

CHILDREN & DIVORCE: A SNAPSHOT

by **Hilda Rodriguez and Chandler Arnold**
October 1998

A Substantial Percentage of Children Experience the Divorce of Their Parents.

- Divorce rates have increased since 1921 with the sharpest increases occurring from the mid 1960's to the late 1970's. These rates did not change during the 1980's. The Census Bureau estimates that half of all marriages occurring since 1970 end in divorce, with the majority of these divorced persons remarrying.
- A substantial number of divorces involve couples with children. 61 percent of the couples in which both the husband and wife are divorcing from a first marriage have children under 18 years of age. With regard to divorces in which one spouse is divorcing from a first marriage and the other from a remarriage, 54 percent in which the husband was the remarried partner had children upon divorce while 47 percent of those in which the wife was the remarried partner had children. 29 percent of couples in which both spouses are divorcing from a remarriage have children.
- In 1990, a quarter of divorcing couples had one child, 20 percent had two children, and 8 percent had three children or more.
- Increasing divorce rates have lead to a substantial increase in the number of children who live with only one of their parents. In 1995, 18.9 million children under age 18 lived with only one parent, of these over half lived with a parent that was separated or divorced (38% with a divorced parent and 19% with a separated parent). The remainder of children living with single parents lived with a never-married parent (35%), a widowed parent (4%), or a parent whose spouse lived elsewhere because of business or another reason (4%).
- In the vast majority of cases, the parent with whom the children live is their mother. In 1990 divorce and child custody cases, the wife was awarded custody of the children 72 percent of the time, joint custody was awarded 16 percent of the time, and the father was awarded custody 9 percent of the time.

While Children of Divorce Do Not Always Experience Problems, There are Significant Negative Differences In Teen Births and High School Dropout Rates Between Children Whose Parents Have Divorced and Those Whose Parents Have Remained Together.

	Two-Parent	Divorce
High School Dropout Rate	13%	31%
Teen Birth Risk	11%	33%

- 73% of children receive a high school diploma and another 12% receive a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Nevertheless, of the 15% who do not receive a high school diploma, children from divorced families are about twice as likely to drop out of school as children from two-parent families. The differences between these two groups of children is even larger when GEDs are excluded and only high school diplomas are used as indicators of school success. Thus, living in a divorced household increases the risk of dropping out of school, but it is not the primary source of school failure.

The Differences in Outcomes Relate in Part to Differences in the Parents and the Amount of Parental Conflict

- Parents who will later divorce are more likely to have experienced pre-break-up difficulties such as alcoholism, drug abuse, physical and emotional abuse, disagreements about gender roles, and other incompatibilities than those who maintain their marriages. These factors clearly affect children and create marked differences in children's outcomes.
- Also, parental conflict plays a key role in children's well-being. Indeed, parental discord can be more disruptive to children than parental absence through divorce.
- Pre-separation conflict--rather than parental separation itself-- may account for much of the statistical differences between children whose parents have divorced and those whose parents stay together. According to data of the National Survey of Children, the experience of parental separation in and of itself has only modest, statistically non-significant effects when measures of children's prior well-being are taken into account.
- In fact, high conflict in intact homes has been found to produce effects that are similar to and as strong as those associated with marital disruption. Indeed, over time, children in intact but persistently high conflict homes show more deleterious effects than do children who have experienced divorce but go on to live in a relatively conflict-free post-divorce situation.
- Thus it is not surprising that the effects of marital disruption on children vary according to the level of marital conflict that existed before the divorce. The effects of divorce are found to be more negative if the amount of conflict that precedes the divorce is greater. A high level of post-disruption conflict also aggravates and prolongs the negative effects of divorce.
- Part of the reason for this is that parents engaged in conflict are less consistent in the discipline they provide, have disrupted bonds of attachment with their children, serve as models for negative behavior for their children, and/or place their children under emotional and cognitive stress.

For Affected Children, However, Marital Disruption Has Some Immediate Effects

- In the period immediately following marital breakup, the custodial parents ability to be a good parent often declines. Many custodial parents, distressed and overburdened, become less supportive and more inconsistent in disciplining their children. In addition, household routines are frequently interrupted, resulting in irregular meals and bedtimes.
- This particularly effects children in the year following the divorce. These effects are attenuated somewhat over time, especially if the divorce is followed by the establishment of a stable, non-conflicted living situation and includes participation by the non-custodial parent (if this does not involve concomitant conflict).

The *Intermediate* Effects of Divorce on Children

Health

- Children experiencing the disruption of their parents' marriages tend to have poorer emotional adjustment, including being more anxious, than children not undergoing this experience.
- 14% of children with divorced parents needed psychological help in 1987, according to their parents, and 13% reported that their child actually saw a psychiatrist or psychologist in the past, compared to only 6% and 5.5% respectively, for children in two-parent families.
- Children living with formerly married mothers had a 50% greater risk of having asthma in the preceding 12 months.
- Children from disrupted families showed an increased risk of accidents, injuries and poisoning, and elevated scores for health vulnerability in comparison to those living with both biological parents. The predicted risk of injury was about 20% to 30% greater for children from disrupted marriages than for other children.

Academic Achievement

- Children with divorced parents, are more likely to exhibit signs of early disengagement from school than children from intact families.
- Marital disruption is accompanied by increases in truancy and more negative attitudes toward school. Marital disruption appears to be associated with behavioral and affective changes, rather than with changes in more cognitive phenomena like aspirations and grades.
- Children of divorce report lower educational expectations on the part of their parents, less monitoring of school work by both their mothers and fathers, and less overall supervision of school and social activities than children from intact families. The change in parenting practices is strongest for father's monitoring of school work, which reflects the fact that

most children live with their mothers after a divorce.

- One possible reason for lower academic achievement is a diminution in income in the custodial parent's household. For example, income differences account for between 30 and 50 percent of the overall difference in high school graduation rates among children from two parent and single parent households.
- Part of the income effect is that a decrease in income frequently leads to an increase in residential mobility. In turn, residential mobility is associated with lower school achievement. Thus, residential mobility and the accompanying disruption of social ties are potentially important mechanisms underlying the lower school achievement of children from disrupted families.
- Moreover, children who move frequently do not receive specialized educational services, nor do they receive the individual attention they may need from teachers in order to identify gaps in their knowledge.

Behavioral Problems

- Children experiencing the marital disruption of their parents' exhibit a disproportionately high range of negative behavioral problems. They can be more oppositional, aggressive, lacking in self-control, distractible, demanding of help and attention, overly dependent, to exhibit anti-social, depressed/withdrawn, or impulsive/hyperactive behavior problems, and to be troublesome at school, and disobedient at home and school.
- In one study, the observed proportion reported to have received professional help for emotional or behavior problems in the preceding year varied from 2.7% for children living with both biological parents to 88% for children living with formerly married parents.
- Reduction in family economic resources and standard of living as a consequence of divorce is partly associated with these disruptive and antisocial behaviors especially in boys. Children may be affected by the losses either directly through lower income and assets, or indirectly through maternal stress caused by the economic hardship.
- Following divorce, boys' reveal a disproportionate increase in substance use, which is significantly greater than that of boys with continuously married parents and that of girls from disrupted homes. Girls from disrupted households do not have a proportionately greater increase in substance use than girls with continuously married parents, although disrupted girls show more frequent substance use before and after the divorce.
- Divorce appears to be particularly hard on adolescents. Children who experienced a parental divorce during adolescence were more likely to be involved in substance use and to report problematic substance use than were children who experienced no divorce or a divorce during their preadolescent years. Adolescents from disrupted families also reported lower psychological well-being, lower self-esteem, lower sense of mastery,

higher strain with parents, and more substance use than their counterparts from continuously married families.

Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce

- The effects of marital discord and family disruption on children are visible 12 to 22 years later in poor relationships with parents, high levels of problem behavior, and an increased likelihood of dropping out of high school and receiving psychological help. Disruption-related problems were at least as evident in adulthood as they had been in adolescence. In the case of mother-child relationships, a significant effect of divorce was evident in adulthood, even when none had been found in adolescence.
- The younger the child at the time of divorce, the greater the likelihood of long term effects. Parental divorce in early childhood (before age 6) poses more long-term risks to a young person's social and emotional development than does parental divorce at later ages.
- Poor relationships with parents are particularly striking during the young adulthood of children with divorced parents. Nearly twice as many young adults in disrupted families (30%) had poor relationships with their mothers as those whose parents remained married (16%). In addition, nearly two-thirds of young adults in disrupted families had a poor relationship with their fathers, compared to 29% of those whose parents had not divorced.
- This is particularly true of mother-daughter relationships. In young adulthood, 29% of women with divorced parents had poor relationships with their mothers compared with 14% of women from non-disrupted families. By contrast, among young men, the proportion with poor relationships with their mothers was roughly the same in divorced and non-divorced families: 19% and 20% respectively.

Gender Differences in the Effects of Marital Disruption

- Boys and girls have strikingly different reactions to a parental divorce. This is especially true during middle childhood and adolescence. Boys are more likely to respond with conduct problems and acting out at home and in schools, whereas girls are more likely to respond with depression and "overcontrolled" behavior.

Boys and Divorce

- Although boys from divorced families seem more likely than girls from these families to show consequences such as behavior problems and high school dropout, these differences do not imply that boys are especially vulnerable to the effects of disruption. Rather, the differences can be accounted for by marital disruption and the interaction of gender (boys are generally more prone to these difficulties than girls).
- Boys' self-esteem declines more after divorce than girls'.

- Marital disruption is also associated with declines in socially acceptable behavior for boys, but not for girls.
- The experience of marital disruption lowers boys'--but not girls'-- mathematics and reading performances. However, the adverse effect of divorce for boys' math performance is largely offset when they break-up means the termination of a high-conflict relationship.
- Boys from disrupted families have higher high school drop out rates (28% to 20%) and behavior problems scores (23% to 14%) than girls from disrupted families.
- Boys from divorced homes displayed poorer performance than intact-family males on mental health measures, while there were no differences in these same criteria between divorced- and intact- family girls. Children of divorce, especially boys, evidenced higher frequencies of dependency, irrelevant talk, withdrawal, blaming, and inattention as well as decreased work effort and higher frequencies of inappropriate behavior, unhappiness, and maladaptive symptoms.
- However, some of this effect can be alleviated by parental contact. Divorced-group boys who maintain contact with the father perform better on several mental health measures than those who do not have regular communication.

Girls and Divorce

- Girls' difficulties occur prior to the marital separation and do not change substantially after the divorce, while boys' difficulties increased subsequent to the divorce, especially for substance use.
- Girl's reading achievement is not significantly affected by parental divorce, even when pre-disruption characteristics are considered. But, it is also possible that girls manifest distress in ways that are more difficult to observe, such as by becoming more anxious or depressed or exhibiting over controlled "good" behavior.