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Developmental Effects of Divorce on Parents and their Children

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Abstract

Divorce profoundly affects adults and children directly involved in the break up of their family unit. Divorce expert, Sanford Portnoy (2006) states that, “divorce can be a seismic event for the individuals who experience it.” It is a major life stressor and life transition for both parents and children (Stallman & Sanders, 2007). People initiate divorce believing the unhappiness, intense conflict, and emotional problems will disappear, yet it shown that divorced individuals experience higher levels of depression, lower levels of life satisfaction, and more health problems than married individuals (Amato & Previti, 2003). This paper investigates the effects of divorce on both parents and children finding that the development of both is negatively affected.

Developmental Effects of Divorce on Parents and their Children

Introduction

Much of society today has accepted and even embraced divorce as the solution for a bad marriage, yet divorce, even if it is amicable, tears apart the fundamental unit of society. Those in an unhappy, unfulfilling marriages; often will not “stick it out for the sake of the children,” but will leave the marriage seeking their own fulfillment rather than working out the problems in their marriage. Approximately one million divorces each year translates into two million spouses who begin adjustment to divorce each year. The emotional process of divorce takes several years to negotiate (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 8) and overall adjustment ranges dramatically depending on circumstances and the battles between divorcing husbands and wives that can rage on for years. Some adjust quite quickly, others never adjust. One researcher calls the first two years after divorce the “crisis period,” in which dramatic change becomes a way of life. Often, roles, residences, economic classes, sexual habits, clothing, hairstyles, personal behavior and/or careers change (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 44).

Divorce is not universally harmful to those subjected to it, but everyone involved is deeply affected by the divorce of a couple who said that they would remain faithful “until death do us part.” It is not a uniform psychological event, but may entail various social, psychological and economic changes (Emery, 1999, p. 2), and these changes interrupt or change the development of both adults and children. Every aspect of a person’s life is affected in one way or another and while many people emerge from divorce without serious problems, every person experiences setbacks in their lives. The conclusion of one study reflects the research well; “although this type of life change has the potential for fostering further growth and development,

it should also be viewed as a life change that may lead to disorganization and regression (Bursik, 1991).

Many people believe that divorce ends the relationship between husband and wife, but in reality, divorce does not end the relationship, but transforms it into a different sort of relationship. Divorce may be a single event dissolving the marriage, but both divorce initiators and non-initiators lose their spouses, their intact families and their familiar routines, and they tend to struggle to build new lives and relationships (Baum, 2007). The changes in family composition, family roles, relationships and economic circumstances have profound implications and can have a significant impact on family functioning (Greeff & Van Der Merwe, 2004). Familial changes and functioning affect the interaction between ex-spouses leading to relationship types ranging from friendship to foes constantly battling over every issue. Research demonstrates that divorce benefits some individuals, causes a temporary decline in well-being for others and sends some on a “downward trajectory” from which they never recover (Krumrei et al, 2007). Although ex-spouses may not be intimately involved in each others lives, the emotional and psychological effects of their marriage relationship and even the divorce continue for many years. Many find that the remarriage of the ex-spouse re-evokes feelings of betrayal, loss and anger even many years after the divorce (Portnoy, 2006).

Effects of Divorce on Adults

Stress incurred through divorce negatively affects most every adult who goes through the experience, but the effects will differ substantially from person to person. The fact that marital dissolution is a crisis and a profoundly stressful life event for many people is well documented in psychiatry, mental health, clinical psychology and psychosomatic medicine (Kposowa, 1999). This “divorce-induced stress weakens the immune system, creating a greater vulnerability to

infection and disease” (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 59). The newly divorced have more physical and psychological problems, which usually peak in the early post-divorce years and then diminish (ibid). An acute sense of failure, often found in the newly divorced can lead to depression and even suicide. In comparison to married people, the divorced exhibit higher rates of depression, suicide, alcohol abuse and mental health treatment (Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001). One study reported significantly higher rates of depression for women reporting a separation/divorce event than women reporting an act of physical aggression (Christian-Herman et al, 2001). Likewise, suicide rates for both divorced males and females are approximately four times higher than that of married males and females (Cutright & Fernquist, 2005).

Depression and suicide are two of the most serious problems found in divorced adults, but there are other problems as well. One study found “that marital dissolution was associated with a 3.7 fold increased risk for mood disorders, a 2.5 fold increased risk for anxiety disorders and 3.3 fold increased risk for substance abuse disorders (Chatav & Whisman, 2007). Divorced fathers may not visit their children because they do not physically, emotionally or financially “feel well” (Wallerstein, 2005). Mothers may face anxiety when the children visit their father; one mother confiding, “All weekend when my daughter is with her dad, I pace restlessly from lonely room to lonely room trying to ward off a depression that threatens to engulf me” (ibid). Another view comes from the story of Bonnie Pollack who has earned a doctorate in psychology. She says of the psychological fallout after her husband left her, “I was 40 and I had no role, I had no place, I had no identity. And it ripped me to the core” (Jefferson, 2008). Divorce brings significant changes in lifestyle and self-image and studies consistently demonstrate that individuals in the first years of post-divorce display more psychological and behavioral problems than those in intact marriages (Portnoy, 2006).

People often divorce to end marital conflict, but conflict usually does not end with the divorce. One author published a study showing that 50% of divorcees get along well after divorce; the problem is with this statistic is that it also shows that 50% do not get along well and can be what she calls “fiery foes,” couples who raged on, sought revenge and engaged in post-divorce litigation for years (Ahrns, 1994). E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly categorize divorcees into six groups. Their studies labeled 20% of divorcees *enhanced*; those whose lives flourished after the divorce. Another group was labeled *competent loners* (10%), those who had done well, but tended to be without a committed relationship. The largest group identified was the *good enoughs* at 40%. They experienced much turmoil through the divorce, but emerged reasonably well, although after twenty years, they had new partners, but the same problems. *Seekers* were mostly men who remarried quickly to give their lives structure and meaning. Typically unmarried twenty years later, they were more unhappy, depressed and had more problems with alcohol than others. *Libertines* exited marriages and looked for freedom; tending to live fast-paced, party lives leading to emptiness. The last group was the *defeated* (10%), a group that succumbed to depression, substance abuse and a feeling of purposelessness (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). These studies show that while, most people did not have serious problems, the majority also did not excel after the divorce and many of those experienced serious problems along the way.

Divorce often initiates a financial crisis for one or both adults as they split assets and attempt to support two households. Reworking finances adds considerably more stress and tension between adults of divorce and can become a leading source of anger. Many divorcees believe they will maintain the same standard of living, but it is simply not possible for the vast majority of couples splitting up. Attorney fees easily deplete savings or assets a couple might

have acquired. Estimated at ten to twenty thousand dollars, the cost of a divorce can set the stage post-divorce financial problems. Nearly 38% of children living with a divorced mother live below the poverty level as opposed to an overall rate of 22% in the United States (Thompson & Amato, 1999, p. 8). Post-divorce financial concerns usually are found to be one of the highest stress indicators for both males and females (Gabraith, 2003). “Both women and men experience a drop in income following divorce, but women may suffer more since men typically have more financial resources” (Knox & Corte, 2007). “Divorced men and women are more likely to default on their debt obligations than married households” (Lyons & Fisher, 2006). Even with governmental emphasis on paying child support, women are often granted inadequate support and unable to collect what is granted. Welfare benefits may help mitigate the economic consequences of divorce for women (ibid), but even with the help, women tend to suffer economically after divorce.

Potentially, one of the most stressful events in a person’s life, divorce also affects one’s job performance in a variety of ways. First are the mental and emotional problems experienced during the divorce process which can make it difficult to perform at normal levels. Often, employees suffering the stress of divorce make poor decisions and can physically be present while mentally and emotionally absent. Time off for stress related illness, court appearances or personal counseling also put stress on job performance. The inability to perform at required levels because of life stress may lead to dismissal or demotion on the job. It is estimated that the divorce of an employee will cost an employer \$8,000 in lost productivity (Turvey & Olson, 2006).

Divorce not only rips apart a family but adults lose most long-term relationships. It affects more than the immediate family as grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family

may be either drawn into the emotions of the split or left outside, wondering how their relationships with one or both of the divorcing couple will work out. Usually, relationships with the ex-spouse's family are severed abruptly, even though they may have been close, long-term relationships. Adult relationships with their children suffer as the child's time is divided between each parent and holidays and birthdays often become points of contention rather than celebrations. Once children of divorce marry, family relationships can become even more strained as the children divide time between three or possibly four sets of parents. Relationships become even more complicated when one or both parents marry bringing more family members into their lives.

In addition to changes in relationships within the extended family, social networks are dramatically changed and the divorcing couple usually becomes estranged from mutual friends. "Divorce is the only major family crisis in which social supports fall away" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 7) Very often both husband and wife lose the very support systems they most need to cope with the issues they face through the divorce. Couples often find it difficult continuing in the same church congregation after their separation, so they leave. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) found that although half of the families they studied belonged to churches or synagogues, not one clergyman came to call on the adults or children during the divorce. Despite the widespread acceptance of divorce in society, people do not know how to handle the divorce of friends or family and often just drop out of their lives. Shared interests people had while married with other couples become lost as the newly divorced attempt to adjust to single life (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 51).

Child rearing is a demanding undertaking and husbands and wives in a marriage relationship together provide a balance needed for parenting their children. Perhaps the greatest

challenge divorced adults face is mutually parenting children when they do not live together and potentially have differences in ideologies, morals and vision for the future. Parenting changes dramatically as the non-residential parent may not be readily identified as a parent and the residential parent must become both parents to children most of the time (Bailey, 2007). Non-residential parents may not identify with the role of parent due to the lack of contact with their children (ibid). While children in intact families relate to parents as a unit, children of divorce must by necessity relate to each parent individually. The family reorganizes into two households and parents must establish an independent relationship with their children (Frank, 2008). Inconsistent discipline affects children negatively and may result from unclear boundaries of parental authority or poor communication between parents (Emery, 1999, p. 97). Changes in parenting brought about by divorce prove difficult and stressful for parents and children. Both suffer because of this stress.

“Divorce is associated with diminished capacity to parent in almost all dimensions – discipline, playtime, physical care, and emotional support” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Parents seek to rebuild their social and economic lives after divorce and do not understand their children’s needs or provide the attention, nurturing and sacrifice required to effectively care for their children (Wallerstein, 2005). Children suffer when their parents do not act like parents and child behavior problems and poor adjustment are linked to the ineffective parenting strategies used by parenting experiencing their own stress and crisis (Stallman & Sanders, 2007). Parents adjusting to their own life changes may turn to an older child as a confidant or caregiver for younger siblings (Portnoy, 2006). Children experience additional confusion regarding roles and often must assume parental and even spousal roles while their parents recover from the divorce

experience. While parents suffer in many ways after a divorce, the children face uncertainty and catastrophic life changes.

Effects of Divorce on Children

Approximately one million children experience the ripping apart of their families by divorce each year. Researchers still disagree about the effects of divorce; some assert that divorce doesn't harm all children; that most emerge into adulthood as well or even better off than children from intact families. They also argue about how deeply children are affected and for how long. The problem is that every child; whether or not they build a successful adult life, is profoundly affected by divorce or the rest of his or her life. Michelle Weiner-Davis states, "Too often the fallout from divorce is far more devastating than many people realize when contemplating the move" (Weiner-Davis, p. 25, 1992). Divorcing parents looking for a new life do not take into account that every relationship their children have will change dramatically; with parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives and friends. The effects of divorce are not over once the divorce papers are signed; and "there is little doubt that divorce causes a number of important, often intense and prolonged stressors for children" (Emery, 1999, p35).

Many people look at divorce as a way to end the pain of a dysfunctional relationship and believe that their children will be better off living with two separate parents than two parents in constant conflict. Yet research shows that, "parental divorce is often followed by a cascade of stressful events that threaten the psychological wellbeing of children" (Sandler et al, 2000). These events include increased arguments (not decreased), moving and loss of time with one or both parents (ibid). Once the divorce is consummated, children must adapt to new surroundings, new relationships and often must make these changes on their own as parents attempt to put their lives back together and adjust to their own life changes. This period of adjustment presents

serious developmental challenges for a child who needs the guidance and nurturing of his or her parents and does not find it because the parents are emotionally devastated themselves or busy building new lives and relationships.

Children of divorce experience loss several different ways; the loss of the home life they knew, physical separation from one parent, emotional separation from parents and other family members, and financial loss. Couples divorcing experience financial set backs as assets are split, attorneys paid and income drops. The economic drop for women can be dramatic, especially if she has not worked outside the home for a long period of time. Society may proclaim that one parent can raise a child as well as two, but children lose a lot when they do not have two parents at home. A mother may be able to do many of the things a father can do, but she cannot replace her children's father, just as a father cannot take the place of his children's mother. Couple differences enhance and enrich children's lives and provide better training and nurturing for children than one parent can alone. Non-custodial fathers very often drop out of their children's lives; research shows that 40% of children have no contact with their nonresidential father and those with contact average only 69 days a year of contact (Halle, 2002).

Parental divorce is a highly stressful experience for almost all children and the increased levels of stress following divorce leads to increased psychological problems for children (Sandler, 2000). Children often become depressed and anxious leading to noncompliance and antisocial behavior (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). They experience difficulties in their relationships with parents, siblings, peers and teachers (ibid). One study shows that divorce early in a child's life is related to more adverse effects regarding internalizing and externalizing problems, while divorce later in a child's life has more adverse effects on grades (Bates et al, 2006). Externalizing relates to the child's interaction with his environment, i.e. poor behavior,

and internalizing relates to the child's internal behavior, i.e. fearfulness and anxiousness (ibid). Additionally, adolescent females from divorced families are more likely to engage in sex at a younger age than their counterparts from intact families and they have more sexual partners during their high school years (Portnoy, 2008). Compared to children from intact families, adolescents in divorced families are two to three times as likely to drop out of school, become pregnant or engage in antisocial and delinquent behavior (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

New circumstances and great dangers enter children's lives with the divorce of their parents. Often, children must care for themselves or their younger siblings as their parents work to meet the financial challenges they face. Left alone, there is greater danger of behavior problems and increased possibility of connecting with predators. Children living with an unmarried mother are fourteen times more likely to experience abuse than children living with both biological parents (Oliver et al, 2006). This danger only increases with parent's remarriage (ibid). When their parents remarry; 75 to 80% of divorcees remarry (Feldman, 2008, p. 553), a whole new set a problems arise for the children. Adapting to step-parents, step-brothers and sisters and adapting to more changes in their lives can cause children a great amount of stress. Step-parents are shown to be less warm and communicative with step-children than biological parents while exhibiting considerable more coerciveness (Oliver et al, 2006). Second marriages have even higher failure rates than first marriages (Feldman, 2008, p. 554), restarting the whole cycle of divorce for the children.

Children of divorce are pulled between the two worlds their parents live in after the divorce. Elizabeth Marquardt poignantly relates her own story as she reports the study of children of divorce in her book *Between Two Worlds*. For children, divorce is the *beginning*, not the end as parents perceive divorce. The child must now contend with upheaval and change that

continues throughout his or her childhood. “The child suddenly inherits two distinct worlds in which to grow up” (Marquardt, 2005, p. 21) and those worlds tend to be very different. Children become both insiders and outsiders to their parents’ worlds and must discover how to fit into each world. Considered “grown-up” during her childhood years, Ms. Marquardt discovered that her parents divorce caused her to grow up very quickly as a young person (ibid, p. 33). Children of divorce too often are left to fend for themselves as their parents put their lives back together. They are left to figure out life for themselves and often must make adult decisions long before they should have to make those kinds of decisions. They also must make moral choices before they should have to as they are pushed to make choices between the moralities of their parents living possibly two very different life styles. Finally, *Between Two Worlds* points out that, children of divorce usually must make loyalty decisions between their parents. In her own life; at a young age, Elizabeth experienced the trauma of her father asking her a question that would betray her mother if she answered it (ibid, p. 113). Children traveling between parents learn details of their parents’ lives and sometimes are asked explicitly to keep secrets or may be used to discover information about the other parent. Whether a parent inadvertently questions his child or actively seeks information to use against the other parent, children of divorce are caught in the middle between two people they deeply care about.

Children of divorce experience difficulties into adulthood, even when their parents have been divorced for many years. Research demonstrates that children of divorce are negatively affected by the divorce of their parents throughout their lives (Ellis, 2000, p.4). Problems include difficulties in intimate relationships, fear of abandonment, lower levels of marital satisfaction and they are more likely to divorce themselves. (Portnoy, 2008). They also experience greater levels of depression and comparatively lower levels of psychological well-being (ibid).

Compared to peers from intact families, children of divorce are less likely to have attended or completed college, are more likely to be unemployed and on welfare and have fewer financial resources (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Divorce follows a child throughout life and very often, he or she must make choices between parents' desires, causing hurt to one or the other parent and distress to the adult child.

Research shows that children of divorce tend to marry either later than their peers or much earlier, in their teens (Jefferson, 2008). Children of divorce often are apprehensive about marriage and many feel that, although they would like to marry, it surely would not work out for them (Wallerstein, 2005). Judith Wallerstein's (ibid) study found that men were more likely to withdraw from relationships, avoiding hurt. At the end of her study, 42% of the men were unmarried as compared to 6% in the comparison group (ibid). Women in contrast, tended to quickly jump into relationships and 20% of the women in her study actually sought out multiple lovers (ibid). Children of divorce tend to be more apprehensive about marriage and relationships, and their views of divorce also differ; 70% of the people in Hetherington's study of divorced families considered divorce an acceptable solution to an unhappy marriage versus 40% from non-divorced families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 243). This group has a much higher rate of divorce than adult children from intact families (Popenoe, 2002).

“Not all couples or children of divorce fail – many (perhaps the majority) go on to live productive lives free from serious problems, but the same is true of any serious trauma – abuse (physical or sexual), being a victim of a crime, sudden loss (due to death), serious injury or illness” (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Yes, many children “survive” the divorce of their parents, but the fact is that parental divorce is associated with negative outcomes and earlier life transitions for children of divorce (D’Onofrio et al, 2006). Hetherington herself states that, “20%

to 25% of youths from divorced families in comparison to 10% from non-divorced families developed serious social, emotional, or psychological problems” (ibid). Children of divorce suffer “serious” problems at an estimated two and a half times the rate of children from intact homes. Based on the statistic of one million children per year experiencing the divorce of their parents; a 15% increase would mean that 150,000 children a year suffer serious problems due to divorce. Over ten years, that equates to 1,500,000 children in the United States today with “serious social, emotional, or psychological problems” because of the divorce of their parents. Quoting Elizabeth Marquardt; “There is such a thing as a necessary divorce, but not such a thing as a good divorce” (Interview, 2006). The vast majority of children suffer when their parents divorce and many suffer greatly for the rest of their lives.

Conclusions

Divorce is a serious problem affecting an exponentially increasing number of people. It “is a considerable crisis that sets extreme demands and requires dramatic adaptation” (Greeff & Ven Der Merwe, 2004) for both adults and children. Several researchers in spite of the data demonstrating the problems of divorce cling to the view that a “good divorce” is possible. Constance Ahrons found that one half of couples had “civilized – and many amicable – relations with each other” (Ahrons, 1994). The problem is that half of divorced couples did not have civilized relations with each other – 50% continued with the conflict and problems they had in the marriage or possibly worse. Hetherington’s research demonstrates that 80% of people do not improve their lives by divorcing their spouse. It affects the lives of the couple who went through the divorce, their children, parents, extended family, and friends. Divorce affects adults’ employment through lowered job performance and job changes, either by choice or through

demotion or even dismissal. The problem extends throughout society and affects millions of people deeply.

Research reveals that nearly 25% of adults under the age of forty-four are children of divorce (Wallerstein et al, 2000, p. xix). Additionally, statistics show that 10% of adults who go through divorce experience serious problems and additionally, 10 to 15 % of children also experience serious problems (over the number from intact households) (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This equates to approximately 200,000 adults and 150,000 children each year who suffer serious problems due to divorce. There are millions of people now living in the United States with *serious* problems due to their own or their parents divorce. E. Mavis Hetherington concludes this number is not so bad considering the large number of people who emerge from divorce relatively unscathed. Yet, as she points out, the people negatively affected by divorce is greater than the association between smoking and cancer (Wallerstein, 2005). The U.S. Center for Disease Control (2007) points out that 400,000 Americans die each year from smoking related diseases; out of 45,000,000 smokers – that is less than 1%.

What advice do the divorced give? Work it out or go see a counselor say more than two-thirds in one study (Knox & Corte, 2007). Similarly, other research finds that the divorced had significant regrets about the decision to end their marriage and wished they had tried harder to work through the problems (Bartlow, 2003). Hetherington & Kelly (2002, p. 57) found similar indications in their study of divorced couples. Divorce simply does not deliver as promised. People do not begin lives anew and the problems incurred through and after the divorce often remain for years, if not for life. Another study shows that people who divorce are less happy than those who remain married (Lucas, 2005). Again, “On most measures, divorce made no difference at all. Unhappily married people who divorced were no happier, five years later, than

unhappily married people who stayed married” (Waite et al, 2002). In fact, 86% of unhappily married people who remain in their marriage find that, five years later, their marriages are happier; rated very happy or quite happy according to research (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 148). Working through the problems a couple may experience in marriage is healthier and better for everyone involved than divorcing and creating a whole new set of problems.

Paul Amato’s extensive research into marriage and divorce includes studying the reasons people divorce. He found that infidelity is the number one reason for divorce and that serious problems (infidelity, drinking or drug use, physical or mental abuse and not meeting family obligations) accounted for 41% of divorces (Amato & Perviti, 2003). The majority of divorces (59%) were caused by non-serious issues such as; incompatibility, growing apart, lack of communication, loss of love, etc. (ibid). These statistics support the findings that many people who divorce wish they had worked harder on the marriage and that if couples work through the low ebbs and problems experienced in marriage, the marriage relationship will improve. Interestingly, J.R.R. Tolkien had this to say about the possibility of changing spouses; “Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might be found more suitable mates. But the real soul-mate is the one you are actually married to.”

It has been said that marriage may not be forever, but divorce is. The majority of divorced adults carry to some degree, the scars of their divorce for the rest of their lives. Most divorces do not have to happen; working together and seeking counseling can help a couple through the problems they experience to build a healthy marriage. There is a vast array of resources available to help every couple with any problem they might experience. Divorce kills a marriage and damages many relationships and it takes several years to recover any semblance of

order in divorcees' lives. The death of a spouse is a painful and traumatic event, but "unlike death, divorce does not provide a sense of closure, of a chapter ending" (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, p. 10). The unresolved issues of divorce continue to haunt the people who have experienced divorce through continued contact and interaction with their ex-spouse.

Children also are scarred by the divorce of their parents and contrary to society's view; they do not completely recover, ever, even in the best of situations. The divorce of their parents is the most traumatic event of their lives and it continues to affect them for life. Children very often learn that no one can be trusted and relationships are not safe. Listen to Generation Xer Elizabeth Wurtzel; "We didn't learn to break promises and (marriage) vows from big bad bullies at school – we learned from watching our parents deny every word they once said to each other." The massive numbers of children of divorce will lead to a slow but steady erosion of the population's overall level of well-being (Medved, 1989p. 244). Marriage is an important institution, and if it is weakened or destroyed, society as a whole will suffer. The destruction of the family costs all of society through higher crime, welfare, education and health-care expenditures (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

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