Jessie Neel

Parental Divorce Effects on Young Adults

Divorce has many adverse effects on families, resulting in broken homes, distressed parents, and confused children. The effects of divorce are more far reaching than to just the two individuals involved. Parental divorce has lifelong lasting effects on the children too. Divorce affects children of all ages, even young adults. Overall, research indicates children from two-parent homes generally have advantages over children from single-parent homes. Further research shows prolonging the divorce until the children are young adults may be more beneficial for their personal development. Regardless of a child’s age, parental divorce still leaves scars and painful memories.

Divorce has not always been as prevalent or socially acceptable as it is today. In the mid-nineteenth century, only five percent of marriages ended in divorce. Today, one half of all first marriages result in divorce (Amato, 2000). Furthermore, remarriages are more common today, but have even higher rates of divorce than first marriages (Hawkins, Nock, Wilson, Sanchez, & Wright, 2002). Today, one half of first marriages also result in remarriages (Amato, 2000). Factors that are thought to trigger these high divorce rates include women’s growing financial independence, men’s decreasing income due to their lack of college degrees, individuals’ beliefs of personal satisfaction from marriage, and the increasing societal approval of divorce (Amato, 2000). More than one million children suffer from parental divorce every year. Research also indicates 40 percent of children will endure parental divorce before they reach adulthood (Amato, 2000). According to experts, Frank F. Furstenberg, researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, and Kathleen E. Kiernan, researcher at the London School of Economics, children from two-parent households tend to have an overall advantage (2001). Researchers Paul A. Amato and Jacob Cheadle of Pennsylvania State University (2005) agree: “Experiencing parental divorce as a child appears to increase the risk of a variety of problems in adulthood” (p. 191). Studies confirm that children whose parents are divorced typically do not perform as well as children whose parents are still married on “academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social competence” (Amato, 2000, p. 1271). Studies also reveal that boys in general tend to be more depressed in divorced homes than in married homes (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenzo, 1999). Children from divorced families are said to be at a higher risk of suffering from more stressful family changes (Haine, Sandler, Wolchik, Tein, & Dawson-McClure, 2003). These major shifts in children’s lives occur due to the rising number of broken homes and parents’ new partners (Amato, 2000). Children from single-parent homes are even said to have lower educational and financial attainment than children from two-parent homes (Mueller & Cooper, 1986). Divorce destroys families, but this research demonstrates there may be a more opportune time to do so to protect children’s well-being and growth.

Children experience parental divorce at all stages in life. Divorce is never viewed as beneficial to a child’s welfare, but children whose parents waited to divorce until their children were young adults may have some advantages over those whose parents divorced earlier in their lives (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). For one, the impact of divorce on younger and older children is different. Young children tend to blame themselves for their parents’ divorce. In contrast, older children usually find one of their parents at fault. Some experts suggest that divorce in families has the power to particularly influence young children because early childhood is such a critical time for growth (Leon, 2003). A prolonged divorce allows children the luxury of living in a two-parent household with usually more resources and opportunities than a single-parent household (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). Furstenberg and Kiernan (2001) further explain, “Parents who wed and remain together have greater material resources from the start, have more human capital, are better able to collaborate, are more likely to be embedded in a system of social support, and probably have greater cognitive and social skills as well” (p. 448). One the other side, parents tend to divorce after their children are grown up, because either the children helped keep the parents together or the parents decided it would be beneficial for the children to grow up with two parents (Cooney, Hutchinson, & Leather, 1995). Children whose parents’ divorce when they are young adults still suffer from the effects of divorce, but they tend to avoid the high rates of dropping out of school, teen pregnancies, running away from home, and financial problems. Conversely, among individuals who experienced their parents’ divorce as a young child, women are likely to begin partnerships at a younger age and men are likely to become fathers at a younger age (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). Even though there may be some benefits to putting off a divorce, children still undergo the painful effects of parental divorce.

Children experiencing parental divorce as young adults suffer from serious consequences. Overall, research findings indicate children from divorced families are more likely to divorce themselves once married (Amato, 1996). Furthermore, if both partners in the marriage come from divorced families, divorce is even more likely. A survey conducted by the National Survey of Families and Households discovered parental divorce increases the odds of dysfunctional relationships for the children by 70 percent. The reason for the high correlation of parental divorce and their offspring’s divorce is not certain. Parental divorce influences children in three predominant areas: life course and socioeconomic status, views toward divorce, and unbeneficial behavior for a healthy marriage. Research reveals couples who marry at a younger age and cohabitate before marriage tend to have a lower socioeconomic status and reports of lower marital stability. Children who have experienced their parents’ divorce tend to have more lenient views on divorce. These children sometimes adopt and portray the same negative behaviors in their relationships they learned in their parents’ marriage (Amato, 1996).

Susan E. Jacquet and Catherine A. Surra, researchers at the Universities of California and Texas, conducted a study observing the effects of divorce on young adults in 464 couples. They explain, “Various factors may contribute to the link between divorce from one generation to the next. Compared with children from intact families, children whose parents divorced marry earlier, cohabitate more often, are less educated, hold more lenient ideas toward divorce, and report more problematic interpersonal behaviors” (2001, p. 627). The most powerful of these elements dealt with children’s interpersonal relationships. Children learned the negative behaviors from their parents, and later mirrored their parents’ actions in their own relationships. This harmful conduct in turn destroyed their own relationships (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). In Jacquet’s and Surra’s research, the characteristics of trust, love, conflict, and ambivalence in couples who experienced parental divorce were also examined. Overall, women from divorced families reported lower relationship satisfaction in general than those from intact families. The research also revealed that if one partner in the relationship came from a divorced family, the damaging effects of that divorce would impact the other partner as well (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Even though researchers argue the importance of a two-parent family, other experts believe two-parent families may not be beneficial to a child’s well-being if the parents are in constant conflict.

Although studies show two-parent homes are more beneficial to children than single-parent homes, there are two consequences that are overlooked when thinking about single-parent homes. Foremost, the decision for parents to stay together, but be unhappy, because of the importance of a two-parent home, is not beneficial to the children. Secondly, studies show children from divorced homes typically end up being emotionally stable (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Divorce can cause children to lose touch with critical relationships, like their father’s (Aquilino, 1994). As stated by researchers Joan B. Kelly and Robert E. Emery (2003), “Between 18% and 25% of children have no contact with their fathers 2-3 years after divorce” (p. 354). Research shows the relationship between the father and daughter after a divorce may be the weakest relationship (Cooney, 1994). Divorce in a family also causes change and disruptions in a child’s life due to remarriages, more divorces, dating partners, and stepchildren. Even though the risk of children from divorced families is a high concern, generally, a child from a divorced family cannot be differentiated from a child from an intact family (Kelly & Emery, 2003). According to Paul R. Amato’s research, “…although parental divorce is a risk factor for subsequent problems, the majority of youth (75%) reach adulthood as well-functioning individuals (2003, p. 332). Memories of divorce leave painful marks on a young adult after a parental divorce; many of whom reported feelings of pain and loss, but when compared to children from intact families, there was no difference on their standardized tests. Additionally, it cannot be proven that divorce leads to this poor emotional and mental adjustment (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Researchers disagree on the level and specific impact of divorce on children, but overall, researchers can agree that children suffer from negative consequences when parents divorce.

The lasting impacts of parental divorce on children can be detrimental for children of any age. Researchers show prolonging the divorce until the children are young adults may decrease the negative effects inflicted upon the children. Regardless, divorce divides homes and destroys families. Parents need to be aware of the lifelong scars divorce leaves on their children.

Works Cited

Amato, P. (1996). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *58*, 628-640.

Amato, P. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*, 1269-1287.

Amato, P. (2003). Reconciling divergent perspectives: Judith Wallerstein, quantitative family research, and children of divorce. *Family Relations, 52*, 332-339.

Amato, P., & Cheadle J. (2005). The long reach of divorce: Divorce and child well-being across three generations. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 191-206.

Aquilino, W. (1994). Later life parental divorce and widowhood: Impact on young adults’ assessment of parent-child relations. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 56*, 908-922.

Cooney, T. (1994). Young adults’ relations with parents: The influence of recent parental divorce. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 56*, 45-56.

Cooney, T., Hutchinson, M., & Leather, D. (1995). Surviving the breakup? Predictors of parent-adult child relations after parental divorce. *Family Relations, 44*, 153-161.

Furstenberg, F. F., & Kiernan, K. E. (2001). Delayed parental divorce: How much do children benefit? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*, 446-457.

Haine, R., Sandler, I., Wolchik, S., Tein, J., & Dawson-McClure, S. (2003). Changing the legacy of divorce: Evidence from prevention programs and future directions. *Family Relations, 52*, 397-405.

Hawkins, A., Nock, S., Wilson, J., Sanchez, L., & Wright, J. (2002). Attitudes about covenant marriage and divorce: Policy implications from a three-state comparison. *Family Relations, 51*, 166-175.

Jacquet, S. E., & Surra, C. A. (2001). Parental divorce and premarital couples: Commitment and other relationship characteristics. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*, 627-638.

Kelly, J. & Emery, R. (2003). Children’s adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations, 52*, 352-362.

Leon, K. (2003). Risk and protective factors in young children’s adjustment to parental divorce: A review of the research. *Family Relations, 52*, 258-270.

Mueller, D., & Cooper, P. (1986). Children of single parent families: How they fare as young adults. *Family Relations, 35*, 169-176.

Simons, R., Lin, K., Gordon, L., Conger, R., & Lorenz, F. (1999). Explaining the higher incidence of adjustment problems among children of divorce compared with those in two-parent families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 61*, 1020-1033.