

**CHILDREN AND DIVORCE:
TRANSITION OR TRAUMA?**

By Robert E. Emery

Historians and anthropologists have demonstrated how family forms are shaped by economic demands and social traditions found during different periods and within particular cultures. While it's useful to acknowledge these variations, it's nevertheless true that a happy, two-parent family remains the ideal environment for rearing children in America today. Many two-parent families are not happy, of course, and economic conditions and cultural attitudes increasingly allow unhappy marriages to end in divorce.

Conclusions about the effects of divorce on children seem to embrace one of two positions. The most common is alarmist: The family is disintegrating, and children are being reared in environments prone to pathology. "Liberation" is the alternative theme. A variety of family forms have blossomed, unhappy (or abusive) relationships can be escaped, and children can thrive irrespective of family status. Each position is partially accurate. Divorce is devastating for some parents and for some children, yet it is a relief for others. The effects depend on the degree of distress experienced during marriage, and the deterioration or improvement in family life which follows divorce.

Limitations of Research on Divorce

Scientific evidence on children and divorce is invariably viewed through the lens of personal, social, and moral/religious beliefs. Because the research is difficult to conduct and its findings sometimes ambiguous, such biases intrude upon its interpretation. It's essential to clarify some problems inherent in the scientific investigation of the topic. The most important caution is that evidence on children and divorce points to correlation, not necessarily causality. When an investigator finds more emotional difficulties among children from divorced families, it cannot be concluded that divorce itself caused the problems. Divorce often is accompanied by economic struggles, diminished parenting effectiveness, and intense parental conflict. Any or all of these problems may be responsible for disturbances among children of divorce, just as they create psychological distress among children whose parents remain married.

Measurement is another major consideration. Assessment of children's psychological health is necessarily imperfect, especially assessment of children's internal states. Even parents of the same child are likely to see divorce as having different effects upon him or her. The parent who wanted the marriage to end is likely to see the

child as coping well; the one who wanted the marriage to continue is apt to see him deeply troubled. Other measures have similar problems. Objective indicators like school grades may be insensitive to children's internal distress, while highly individualized measures like clinical interviews can turn normal worries into cataclysmic struggles.

Sampling is a third consideration. Much research on divorce has been conducted on samples of convenience, particularly clinical cases. One shouldn't generalize about all children's experience with divorce from narrow samples—especially since clinical samples are comprised of children who are notably disturbed. Investigators who focus only on such narrow samples are in danger of ignoring resilience and diversity across children, families, races, and cultures.

Sensitive clinicians might detect hidden pathology among children of divorce, but numerous questions can be raised about their findings. Are the children's difficulties really caused by divorce as such? Would the children have fared better if their parents had remained unhappily married? How pathological are problems which are only evident under the clinical microscope? To what extent do their experiences apply to other children, especially those from different ethnic backgrounds? Fortunately, recent research has provided evidence based on hard indicators and national samples. It clarifies the correlations between divorce and difficulties among children, although as we will see, problems of interpretation remain.

Studies of National Samples of Children

The demographics of divorce is one point of clarity. Although divorce rates stabilized in the 1980s, they did so at a very high incidence. Projections indicate that as many as half of the current generation of children will experience divorce by the time they are 18 years old. Divorce is especially likely to occur early in children's lives; about half of all divorces involving children take place before the children are six years old.

Another clear finding concerns mental health utilization. Children whose parents divorce are 2 to 3 times more likely to see a mental health professional as are children whose parents remain married. The great majority of children of divorce do not need professional help, however, and one can question to what extent referrals reflect parental concern rather than child psychopathology.

National survey data are less clear in pointing to the specific behavioral disturbances that may lead to clinic referrals or subclinical distress. The most consistent evidence points to increases in aggression and noncompliance among children of divorce, especially among boys.

Survey studies generally find more ambiguous evidence for less visible difficulties such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Even when increased internal or external disturbance is found, however, the magnitude of the relation can be debated. For example, in the well-known national studies of Frank Furstenberg, Nicholas Zill, and colleagues ("Marital Disruption: Parent-Child Relationships and Behavior Problems in Children," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1986, Vol. 48, pp. 295-307), divorce generally was as strongly related to children's psychological health as were other demographic measures such as race or socioeconomic status. The increased behavioral and emotional difficulties experienced by black children, or by children reared in poverty, should not be dismissed. Neither should the risk associated with divorce be discounted. Still, whether one is considering race, income, or divorce, it is essential to remember that the majority of children who experience the epidemiological disadvantage are *not* emotionally or behaviorally disturbed. The study of children "at risk" also teaches us much about resilience. (Furstenberg, "How Marital Dissolution Affects Children: Variations by Age and Sex," *Developmental Psychology*, 1989, Vol. 25, pp. 540-549.)

Survey studies typically find quite small differences in the academic aptitude and achievement test scores of children from divorced families, in comparison to children from married families. Notable differences are found in the number of years of school completed, however. For example, David Featherman and Robert Hauser (*Opportunity and Change*, New York Academic Press, 1978) found that men reared in single-parent families during the first half of the 20th century completed an average of three-quarters of a year less formal education than did men who were reared by two parents. A potentially important trend found in the survey was that the disadvantage associated with family status diminished for men born later in the century.

Popular concern has recently focused on the heterosexual relationships of children from divorced families. All young adults worry about forming close relationships, and children whose parents have divorced may face added anxieties. Some survey data indicate that children of divorce engage in sexual activity somewhat sooner than children from married families. It is well-established that there is some intergenerational transmission of divorce. For example, divorce rates generally are 15-20% higher among adults whose parents were divorced; such increases may reflect attitudes about the acceptability of divorce rather than difficulties in maintaining relationships.

This leads to a final area of concern, psychological health during adult life. As adults, children of divorce generally are indistinguishable from others on various indices of their psychological health. The small influence

of parental marital status on adult mental health stands in stark contrast to the influence of the adult's *own* marital status. Married adults have consistently been found to have fewer psychological difficulties than divorced adults irrespective of their own parents' marital status.

Interpreting the Correlation between Divorce and Children's Disturbances

This brief outline of research on divorce points to a moderate but socially significant relation with psychological difficulties among children. Still, it is not clear how the correlation should be interpreted. Much of children's distress is attributable to the events that sometimes surround divorce, not to the divorce itself. Numerous studies have found that indices of family economics, parenting quality, and interparental conflict predict children's psychological functioning more accurately than does marital status. Moreover, longitudinal studies have documented that children's distress lessens as time passes after divorce. Most important of all, recent prospective research indicates that many of children's behavioral difficulties actually are present *before* a divorce occurs. It's the overall quality of family life that's at issue, not divorce alone.

There is no doubt that most divorces are distressing, and that children fare better when their parents are happily married. The key question is whether the functioning of an *unhappily* married family improves or deteriorates following divorce. It's clear that disposable income declines, especially for women and children. Parenting also may be less effective, at least for a period of time. On the other hand, conflict presumably de-escalates following separation and divorce.

Demands on Public Policy

What's the net effect? Can policy be redesigned to minimize economic and parenting difficulties? Why are we so concerned about economic well-being, adequate parenting, and contained conflict in divorced families but not in married families? This suggests a new twist to the old question: Should parents stay married for their children's sake? Perhaps our societal concern should focus less on marriage and more on children. Our social philosophy is to allow pluralism in marital preferences and family forms. The adequate rearing of children is, however, a singular societal concern. Child support, child care, and dispute resolution policies can be designed to apply to families irrespective of marital status.

Child support policies can demand that all parents support their children by establishing paternity, providing clear formulas for determining support, and by making sure the financial support is forthcoming. The collection

of income tax provides the model for the future collection of child support. Child care programs can be offered to all families, but they should be of special benefit to single-parent families, given the latter's economic and practical needs. Policy needs to be concerned not only with the *rights* of noncustodial parents, but also with their *responsibilities* to their children.

Family feuds in marriage or divorce need not be tolerated, let alone encouraged by the adversary legal system. "No fault" legal statutes have made divorce much more of a private matter. Alternative methods of dispute resolution such as divorce mediation are a logical outgrowth of this trend; they place the responsibility of ordering affairs after divorce on parents, not on the state.

Cooperative dispute resolution is especially needed in relation to child custody and visitation, while clear guidelines are most pressing for directing couples toward economic settlements.

Finally, more efforts from the state, social organizations, schools, therapists, and individual families should be directed at the "front end" of divorce: marriage. As we acknowledge the difficulties of divorce, we must also face the problems that accompany marriage and childrearing. If our concern is children, our policies should be directed toward children, not marriage. If our concern is marriage, our efforts are should be targeted toward strengthening marriage, not bemoaning divorce.

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FAMILY DISRUPTION AND ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

A panel in the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) was interviewed eight times between the fall of 1983 and the spring of 1986, with data collected on family status and economic position. The SIPP panel study found "economic hardship for children who experience the departure of their father from the household...[resulting] from two different factors: One was the loss of income earned by the absent parent; the other was that children who made the transition into single-parent households were less well-off to begin with...."

Change in Average Monthly Income (in constant dollars), by Family Status

	Always Two Parents	Mother Present, Father Leaves	Mother Only Present Throughout
Average Income			
Fall 1983	\$2,834	\$2,346	\$1,132
Spring 1986	\$3,060	\$1,815	\$1,176

Note: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Family Disruption and Economic Hardship*, 1991.