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The Possible Negative Emotional and Psychological Consequences in Children of Divorce

by Leah Cameron

(English 1903)

Everyone has probably heard, at some point or another, the statement that over 50% of American marriages end in divorce. The breakup of a marriage is, indeed, relatively common these days, and oftentimes, within those marriages, there are children involved. In some cases, the divorce is for the better, and families can still exist harmoniously with the parents being separated. Unfortunately, those cases are often in the minority, for varying reasons. If parents do not choose to handle their divorce with sensitivity, awareness and cooperation from both parties, the consequences of their neglectful or reckless actions in the wake of the ending of the marriage can have a severe negative impact on their children. The children of a divorce may feel alienated from their peers, or stigmatized by the loss of a “normal” two-parent household. Confused and angry, the child of an especially contentious divorce may later become defiant, violent, or “act out” at home or in school; they may show a marked or sudden decline in academic performance; become promiscuous; or choose to abuse illegal substances. However, steps can be taken by parents to avoid these emotional and psychological upsets, and with awareness, empathy and compassion they can find that it is indeed possible to raise a happy, healthy and well-adjusted child while divorced.

We often hear that if one’s parents are divorced, that person is more likely to become divorced him/herself later in life. In a study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* in 2005, Pennsylvania State University researchers Paul Amato and Jacob Cheadle concluded that “...events in the lives of grandparents can have long-term implications for the lives of grandchildren. Grandparents’ decisions to divorce predict less education, greater marital discord, and weaker ties with parents two generations later” (p. 204). Amato and Cheadle (2005) also note that “These findings are particularly striking when we consider that the great majority of grandchildren were not yet born when these divorces occurred” (p. 204). This shows that even a grandparent’s divorce can have an impact on a family, generations later.

When looking at this study, as well as similar ones correlating a parent’s divorce with his or her child or children’s later likelihood of their own divorce, it’s clear that the effects that a divorce can have on a child can have long-reaching consequences, ones that may last even into adulthood. If the children’s emotional needs are not handled properly both during and after their parents’ divorce, lingering feelings of anger, insecurity, alienation, abandonment, and confusion can even manifest into the children’s adult relationships and personal growth years, even decades, after the divorce itself takes place. A number of factors can affect this, including parental absenteeism or alienation, destructive parentification, poor parenting skills, lack of cooperation by the parents in regards to childrearing, poverty, and stress.

In the aftermath of a divorce, one of the more unfortunate outcomes is that one of the parents may become absent from the child’s life. While there is nothing inherently “wrong” with a single-parent family, it stands to reason that a child who suddenly goes from having two parents to one parent will almost certainly feel the missing parent’s absence acutely, especially if the transition is abrupt or lacking an explanation from one or both parents. A child in these circumstances may feel abandoned, unloved, or come to believe that there is something “wrong with them” that caused the other parent to go away. A parent’s absence can affect a child not only through the direct factor of their absence, but through a lack of fiscal support as well.

More often than not, the absent parent is most commonly the father, quite possibly due to the

fact that most of the time it is the mothers who are awarded full custody of the marriage's children in a divorce settlement. This can have a detrimental effect on the children's day-to-day relationships with their fathers. Richard Weissbourd (1999) states in his article "Distancing Dad" that "...one-sixth of all children will see their fathers once a week after a divorce, and close to one-half will not see them at all. Ten years after a divorce, fathers will be entirely absent from the lives of almost two-thirds of those children" (p. 32). Worse, Weissbourd (1999) also notes that post-divorce, children are nearly two times more likely to be living in poverty, as almost 41% of their fathers have no child support agreements in place with the courts, and about 50% of them never pay their court-ordered amount (p.32). This is not to say that there are no mothers out there who fail to live up to their financial and custodial responsibilities (there most certainly are), but in the majority of cases, whether intentional or unintentional, the fathers are by far in the majority of offenders, according to the data.

With a lack of fiscal support from a parent, those unfortunate children whose lives are condemned to poverty due to a parent's nonpayment of child support are directly affected not only physically, but emotionally as well. According to Robert Kuttner (2007), children who live in poverty are:

...statistically at greater than normal risk for every bad social outcome in later life associated with early chronic trauma. As the infant grows into a toddler, the child is more likely to have poor cognitive and emotional skills; later on to do poorly in school; to have poor eating and exercise habits, to use drugs and excessive alcohol, to become pregnant as a teen, to drop out of school. As an adult, this grown child is more likely to suffer physical and mental illnesses, to have difficulty forming secure attachments to a life partner, to get into trouble with the law, to be incarcerated, and to die prematurely. ..Some remarkable individuals surmount these odds, but to be poor is to be at greater risk (p. A31).

Living in poverty is a very real consequence of a parent's failure to fiscally support their child, whether or not that parent's failure was intentional or unintentional, and the lack of that financial support can trickle down into nearly every aspect -- both emotional and physical -- of that child's life.

This may go hand-in hand with the divorce's impact on the parents involved, as their fiscal and emotional circumstances can often heavily impact their children in turn. A Kansas City study published in 2003, done by Hira Najr and Ann D. Murray, examines the attachment security of preschool children in both divorced and intact families. The results of the study are fairly predictable -- in divorced families, the parents are far more likely to be depressed, stressed, lacking emotional support from friends and family members, and reporting more conflict with their ex-spouses (2003). Additionally, the parents in the intact family groups had higher levels of education and higher amounts of household income, while mothers in the divorced group reported making, on average, half that of their counterparts in intact marriages (Najr and Murray, 2003).

Certainly, the negative factors in the divorced parents' lives -- anger over the divorce, stress over financial issues and ongoing conflict with the other parent, low levels of education as well as pay, and a lack of emotional support -- may, at times, overflow onto their children, whether or not they intend to do it, or are even aware that it is happening. This "spillover" effect from the parent to the child can, in turn, cause anxiety and stress in the child over conflicts that they as children are not fully able to grasp. Growing up in this sort of emotionally turbulent environment can definitely have a negative emotional effect on the child.

Sometimes, post- divorce, parents may either intentionally or unintentionally force a child into a position of increasing demands and responsibility, especially if the other parent is unwilling to cooperate or share responsibility with their ex-spouse, or absent entirely. A 2001 study published in

the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* found that twice as many of its participants who were from divorced families experienced what they term as “destructive parentification” (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, p. 6). They explain this term to mean “assuming developmentally taxing caregiving responsibilities at home that are not acknowledged, supervised, and reciprocated” (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, 2001, p. 1). These responsibilities could include such things as repeatedly taking care of a younger sibling while a parent is out, mentoring a parent through anxiety or depression, housekeeping, or mediating conflicts in or outside the home (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, p. 2). When a child did experience this “destructive parentification”, however, they noticed that “...destructively parentifying patterns continue to characterize the family relationships of these individuals at levels mirroring their retrospective reports of caregiving and fairness during childhood” (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, p. 7).

In the article “Growing Up in the Divorced Family” published in the *Clinical Social Work Journal* in 2005, Judith S. Wallerstein, PhD. Writes:

These youngsters spend the bulk of their growing-up years in post-divorce families, trying to cope with a range of changing relationships of one or both parents including cohabitations and remarriages. Their losses will be compounded by their parents’ broken love affairs, second or even third divorces, and by the several years of diminished parenting that are inevitable as both parents struggle to rebuild their lives and recapture their hope of achieving a rewarding and lasting life partnership. These children are the invisible clients in our divorce proceedings, and their lives are the ones most influenced by a proceeding in which they have no standing and only feeble voices usually ignored (p. 403).

Wallerstein (2005) goes on to describe several negative parental factors that may contribute to the child’s sense of confusion and anxiety regarding their parents’ divorce: parental overdependence on the child or expectations that the child is a “little adult” able to engage in more mature conversations or behavior that are age-appropriate, strong feelings of “escapism” or an urge to abandon their children and erase all reminders of the failed marriage, and intense anger over the ending of the marriage (p. 406). Also, the child may have to deal with what is termed “parental alienation” – the desire of one parent to turn the child against the other. Often, the alienating parent does this out of his or her own anger or guilt over the ending of the marriage, the stress of being a newly single parent, the desire to “punish” the other parent for misdeeds both real and imagined, and the desire to “ally” their children with him or her – in other words, forcing his or her children to take sides.

In a study on the effects of parental alienation that was done in 2004 by Amy J. L. Baker for the Center for Child Welfare Research, she notes that the adults participating in the study who had experienced parental alienation as a child reported feelings of low self-esteem and self-loathing, guilt, depression, anger, drug and alcohol problems, lack of trust, and most telling of all, feeling alienated from their own children (p. 301). Baker (2005) also states that of the adult children of divorce “...many reported selecting a life partner a person remarkably similar to their own alienating parent. This typically meant a person who put their own needs first, lacked empathy for others, and desired an excessive degree of control over them” (p. 300). This shows that the child, now an adult, is experiencing the same sort of interpersonal issues that their parents did years earlier – the very ones that caused them to split up.

A 25-year longitudinal study by Judith Wallerstein (2005), published the following year, would seem to be in agreement with this assessment, and also adds:

The central finding of our study is that, at adulthood, the experience of having been through parental divorce as a child impacts detrimentally on the capacity to love and be loved within a lasting, committed relationship. At young adulthood when love, sexual intimacy, commitment and marriage take center stage, children of divorce are haunted by their parents' divorce and terrified that the same fate awaits them. These fears, which crescendo at young adulthood, impede their developmental progress into full adulthood. Many eventually overcome their fears, but the struggle to do so is painful and can consume a decade or more of their lives. In addition to overcoming their fear of failure, they have a great deal to learn about the give and take of intimate living with another person, about how to deal with differences, and how to resolve conflicts. This is knowledge that other children acquire from growing up with both parents and learning from them how to negotiate the inevitable ebb and flow of marital life (p. 410).

It seems that the above studies all clearly show that a parents' divorce can have many long-lasting consequences on a child, even well on into adulthood. These consequences may include difficulties with adult relationships with their own spouses or children, lingering feelings of insecurity and doubt, low self-esteem, and even drug and alcohol abuse. Fortunately, it seems that the negative effects that a parents' divorce can have on a child are gradually becoming better recognized, and steps are being taken to counteract those problems.

An article published in the *Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter* in 2002 describes a six-year-long study involving two groups: divorced custodial mothers, and divorced custodial mothers and their children. As part of the study, the mothers were given classes on how to positively and more effectively parent their children in regards to their new circumstances. In the group involving both mothers and children, along with the parenting program for the mothers, the children were taught both coping and communication skills. Happily, six years after the initial study, a follow-up interview was conducted with the participating families of both groups, in which some of the problems often reported by divorced parents were reduced – the children whose mothers were involved in the parenting program were less likely to have mental and behavioral disorders and were less likely to have used alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs (p. 3).

Parenting programs are becoming increasingly more widespread for parents going through a divorce, and, indeed, are mandatory for any couple divorcing in DuPage County (DuPage County Family Center [DPCFC], 2007, p. 1). The four-hour workshop must be taken by both parents within 90 days of filing for a divorce and can be taken either in a classroom setting or online for the convenience of both parties (DPCFC, 2007, p. 1). The topics covered by this course include “normal feelings and reactions for adults and children during divorce, the grief process, effects of ongoing parental conflicts on children, co-parenting relationships, [and] children's needs during the divorce process” (DPCFC, 2007, p. 2).

However, this type of program does not directly involve the children, who are often unaware of how best to cope with the stress and strain of their parents' divorce and are unable to adjust quickly to their new situation (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, 2001, p. 8). When children have received this sort of counseling, in contrast to their peers who have received no educational programming regarding their parents' divorce, they tended to feel less stressed (Jurkovic, Thirkield and Morrell, 2001, p. 8).

A study published in 2004 by Emily B. Winslow confirms that these types of parental intervention programs have proven to be effective. Winslow found that both school-based programs for children, as well as multi-session parenting skills programs, were found to reduce the incidence of later emotional and/or behavioral problems later in life (2004). However, she notes that “programs proven to be effective for children of divorce have yet to be widely disseminated” (Winslow 2004, p.

48).

Due to the extreme emotional upheaval for all family members during the stress of a divorce, parents should be vigilant towards their attitudes and actions both during and after the split from their spouse. Perhaps if more programs such as the ones described above were more commonly instituted, some of the more severe negative emotional and psychological consequences of divorce would be less likely to affect children later on in life as adults. Parents who do choose to divorce should approach the situation with both sensitivity and honesty in order to facilitate healthy attitudes in their children towards relationships, commitment, and themselves that will last the course of their children's lives. These parents should be aware that their divorce, and how it is handled by the entire family, can have a long-lasting effect on their children, an effect that can shape their children's behavior, attitudes, and emotions all the way through their adult lives. This is not in any way to say that parents should stay together "for the children", as children can surely sense the conflict and tension in their homes as they are growing up. Rather, in the event of a divorce, both parents should be wholly committed to ensuring the best and smoothest possible transition for their children from an intact family unit to a divorced family.

Furthermore, both parents should realize that though the marriage has ended, their fiscal commitment to their children has not. Regardless of one's feelings towards the unhappy ending of a marriage or one's bitter feelings towards an ex-spouse, no child deserves to languish in poverty as a result. Nonpayment of child support may be intended as a "punishment" by the noncustodial parent towards their ex-spouse that unthinkingly and callously transfers, through no fault of their own, on down to the child. Stronger penalties should be issued by the states for willful nonpayment or evasion of child support, as it has been proven time and again that it is so very detrimental and dangerous for a child to be raised in poverty.

Also, parents who are in the process of divorcing should be encouraged, if not required, to complete both counseling as well as parenting skills programs. Since the majority of the data collected on the programs show clear positive results for both the divorced parents and their children, more states should provide these sorts of programs, and all divorcing families should be involved in them. Both parents should work together, regardless of their feelings towards one another, to ensure that their child or children spend time with both of them, that they share equal responsibility for their child or children, and be careful that they do not transfer their negative emotions or feelings towards the other parent over to their child.

All children deserve to feel loved, safe, and comfortable with their parents, as well as with themselves. Each child should have a warm place to sleep, plenty to eat, and they should be able to live in a supportive, nurturing environment that allows them to grow up happy and healthy, at all phases of their lives. Ideally, they should benefit from positive models of relationships with both a mother and a father, and the dissolution of their parents' marriage should not have to change that.

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