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Adjustment Outcomes of Divorce for Young Children and Adolescents



by Clayton T. Johnson

The pervasiveness of divorce attracts the attention of researchers in many fields. The purpose of this literature review is to summarize and synthesize major themes regarding the adjustment outcomes (the process and outcomes of adaptation to new circumstances) of divorce from current psychological literature. These themes are divided into two distinct age groups for contrast and comparison: young children and adolescents. Review and analysis of the literature revealed unique internalized and externalized outcomes for each age group. Young children showed an ability to comprehend but not cope with problems and an inability to deal with affect, which most often leads to internalized adjustment outcomes. Adolescents tended to show more serious adjustment outcomes—such as depression, anger, anxiety, and behavioral problems. Boys showed more externalized adjustment outcomes, while girls showed more internalized. Individuals at all ages experience unique adjustment outcomes due to age and level of psychological development.

Adjustment Outcomes of Divorce for Young Children and Adolescents

Divorce has become so common in today's world that almost every individual feels its inescapable presence. In fact, 856,000 divorces and annulments occurred in the United States in 2007 (Center for Disease Control, 2009). Divorce effects both those experiencing it directly (as members of the immediate family) or indirectly (as a more distant relative or friend). Scientists in many fields are seeking to understand the source and magnitude of those effects—positive or negative. Every year, scientific journals publish copious research studies on the effects of divorce.

A good portion of published research focuses on the adjustment outcomes of divorce. An adjustment outcome, as discussed in current literature, is defined as the outcome or end result of the adjustment or adaptation process following a major, life-changing transition—such as divorce, adoption, or death of a parent (Størksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, 2006; Tan, Marfo, & Dedrick, 2010). Adjustment outcomes are often segregated into categories, such as externalized, internalized, and social. Some of the most common adjustment outcomes of divorce are depression, anxiety, psychological distress, school and social problems, and a decreased level of life satisfaction (Amato, 2001; Størksen et al., 2006). Most current studies focus on specific age groups: young children, adolescents, or those divorcing.

The purpose of this review is to summarize and synthesize major themes from current literature regarding the adjustment outcomes of divorce and to propose future directions for research and application. Primary focus will be on two components of the family unit: young children and adolescents. To more fully explore similarities and differences between age groups, focus will also be devoted to internalized and externalized adjustment outcomes only.

Adjustment Outcomes In Young Children

Research on the adjustment outcomes of divorce for young children (age 0–12) is sparse in today's psychological literature and mostly discusses children's experience in contrast to adolescents' experiences. Much of the difficulty for children in post-divorce adjustment comes from the change in relationship status with parents (Saltaris, 2002). Children internalize the consistent parent-child interactions as working models of one's self and of the world. When one parent is removed from the household, the emotional attachment and relationship are disrupted

(Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000). A relationship disruption between a child and a parent, such as one parent permanently leaving a household, is one potential genesis for negative adjustment outcomes (Lewis et al., 2000).

Divorce is often an emotionally draining time for separating parents and their children. A child will likely encounter a decrease in parent's emotional availability during and after a divorce. This emotional deficiency may lead children to question their working models of self and the world. If children believe they must face the transition alone, they are likely to over control (internalize) or under control (externalize) affect (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010).

Internalized Adjustment Outcomes

Young children who experience divorce are more likely to over control affect than children from non-divorced families. As children begin to internalize their feelings, they are more susceptible to developing psychological issues (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). This finding is valuable to a parent seeking to guide a child through the life change; a parent who anticipates internalization of feelings will be more prepared to help.

For many years, scientists believed that young children did not understand the meaning, permanence, or consequences of divorce. However, researchers recently found through children's verbal expressions and drawings that children understand much of the process, and that many children try to cope with the life change. While children's expressions were often rudimentary, they gave coherent explanations of divorce and the divorce-related relationship changes, which often included expressions of negative affect (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009). These findings show that even young children, though elementary in their understanding, are affected by divorce-induced relationship changes not only socially, but emotionally.

Young children are also often unable to cope with divorce-related changes. When children answered questions about what they felt, thought, and understood about divorce, they most often shared feelings of anxiety, abandonment, anger, and depression. Such feelings were common for children who had lost consistent interactions with either the mother or the father (Tippelt & Konig, 2007). The findings of this study further unfold an interesting dichotomy: a separation between *recognizing* and *coping with* the change. Even though young children recognized that a change was taking place, they failed to cope with it. Thus, young children are unable to escape their situation and are ill-equipped for sizeable emotional struggles.

However, age and maturity level (level of cognitive development) correlate with ability to understand and cope with a major life change (Mazur, Wolchik, Virdin, Sandler, & West, 1999; Sandler, Kim-Bae, & MacKinnon, 2000). While young children often display an inability to properly cope with affect, older children often have a greater cognitive capacity to employ effective coping measures. For example, the endorsement of negative appraisals of self and situation amplify levels of depression and anxiety, whereas the endorsement of positively biased appraisals buffers the adverse effects (Mazur et al., 1999; Sandler et al., 2000). Because of their level of cognitive development, older children are more able to modify their cognitions to purposefully guard against emotional distress. These conclusions underscore the uniqueness of each child's experience and needs: depending on age and level of cognitive development, each requires specific intervention.

Externalized Adjustment Outcomes

Young children experience not only internalized adjustment outcomes, but also externalized outcomes. While externalized outcomes for young children are less likely than internalized, young children who experience divorce are still more likely to develop externalized behavior problems (e.g., aggression and rebellion) than peers in non-divorced families (Malone, Lansford, Castellino, Berlin, & Dodge, 2004; Mazur et al., 1999). Furthermore, the conspicuous nature of externalized outcomes could possibly draw a parent's attention from serious internalized issues.

Researchers have found gender-related correlations in externalized outcomes for children. Interestingly, girls' externalized behavior problems are not affected by the timing—meaning age and circumstance—of divorce, while boys showed an increase in externalized behavior problems depending on timing (Malone et al., 2004). Understanding the timing of divorce and the related adjustment outcomes for young girls and boys could help parents arrange appropriate treatment to minimize the severity of negative adjustment outcomes. However, most literature fails to identify the connection between timing of divorce and debut of negative adjustment outcomes.

Some evidence suggests that those who experience divorce as young children are more likely than adolescents to experience more long-term difficulties (Malone et al., 2004), though opinions are mixed (Lewis et al., 2000; Malone et al., 2004). Although children may not comprehend divorce to the same degree as their older siblings, young children do experience

internalized and externalized outcomes. Understanding children's unique situation is critical if parents and therapists are to successfully mitigate adjustment outcomes.

Adolescent Adjustment

Adolescents experience adjustment outcomes from their younger counterparts. Typically, the effects adolescents experience have a more significant impact on their psychological development (Storksen et al., 2006) and, in many cases, longer lasting effects (Malone et al., 2004). Approximately eight years after divorce, adolescents reported more symptoms of anxiety and depression, a lower feeling of well-being, and more school-related problems than peers from non-divorced families (Storksen et al., 2006). These detrimental effects can retard normal development, which can lead to maladjustment. Adolescents living in single-parent, post-divorce homes are at increased risk of psychiatric disease, suicide or suicide attempt, injury, and addiction (Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund, & Rosen, 2003). In comparison to outcomes for young children, the adjustment outcomes for adolescents are dramatically more severe. Parental awareness is key to guiding adolescents down a path of healthy adjustment.

Adolescent girls were more likely to internalize affect, while boys were more likely to externalize (Malone et al., 2004; Storksen et al., 2006). Teenage boys in single-parent families showed higher risk than girls for psychiatric and drug-related disease (Weitoft et al., 2003). The gender-specific nature of these outcomes will assist parents in predicting and preparing for their children's behavior. The negative adjustment outcomes of divorce—be they internalized or externalized—could be more injurious for adolescents than for young children.

In contrast, some researchers purport that adolescent whose parents divorce do not experience negative behavioral and developmental outcomes (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005), and some even claim that the outcomes are positive (Sever, Guttman, & Lazar, 2007). Nevertheless, regardless of divorce outcomes, researchers do not deny that adolescents experience great levels of stress on self and family relationships (Ruschena et al., 2005). What all of these studies lack, however, is an explanation of *why* each of two adolescents experiencing the same life change could have different adjustment outcomes—one negative and one positive. If the sum of similar sets of variables produces starkly different results, there must be alternative explanations or additional variables.

Internalized Adjustment Outcomes

Internalized adjustment outcomes for adolescents can be focused mostly on girls, as girls tend to suffer more from internalized outcomes than boys. Adolescents—girls more than boys—report higher levels of distress (e.g., depression and anxiety) than younger children in the adjustment process following a major family transition like divorce (Malone et al., 2004; Ruschena et al., 2005; Storksen et al., 2006). Girls are also more likely to suffer from those effects longer than boys (Malone et al., 2004; Storksen et al., 2006). Such findings indicate that girls may allow the difficulty of divorce to affect them more deeply and permanently. The consistency of these gender-related findings could be the push for better-planned interventions for girls that focus on resolving internalized emotional issues.

In addition to adolescents' personal bout with life changes, both girls and boys seem to be aware of how divorce affects parental mental health. Distressed parents and the divorce-related change itself can have a "double exposure" effect on teenagers (Storksen et al., 2006). Parents battling with the stresses of divorce often exhibit a decline in parenting quality, with more inconsistent discipline and affection (Ruschena et al., 2005). As with young children, a relationship disruption like inconsistent discipline and affection could lead adolescents to question their working models of the world and self. The double exposure effect, coupled with a decrease in care from parents, likely contributes to the increased severity in negative adjustment outcomes.

Furthermore, internalized adjustment outcomes in boys and girls tend to last longer than externalized (Malone et al., 2004). Adolescents will likely suffer from depression, anxiety, or anger long after their parents' divorce.

Externalized Adjustment Outcomes

Adjustment outcomes for adolescents are not limited to internalized outcomes only. In a landmark longitudinal study, researchers found that adolescents whose parents divorced displayed more externalized adjustment problems both before and after their parents' divorce than adolescents whose parents did not divorce (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). This research was followed by more research supporting the claim that adolescents whose parents divorce display pre- and post-divorce externalized adjustment outcomes like aggression, rebellion, and drug abuse (Weitoft et al., 2003; Overbeek et al., 2006). Collectively, these conclusions confirm that externalized adjustment outcomes of divorce are real and significant.

Externalized adjustment outcomes, while experienced by both boys and girls, tend to be manifested more in boys than in girls (Amato, 2001). As discussed above, evidence of gender-related adjustment outcomes can help predict behavior for adolescent girls experiencing a family transition. In like manner, manifestations of male-specific outcomes can help predict behavior and increase intervention efficacy. When taken as a whole, findings on adolescent adjustment outcomes delineate patterns of behavior that can help parents be aware of and prepared for their children's potential adjustment struggles.

Application and Conclusion

A methodological weakness in the current literature is a failure to identify the genesis of negative outcomes: whether the adjustment outcomes children experience are due to the divorce itself, to the circumstances at home before the divorce, or to some combination thereof. While some researchers recognized this weakness (Malone et al., 2004), others did not. Researchers should focus on increasing intervention efficacy by identifying the correlative triggers of negative adjustment outcomes in young children and adolescents.

Much of the literature distinguishes the gender-specific differences in adjustment outcomes. While that distinction is helpful in a general sense, the majority of research methods did not determine a relationship between timing of divorce (age of child at divorce) and the adjustment outcomes experienced. Were researchers able to correlate specific adjustment outcomes with a given timing of divorce, children could receive the correct intervention at the most efficacious time. More specifically, a greater clarity of gender-outcome relationships could further increase the effectiveness of interventions. Because of the tenacious nature of negative adjustment outcomes, parents and psychologists must provide children with interventions that could greatly reduce the severity of post-divorce maladjustment.

Themes in the literature depict the uniqueness of the divorce experience for young children and adolescents. Young children showed the dichotomous ability to comprehend but not cope with divorce-related changes. Adolescents showed important and significant gender differences, with girls reporting more internalized outcomes and boys reporting more externalized. Additionally, divorce does not affect children of all ages in the same way. Adjustment outcomes appear to be related to age and level of psychological development.

While the literature contained conflicting claims about the significance and severity of divorce-related adjustment outcomes, one theme ran constant: divorce introduces children to copious stressors (Ruschena et al., 2005). The trends described in this review are valuable for those who are in a position to help children and adolescents comprehend and cope with a substantial life change like divorce.

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