

The Short and Long Term Effects of Divorce on Children Mental Health and their Relationships with their Parents

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ABSTRACT

This article presents different views that the mental health of children in divorced families is negatively affected. With the increasing divorce rates, there are many children who are adversely affected by divorce. Children face several difficulties in terms of psychological, emotional, and social aspects. Moreover, it is a well-known phenomenon that children have various problems with their parents who do and do not get custody. The article refers to the mother's inability to adequately communicate with her child after the divorce due to various financial and psychological problems. On the other hand, the separation of fathers from children and the child's feeling of a strong deficiency in this regard can affect his/her future life considerably. The article mentions that the mental health of children is affected not only in the short term but also in the long term. Children of divorced families may face various problems in their bilateral relations at later ages. With the necessary studies, the damages that children receive during the divorce can be minimized.

Key Words: Divorce and children, Divorce and well-being of children, mental health of children after divorce, short-term and long-term effects of divorce on children, parent child relationships after divorce.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in divorces around the world has caused many educators and social scientists to investigate the issue. In Turkey, according to official data, 174 thousand people divorced in 2021 (13). Such high figures prompt an examination of the consequences of increased divorce on children. There are many articles in the literature on the effects of divorce on children. These articles have a consensus that children with divorced parents have more mental problems than children whose parents are together. (10) One of the reasons for this is that divorce is not just a process that takes place between two spouses. Although it seems like the end of a relationship, it should be a process where a relationship continues for families with children. Otherwise, when parents cannot continue their relationship in a healthy way, children are more or less affected by this situation.

Children can be affected by the situation in different ways. According to recent studies, children are affected quite badly in terms of weakening adaptation and coping strategies. (5) Parental separation causes problems such as underachievement in academic life, low self-worth, delinquency, drug addiction, depression, precocity, and suicidality. The main reason behind these bad consequences is that the mental health of children cannot be protected. If families cannot provide a safe environment for the child during the separation process, the child may not know how to deal with it on his own. Children who feel feelings such as anger, confusion, loss, or anxiety during the divorce process can take damage in the mentioned areas. While some of them have a lower course average, some may start using drugs at a young age. Such influences may adversely affect the future life of the child and may lead to problems that are difficult to solve. While this article mentions how the mental health of children is negatively affected, it also mentions that the problems children experience with their parents will negatively affect their psychological resilience.

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DOI: 10.33309/2639-9113.040203

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Divorce and Children's Mental Health

With the divorce of parents, children first lose continuity and stability in their lives. In some circumstances, they face new regulations, and communication problems with their families may arise. (8) As a result of such problems, their mental health cannot remain stable. Mental health includes three main parts which are psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Damage to these parts due to divorce can take various forms. Initially, children can be psychologically weak. Children with divorced parents experience anxiety and depression, but also face some psychological disorders and emotional problems. These disorders can vary according to age group. If the child's parents are divorced during infancy, reactions such as loss of appetite, increase in restlessness, and deterioration in the attachment process may be encountered. (6) If this occurs between the ages of one and three, which is called play childhood, irritable and maladaptive behaviors, crying spells, or regressive behaviors may be observed. In the pre-school period, which is between the age of three and five, children often have thoughts such as feelings of guilt and fear of abandonment. Problems such as experiencing depression, increased anxiety and aggression, feelings of abandonment and rejection, and panic reactions can be encountered in early school and middle school periods. In the late school-age period of nine to twelve, children are comfortable enough to show and express their anger. Problems such as getting very angry with one or both parents and experiencing separation in feelings of loyalty may arise. Moreover, although it shows behavior problems such as externalizing or internalizing, the desire to take revenge is thought that can drag the child into a psychological depression. In the adolescent period, emotions such as anger, sadness, weakness, and shame predominate. It is seen that the feeling of being abandoned and the feeling of heavy loss are experienced. This heavy sense of loss may be thoughts such as the thought that the concept of family has left his life or the loss of his childhood. Finally, the sexual identities of children who are not supported psychologically and emotionally may be impaired. This subject will be explained in detail in the following sections.

Another part of the mental health impact of children from divorce is the negative impact on social well-being. As a result of the divorce of the parents, there is a decrease in the social skills of the children. A child who thinks that he has been abandoned and unloved once may have problems in trusting others. It is likely that he will be more asocial and introverted in the environment he lives in. According to a study, children whose parents divorced are twice as likely to be afraid of rejection by their peers. (7) Therefore, they distance themselves from their friends and may have difficulty in establishing healthy communication.

Weakened Parent-Child Relationships

The divorce occurs between two spouses and a sort of divorce also occurs between the children and their parents. (7) When

parents divorce, children get less practical help, emotional assistance, and financial support from their mothers and fathers. Spouses are often stressed during this process and are not in a strong state of mind. While they are under great emotional turmoil, the stress of breaking up with someone and establishing a new order, they can sometimes ignore their children. In addition, in the time after the divorce process, the parent who starts living alone may not show the necessary interest and concern for their child. In the later process, if the parent marries a new person, this situation can be quite destructive for the child and may lead to greater dilemmas. If we evaluate the well-being of children through the persons who have taken custody, various differences may arise here.

Weakened Mother-Child Relationships

In the literature, in more than 80 percent of divorces, the parent with custody is presented as the mother, and the parent without custody is presented as the father. It is known that the individual who receives custody, usually mothers, face many different difficulties in terms of material, moral and psychological aspects. First of all, if a divorced woman has decided to go out to her own home or live with her parents, it will be a big change for the child. A child who leaves home, room, friends, and the school has already experienced many separations and sorrows. According to one study, divorced mothers are less likely to provide emotional support to their children compared to non-divorced mothers. (7). Moreover, divorced mothers are at a much higher risk of experiencing chronic tension than married ones. (10) Different problems arise in children if the mother cannot get through the divorce process and does not show interest in her child. Children may think that they are no longer loved and may have trust problems. Furthermore, according to one study, divorced mothers are more closed to communication and less affectionate, and more disciplined. This over-disciplined attitude will make the child feel dissonance. She may attach herself to the attitudes of her mother, who did not act this way before, and may feel guilty. Although it seems positive that the children stay with the person who takes custody, mostly their mother, the situation is not so positive for the children of women who do not receive enough support and cannot manage the process well.

Weakened Father-Child Relationships

After a divorce, it is usually the fathers who do not get custody. Divorced fathers move away from their children when they realize that they do not fulfill their responsibilities after many difficulties (2). Besides, according to a study, an average of 50 percent of the children stated that they did not see their father in the last year, and a very small percentage remained with their father, but this was done in the form of a private visit, not a regular activity. (7) However, in these cases, the fact that children do not meet with their fathers often enough can negatively affect their well-being. However, the opposite is also true. If the child does not have a good relationship with his father, frequent contact with the father may increase the

problems experienced by the child. (10) If there is still hostility between the spouses, this is reflected in the child. In a life where the role of the father is lacking, the child has difficulty in staying strong and may experience mental breakdowns. Children who grow up without a father have a higher tendency to engage in anti-social behavior and crimes.

Overall, children who live far away from either their mother or father have difficulty in establishing healthy relationships in their own relationships (2). Since there are situations such as loss of confidence and feeling of being unloved that will adversely affect their mental health after the divorce, the results appear quickly in the short term. Anti-social behaviors and depressive moods are encountered in these children. However, this can turn from a short-term mental breakdown to a very long-term ailment. For instance, according to the psychoanalytic perspective, it is stated that the absence of the father after the divorce will affect the psychosexual development of children at later ages. (5) According to some longitudinal studies, divorce is a very stressful event for children and this can change attachment relationships. (12) Especially in romantic relationships, avoidant or anxious attachments can occur. Children who experience their parents' divorce are often afraid of rejection, but they are also afraid of trusting completely. (7)

Pros and Cons

Children of divorced families can learn to cope with their problems after a certain point. Such a stressful and challenging event makes them stronger. Children whose mental health is affected can easily get out of the situation with adequate support. In addition, if the marriage is very problematic and the fight is noisy, divorce will be a much more correct decision for the child. However, if we look at the effects of divorce on the child, we see that it mostly has disadvantages. In addition to negatively affecting their mental health, it also leaves long-term permanent problems.

In my opinion, the worst part of the situation is that the lives of children from families whose parents are divorced are affected by this. After the parents' divorce, the children are already going through very bad processes, and in a way, they are fighting a civil war. There is a constant conflict in their minds. It's about whether they value whether their parents love them or not. Moreover, they may sometimes even feel guilty about the situation that has arisen. While these feelings are in their minds, there is a lack of acceptance from their social environment, not trusting anyone, or a decrease in communication skills. After children go through such troubles in their younger years, they may not be able to establish a good enough mental health structure at later ages. Some children lose their self-confidence and do not even attempt to dream of a better future. (3) There are problems with intimacy and commitment for children whose parents are divorced and have

no such role model. (9) If a secure attachment does not occur in the child's relationships, the probability of experiencing a divorce in his own marriage is quite high, as well as having a separation during his childhood. It is a very sad situation that the divorce of the parents drags the child to another separation. In order to avoid any separation afterward, it is essential that the problems of the children be resolved at that time. This is why children with separated parents need more psychological support.

Reflections and Suggestions

First of all, I believe that individuals who have decided to divorce should apply for additional help if they think that they cannot support their children. Otherwise, as stated in the article, children can be adversely affected in many ways. Children who grow up in an unhappy environment in divorced families face many difficulties in terms of social, emotional, and mental aspects. (11) Mothers cannot show the necessary attention to their children, despite being economically inadequate and not being strong psychologically. On the other hand, fathers are generally estranged from their children and cannot establish adequate bonds. In the same time, there can be some solutions to the issue. For instance, one way to ensure that children are not badly affected by the separation situation is co-parenting. (4) Despite the changing family structure, parents who work together for their children protect their children's future relationships. Although divorce is an upsetting situation for children, the continuation of peace and the respectful progress of parents towards each other ensure that the child develops in a good way. Moreover, it will be crucial to reduce the rent burden of parents living alone with their children and to open state-guaranteed kindergartens where single parents can leave their children. (1) Further, it is quite significant to provide additional psychosocial assistance to divorced individuals. Overall, with the support provided to both parents and children, the problems that arise will decrease and the long-term well-being of children will be increased.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, as divorces continue to increase rapidly, new studies are needed. According to the literature, children face various problems after divorce and it is not always easy for them to overcome these problems. Some children's academic careers are badly affected, while others have suicidal thoughts. The main source of such problems is the inability to protect mental health and the lack of psychological resilience. Children face many new separations as the divorce process they go through is futile. Children who are separated from school, friends, and most importantly one of their parents may show psychological, emotional, and social instability in the short term. Problems such as more asocial behaviors or mood disorders and anxiety may be encountered. Moreover, the different problems that the child has with his parents

are at a level that can cause permanent damage in the long run. It seems that children whose families are divorced also have difficulties in terms of trust and attachment in their own relationships. The negative effects of this very stressful process can be reduced to some extent by giving sufficient importance to the issue of divorce and providing various assistance to the family and the child.

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How to cite this article: Aktas F B, Bulut S. The Short and Long Term Effects of Divorce on Children Mental Health and Their Relationships with their Parents. *Clin Res Psychol* 2022;4(2):15-18.
DOI: 10.33309/2639-9113.040203