public knowledge of the parental conflict. Among siblings there were reports of increased conflict.

After the separation, the eldest often assumed more responsibility for younger siblings. While most did this willingly, they tended to resent the younger children's age-appropriate dependency and childishness. Conversely the younger children resented being "bossed." However, they did report that all was not conflict. Many children reported that the older siblings had explained the divorce to them, answering their questions and providing support.

Springer and Wallerstein found the predominant coping technique for these children was distancing. By denying that the divorce had had any real effect upon them, the children were able to keep their cool emotionally and behaviorally. As they distanced from the stress, the kids found new supports in which to draw, in other relationships and activities. Children who did not distance however, tended to retreat into the family -- a family in turmoil and thus largely insensitive to their needs. These children were designated as high risk candidates. Failure to distance also brought violent reactions from some children. Many researchers have noted the adolescents, both male and female who vent their rage through physical attacks on their custodial parent, usually the mother (Hetherington, 1978; Bloom et al., 1978; Wise, 1980). Springer and Wallerstein believe that the child unable to maintain distance from the parental conflict becomes directly involved through violent attacks.

Young's blame attribution study (1983) found that most children blame dad first and then mom. Adolescents, on the other hand,

tended to blame both parents. Children needing a secure coalition with their mother find dad a safer target for their anger and hurt (Young, 1983). Adolescents however are less in need of coalitions and thus strategically withdraw from all family coalitions (Young, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974).

Much has been written about mother deprivation and to a lesser degree to parental absence. This research has gained a new relevance today as divorce now separates many children from mothers and fathers. Bowlby (1969, 1973 note 1) has offered a theory of attachment in which the mother is the central precursser to all later social relationships. Rutter (1971) notes that apparently the purpose of bonding is to give the child security as it moves into other relationships. Rutter (1971) also points out the current research which supports the idea of critical periods in a child's development. The underlying concept behind this research is that maternal deprivation at or during a critical period may cause a child to experience cognitive and emotional losses. This research must be regarded skeptically at best as it is impossible to separate out other psycosocial factors. As it applies to children of divorce the research does not support a clinical need for the maternal presence. Research does support the need for harmony. Rutter (1971, 1979) has found that antisocial disorders are not linked to separation, rather they are linked to the disharmony which led to the break. Experiments with infant rhesus monkeys have found that the infants showing the most distress after separation from their mothers were those who had

experienced the most rejection by their mothers, and those for whom there was the most tension in the mother-infant relationship (Hinde & Spencer-Booth, 1970).

Paternal deprivation has received only slightly less attention by researchers. However, much of this data is at best inconclusive. The majority of studies have examined the effect of father absence on boys. In an oft cited study on the sons of Norwegion sailors who are absent from the home for extended periods of time researchers found insecure father identification (Lynn & Sawrey, 1959). As a result the boys exaggerated their masculinity, through antisocial behaviors. Siyman (1966) found similar results using a self-report device with medical students who had experienced early paternal deprivation. The authors of this study sought to support the hypothesis that young males over identify with their mother. When he comes to reject this identification he does so through symbolic assertion of masculinity -- through antisocial behaviors (Siegman, 1966). He found these medical subjects guilty of such crimes as driving without a license, theft of less than $2.00, exceeding speed limits and the use of profane language. Another study (Mischel, 1961) examined the relationship between father absence and the preference for immediate over-delayed gratification. The subjects were children of both sexes, aged 8-9. An increased preference for immediate gratification was found among the father absent group. Mischel attributed this to the younger child's lack of trust due to father absence. While these studies appear to indicate a negative effect

of paternal absence, the studies themselves and therefore the results are highly questionable.

Hetherington (1972) conducted one of the few studies of the effect paternal absence has on girls. She examined and compared the behaviors of the daughters of widows and the daughters of divorcees in a social and interview situation. She found differences only in interactions with males. The daughters of divorcees sought proximity to males, displayed more nonverbals communicating openness and responsiveness and reported earlier heterosexual behavior. The daughters of widows by contrast expressed inhibition, rigidity, avoidence and restraint around males. Hetherington also reported that early separation from fathers had a more severe effect than late separation. In the cases of early separation, before the age of 5, the disparity was greater between the two groups. Father absence, the author reasons, leads to inadequate skills in relating to males. Both groups showed a general feeling of anxiety and powerlessness. This is intensified in the daughters of divorcees by their low sense of self-esteem. Hetherington felt that the difference lay in the parenting. The divorced mothers tended to be dissatisfied with life, anxious and unhappy. The widow on the other hand, tended to be less unhappy, having happy memories of marriage and a support system of family and friends.

It is hypothesized that daughters are a life different from that of their mothers and feel that for happiness it is essential to find a man. This was a very important study not only to the extent that it examines the effects of paternal absence on females

but in its discussion of parenting techniques as a major factor in the child's adjustment. While research has in the past concentrated on the negative effects of parental deprivation, more current studies are examining the role of the parent within the home. Rutter (1979) has found that the attitudes, prejudices and fears of the custodial parent are just as likely to effect the child's long-term adjustment.

A recent outgrowth of the deprivation and anxiety research has been in the area of social skills. Rutter (1979) states that the purpose of bonding is to give a child security in relationships so that they may go on to new relationships unafraid. Other researchers as previously attested point to the disruptive effect of separation and divorce on all aspects of child development, including the development of relationships (Mischel, 1961; McCord et al., 1962; Siegman, 1966). A landmark study by Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1979) examined the play and social interactions of forty-eight children from divorced families and forty-eight children from intact families. The children were observed 2 months, 1 year and 2 years after divorce. Observers found disruptions in the play and social relations for both males and females from divorced families. After two years the effects had largely disappeared for girls. For boys however, the effects were more enduring and intense. Play patterns for both girls and boys of divorced families was less socially and cognitively mature immediately following the divorce. Additionally both boys and girls of divorced families were more depressed, anxious and

apathetic than those of nondivorced families. After one year boys from divorced families showed a more hostile affect than the girls of divorced families. Two years later, the boys continued to seem more anxious and unhappy. In fantasy play children of divorce were found to be more limited and rigid. In general, both girls and boys of divorce showed higher rates of helpseeking behavior and dependency. Interestingly, Hetherington found that the verbal and physical aggression displayed by girls at 2 months and by the boys at 2 months and 1 year, tended to be immature, unprovoked and ineffective. Such a finding would support the role model theory of Porter and O'Leary (1982) discussed earlier. Apparently through the observation of their parents ineffective methods of problem solving, children learn the same ineffective methods. It does seem therefore that the process of divorce has a disruptive effect upon the child's normal development of play interaction skills, however time limited these effects may be.

To collect data on children of divorce, parents, peers and teachers are often asked to provide information about a child -- information which is then used in the researchers assessment of the child. However, teachers and peers have been found to evidence some bias against children of divorced families. Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1979) found that boys from divorced families were subject to greater degrees of rejection by peers than were males from nondivorced families. At the two month mark, Hetherington et al. noted that while these boys frequently initiated contact with others they tended to do so in a negative manner and

thus were rebuffed by their peers. There was no such peer effect for girls. Teachers too, exhibited more negative behavior toward the boys from divorced homes than toward the boys from intact homes. No teacher differences were found for the girls from divorced homes and for this Hetherington offers two explanations. Possibly boys tend to adopt coping behaviors which are noxious to others, undercontrolled, disruptive behaviors. An alternative possibility is that expressions of neediness and emotional stress are more sex role deviant for boys and thus less acceptable to teachers and peers. Whatever the reason, teachers ratings of children of divorce have been found by several researchers to reflect a negative bias. Hetherington et al. (1979) found that teachers viewed boys from divorced homes as more aggressive and impulsive and lacking in task orientation. Santrock and Tracy (1978) had similar findings. They examined the possibility that teacher ratings of children reflects a stereotype about divorce. The teachers were all shown a video tape of an eight year old boy. Half were told that he came from a divorced family and half were not. The teachers rated the divorced child more negatively on happiness, emotional adjustment and copes with stress. The researchers concluded that this was evidence of a negative stereotype among teachers. Indeed Hetherington (1979) concluded that rather than attempt to fight these negative stereotypes it is easier for the child to start afresh than to try to change them. Unfortunately for the child, a great deal of research has shown that parents in the throes of the divorce

themselves have little awareness of the emotional and psychological distress their child is experiencing (Young, 1983; Fulton, 1979); Kurdek, Blisk & Siskey, 1981; Kurdek & Berk, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Throughout this examination there has been a pattern of sex differences among children of divorce. A great deal of research supports the sex difference in children's reaction to divorce in their adjustment processes and coping skills (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Hetherington, 1979; Rutter, 1971; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Girls and boys seem to perceive the parental discord with equal accuracy (Emery & O'Leary, 1982). However, boys have a much stronger behavioral reaction than do girls (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1979). Boys tend to undercontrol their emotions where as girls overcontrol when subjected to equal stress (Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Rutter (1971) suggests that boys are psychologically more vulnerable to stress than girls. Since emotional neediness is more appropriate for girls it is possible that more support systems are offered to them at times of stress (Hetherington, 1979). Finally, emotional distress is less sex role appropriate for boys possibly forcing them to find another outlet.

The process of divorce must be regarded as a major life change for children and as such requires understanding and compassion if a successful adjustment is to be made. The research reviewed here offers little evidence that the mere absence of a

parent, mother or father, negatively impacts on a child's adjustment. Nor is there great evidence to support the conclusion that divorce necessarily has a negative impact on a child's adjustment. Rather, the evidence related here, seems to demonstrate that it is the process associated with divorce that most heavily impacts upon the child. In both pre-divorce and post-divorce families the child can be at great emotional risk, if allowed to become so by the parents. Further, the child may be subject to negative biases about divorce from teachers and peers.

Apparently, the behavioral problems often evidenced by children in the throes of parental divorce are their attempts to cope with the upheaval in their lives. Quite often adults in the process of divorce are distracted and upset as well as fail to notice their child's growing distress. Teachers may reinforce these behavioral problems by expecting them from children of divorce, rather than seeing them as cries for help.

There is little evidence that divorce will permanently affect a child's ability to bond with others or to have meaningful relationships. However, if allowed to become a victim of interparental hostility or forced to be a go between for bitter adults, such enduring damage may well occur.

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