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1988

Parenting on Your Own : How Divorce Affects Kids

Cooperative Extension, South Dakota State University

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HOW DIVORCE AFFECTS KIDS

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"I think due to the amount of love she's gotten that there have been no negative effects."

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Children from single-parent homes can grow up to be healthy and happy. Social scientists, such as sociologists and psychologists, are just beginning to provide reliable information about the effects of divorce on children. While many popular books detail the effects of divorce, only recently have there been many studies on which to base statements in these books. This latest research provides some good insight into how kids are affected.

Social scientists have found that in the short term, children's behavior is disrupted by the divorce of their parents. But we really shouldn't expect anything else. Their world has changed dramatically. The important questions are: How can we help children adjust? Can they lead productive lives? In this circular we take the first step and examine how children's behavior is affected. Other issues in the *Parenting on Your Own* series discuss how to help children adjust. Here are some answers to questions frequently asked by parents.

Does divorce have a negative effect on children?

An important research finding is that the effects of divorce on children are very complex and not always entirely negative. The effects depend on the age of the child at the time of the divorce, the sex of the child, the amount of conflict between parents, support provided by friends and family, and many other factors.

What is the effect of divorce on children at different ages?

Very little is known about the effects on children younger than two years of age. When the bonds between parent and child are severely disrupted there may be a problem. However, very young children do not necessarily suffer just because a divorce has occurred. Both parents can stay actively involved in child rearing, or one parent can maintain a strong, healthy relationship with the child.

For children between the age of two and adolescence, it appears that divorce has a more negative effect on the younger children. Preschool children tend to have greater difficulty understanding what is happening and are more likely to blame themselves for the divorce. Older school-age and adolescent children can better understand what is happening and are less likely to blame themselves.

Will young children never be normal as a result of a divorce?

Extended abnormal behavior is generally not found. Recent studies indicate that children's behavior may change for the worse within the first several months after the divorce but that most children make healthy adjustments within two years. While the parents' breakup does disrupt the family's life, children can learn how to cope with the situation and make healthy adjustments.



"When the child lived with us, I had contact with the child, I could get a hug and a cuddle. For the first month or two after we separated, I called it 'Daddy withdrawal.' I was prone to pick up small children and kiss them for no reason. That's created more of a feeling of loneliness than anything else."

How does children's behavior change?

Parents need to remember that divorce is stressful for their children, just as it is for the parents. In the short-term — perhaps for several months or even a couple of years — children may act in ways that are aggravating and sometimes disruptive. This is understandable in view of the changes taking place.

By being aware of possible changes, parents can respond in constructive ways to help children adjust and understand. As you read each of the following descriptions, keep in mind that, while the responses are typical, each child will react somewhat differently. If your child fits these patterns, remember that you can contribute to your child's adjustment. In another circular we will explore some ways that you can help children adjust.

Preschool children. Children from three to five years of age tend to be fearful and resort to immature or aggressive behavior. Initially, these children may fear being left alone or abandoned altogether. They might return to security blankets or old toys. Some may have lapses in toilet training. These types of behavior rarely last for more than a few weeks. Most children are confused about what is happening or about why mom or dad has left. Children often deny that anything has changed.

Preschoolers may also become less imaginative and cooperative in their play. Children may spend more time playing by themselves than with friends. They also may show more anxiety, depression, anger, and apathy in their play and in their interactions with both children and adults. Socially, preschoolers tend to spend more time seeking attention and the nearness of adults. At the same time, they may resist adult suggestions and commands. Some children become much more aggressive.

On the positive side, preschool children also try to understand the situation. They attempt to bring some order to their world by trying to explain to themselves what is happening and by trying to be well behaved. Though it takes some time, most children gradually understand the situation and adjust to it. In the short term, there do

not seem to be any effects on the intellectual behavior of children. They are likely to do just as well in school as they did before the divorce.

Young school-age children. Children six to eight years old have some understanding of what the divorce means. With their better sense of what is taking place, these children are able to deal with what is happening. Many young school-age children experience deep grief over the breakup of the family. Some children are fearful and yearn for the absent parent.

If the mother has custody, boys tend to behave aggressively toward her. Many of the children feel conflicts in loyalty to one parent or the other, even if the parents made no effort to make the child take sides.



Older school-age children. Many children aged nine to twelve try to understand the divorce and keep their behavior and emotions under control. While they may have feelings of loss, embarrassment, and resentment, these children actively involve themselves in play and activities to help manage these feelings. They may make up

Growing Number of Children From Single-Parent Families

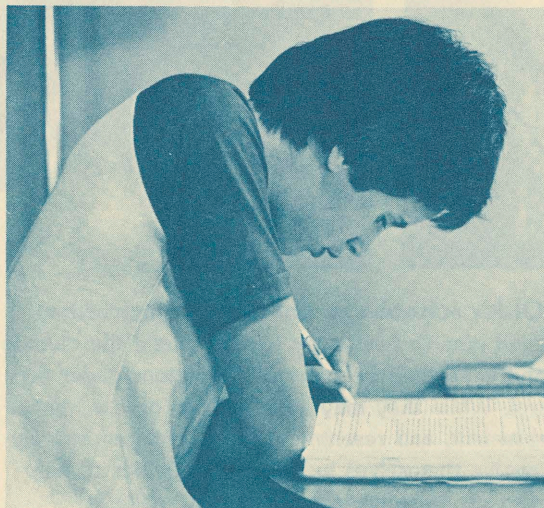
During the 1970s and 1980s the number of children living in single-parent families has been increasing steadily. Today, it is estimated that one out of five families is headed by a single parent. An estimated 40 to 50 percent of children born in the 1970s and 1980s will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent household. In 1980, 1,174,000 children were involved in divorce. During the years from 1950 through 1979, the number of children involved in divorce increased almost four times.

"I feel guilt, anxiety, and sometimes depressed about whether I'm hurting my son. I wonder if I shouldn't have hung on, you always wonder if you shouldn't have done something different and made it better for the kids."

games and act out make-believe dramas concerning their parents' divorce. These activities seem to help the child cope with the situation. Anger is perhaps the most intense emotion felt by this group of children. This anger may be aimed at one parent or at both parents. These children may also be more easily drawn into choosing one parent over the other. Children who become drawn into struggles between the parents tend to have more difficulties.

Adolescents. While adolescents understand the divorce situation better than younger children do, they too experience some difficulties adjusting. Many teens feel that they are being pushed into adulthood with little time for a transition from childhood. They may feel a loss of support in handling emerging sexual and aggressive feelings. In some cases, adolescents may even feel that they are in competition with their parents when they see them going on dates and becoming romantically involved. Sometimes, teens have grave doubts about their own ability to get married or stay married.

Many adolescents seem to mature more quickly following a divorce. They take on increased responsibilities in the home, show an increased appreciation of money, and gain insight into their own relationships with others. On the other hand, adolescents may be drawn into the role of taking care of the parent and fail to develop relationships with peers.



Are boys and girls affected differently?

Current research indicates that boys and girls appear to be affected differently by divorce. Boys tend to show more negative and long-lasting effects. This tendency seems to be truer of preschool boys than those who are older. However, these effects may be due largely to the fact that most children are in the custody of their mothers. Researchers are now finding that boys raised by fathers and girls raised by mothers tend to fare better than children raised by the parent of the opposite sex.

Young boys raised by their mothers tend to show more aggressive behavior both at home and at school. These boys appear to have more trouble playing with other boys their own age and tend to spend more time alone. Even after two years many still have hostile and anxious feelings.

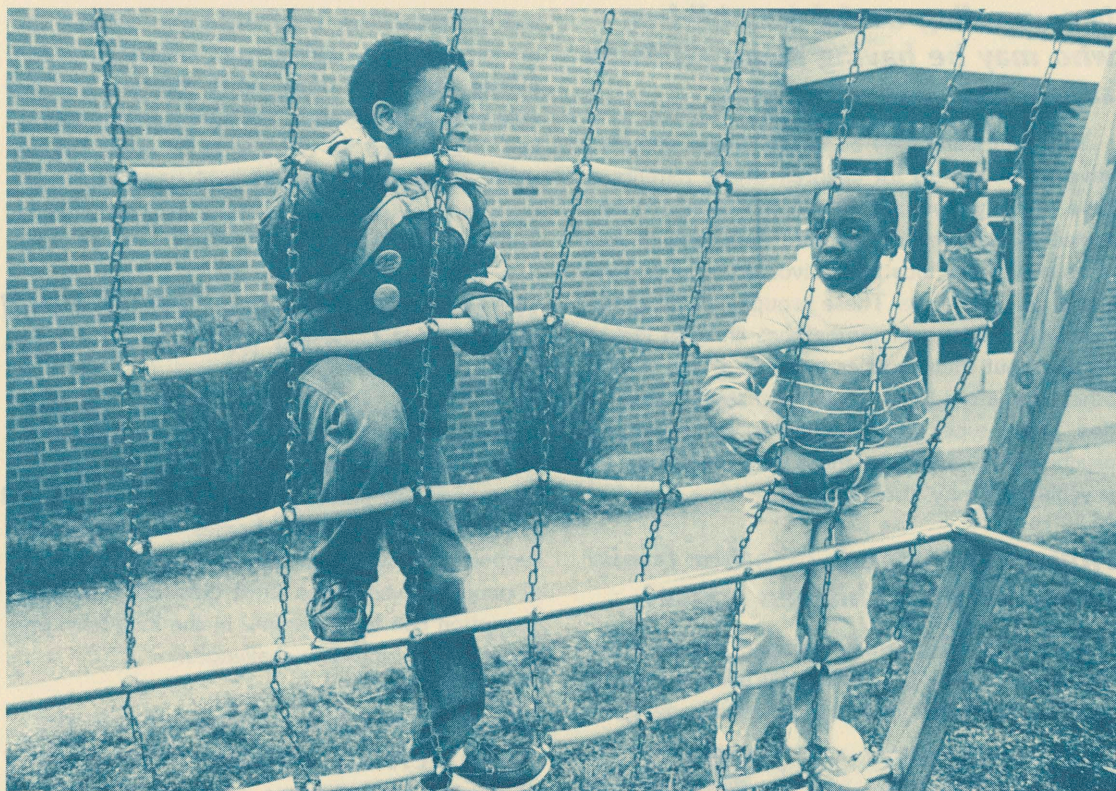
Likewise, girls raised by their fathers are often more demanding and show less mature social behavior. Most of the girls in these families are less independent and less sociable. However, these possibilities should not be cause for alarm. Many parents find ways to help their children behave in constructive ways. What we can say is that, in the short term, it may be more difficult — but not impossible — for the mother raising a young boy and the father raising a young girl. The adjustment two or three years following the divorce has little to do with the sex or age of the child and more to do with the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Can parents do anything to reduce these negative effects?

Yes. Much of what we've learned about the effects of divorce indicates that parents can contribute greatly to the child's adjustment. Hearing about disruptive behavior may be disheartening, but remember that the children are going through a difficult time in their lives.

Social scientists have repeatedly found that several factors contribute to the intellectual, social, and emotional development of children. In

“A lot of people think that kids from divorced families are going to grow up maladjusted. I totally disagree. He gets four times as much love.”



general, parents who practice a kind but firm style of discipline foster healthy development. Effective discipline requires providing the nurture and love that children need, while setting firm limits on aggressiveness and other inappropriate behavior. Minimizing the conflict and hostility between parents following the divorce can contribute to the child's growth. Agreement between the parents on discipline and child rearing, as well as love and approval from both parents, contributes to the child's sense of well-being and self-worth.

Limiting the disruptions the child must cope with — such as changing schools, child care, and residence — can reduce the number of stressful events with which the child must deal. Children seem to adjust best when the ex-spouses can support each other in their roles as parents and when the youngsters have regular and frequent contact with both parents. Letting the children know that you are willing to discuss divorce-related concerns can help them to understand and be more comfortable with their situation.

Do some children adjust more easily than others?

Each child grows and adjusts at his or her own pace. Some children will have few difficulties, while others will experience more problems. Parents who are aware of their children's needs are better able to help them adjust. Children who experience many changes — such as moving to a new place, starting in a new school, or being cared for in a new day-care center or home — have more to handle and may be slower to adjust. When changes can be reduced, the child may have an easier time. Obviously, this is not always possible. When a change does occur, parents need to let the child know in advance about the change and make it clear that mom and dad are doing their best to make the transition easier.

Children who have had difficulty in the past adjusting to change may also have more problems. There are no easy answers for this situation. Continuing to use kind but firm methods of child rearing will help children adjust.



"I think my kids are better off. I think they are happier and doing better in school. I think that just says something about how bad the marriage was, not about their reaction to the divorce."

Is counseling useful for children who may be having some difficulty adjusting?

Yes, counseling may be useful. Some schools have begun groups for children whose parents have recently divorced. These programs are designed to help children explore their feelings and learn how other kids from divorced families have found ways to cope. These groups can promote children's adjustment. Sometimes children feel better about their families when they find that other kids are adjusting well to a similar situation. Other types of counseling by social workers, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and psychiatrists may also be helpful.

How might friends or other family members help children adjust?

Friends or other family members can provide emotional support to children by being available to listen attentively and provide encouragement

and understanding. They might also act as role models and help children learn new skills or activities. Friends or other family members can provide emotional warmth, reassurance, and comfort. It is helpful for children to be reminded that they are important, valued, and capable of coping with difficulties and learning new activities or skills.

What about long-term effects? Will these children be well adjusted as adults?

Adjustment will depend on many factors. Current evidence suggests that most adults who come from one-parent homes are as well adjusted as those from two-parent homes. This evidence supports the view that divorce causes disruption of people's lives in the short term but that such disruption can be overcome in the long-term process of mastering new challenges.

What about long-term effects on these persons' relationships with their own spouses and children?

Some sources suggest that persons whose parents divorced are more likely to divorce themselves. However, overall marital happiness does not seem to differ, regardless of the background of the family. Adults who grew up in single-parent homes feel adequate as parents and are generally satisfied with themselves. There is no evidence to suggest that they have any more trouble raising children than do other parents.

Can there be a "victimless divorce"?

No. Divorce clearly creates stress and disruption that have the potential of creating much harm, especially for preschool children. However, the care and the skill of parents and those who provide support to these parents can reduce many of the adverse consequences and foster the healthy adjustment of children.

Your Children Are Not Alone

By 1990, one-fourth of America's children will have lived part of their lives in single-parent homes. Whether we like it or not, having divorced parents will become an increasingly common experience. Because many of their peers will have similar experiences, children may feel less alone or different. We already know that children and adolescents can find support and understanding from their peers, and this may be more common in the future.





“My son has a hard time understanding the divorce. He’s almost five now. Sometimes it gets out of hand and he cries because he wants his father back. And he gets frustrated. That’s when being rational doesn’t work anymore.”

For Further Reading

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This article was prepared by Robert Hughes, Jr., Assistant Professor of Family Relations Extension. Acknowledgment is also given to the parents and children who enthusiastically shared their experiences through photographs and personal responses.

Parenting On Your Own is made possible by grants from the Garrett Foundation and the South Dakota Office of Vocational-Technical Education.

Robert Hughes, Jr., and Lisa A. Chesser, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, for their assistance in developing content and layout. Contact information: 217/244-2400, ext. 5240.

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For Further Reading

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Robert Hughes, Jr., and Jane A. Scherer, University of Illinois, project coordinators, Illinois. For more information on single parenting, contact your county Extension agent/home economics or Extension Home Economics, SDSU, Box 2275A, Brookings, SD 57007.

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