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# Effects of Divorce on Children: The Importance of Intervention

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## Abstract

When parents divorce, their children are affected in significant ways. Many of the consequences of marital dissolution may adversely affect children's success in their future romantic relationships, but fortunately this downward spiral can be mitigated through deliberate parental efforts (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Conolly, & Bohr, 2012). One remedy to counteract this trend is conscientious *coparenting*—continuing to work together despite altered family dynamics, since such effort positively impacts the children's future relationships, specifically daughters' future intimacy (Haaz, Kneavel, & Browning, 2014; Shulman et al., 2012). Another significant factor in children's future marital success is the amount of conflict between their parents. High-conflict parental relationships have been linked to children's difficulty in forming their own healthy relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Gager, Yabiku, & Linver, 2016; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). However, when the amount of conflict between parents decreases following divorce, children fare significantly better (Gager et al., 2016). If divorced parents have an increased awareness of how their behavior and relationship affect their children, they may take measures towards more cooperation and less conflict, thus increasing their children's future chance for success in romantic relationships.

*Keywords:* divorce, children, coparenting, conflict

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## Effects of Divorce on Children: The Importance of Intervention

Six months after Zachary and Pauline Robison divorced, they noticed their children acting out. Eight-year-old Tom returned from his father's house noticeably irritable, and 6-year-old Sarah did not want to go to her father's house at all. Pauline decided to pursue family therapy, to which Zachary reluctantly agreed. The tense atmosphere of the first therapy session dissipated over time as each person eventually shared their feelings and concerns. By the end of their family's postdivorce treatment, Pauline and Zachary understood the importance of parenting together for the good of their children, despite their legal and physical separation. All family members sat on the same couch during therapy, comfortable with each other and their redefined relationships (adapted from Wylder, 1982).

Following divorce, children experience many difficulties which may linger into adulthood if left unaddressed, adversely affecting their success in intimate relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Haaz, Kneavel, & Browning, 2014; Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Conolly, & Bohr, 2012). These potential long-term consequences reveal the importance of taking remedial action following divorce—now a common occurrence in modern society. Perhaps not surprisingly, Amato (1994) observed, “The high rate of marital dissolution means that about 40% of children will experience a parental divorce prior to the age of 16” (p. 143). According to the American Psychological Association (2017), roughly half of United States marriages end in divorce, and the likelihood is even greater for second and subsequent marriages. The prevalence of divorce demands an investigation of its effects and their remedies to prevent the tide of broken families from surging into the next generation.

Studies on the effects of divorce on children reveal several common struggles. For example, the experience of parental divorce often conveys negative messages about marriage, family, and relationships, creating mental constructs that manifest themselves in children's difficulty forming relationships in the future (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Weigel, 2007). Another issue frequently faced

by children of divorce is an increase in mental health challenges attributable to the decreased involvement of parents following divorce (Sandler, Wheeler, & Braver, 2013). These findings show that children are not immune to the effects of divorce and can suffer severe and lasting consequences if left untreated.

While the effects of divorce on children are often detrimental, many divorced parents are unaware of the importance of interventions for their children. Such measures aim to reduce the likelihood of suffering short- and long-term consequences from divorce. As noted by Amato (1994) in a summarization of several studies, research has found that although many children from divorced families adequately adjust without formal therapy, those who received professional help benefitted from it. Other studies have revealed that parent-centered programs, such as the New Beginnings Program, ameliorate the negative effects of divorce on children (Mahrer, Winslow, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2014; Velez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011). These resources and many others are available to families that experience divorce; however, many people who divorce may ignore the benefits of formal and informal intervention potentially to the detriment of their children's well-being (Amato, 1994).

Although many studies have explored methods of helping children navigate divorce, a disconnect appears to exist between knowledge and application. An increase in the dissemination of findings regarding effective ways to combat the negative outcomes of divorce on children would likely motivate parents to take deliberate action to fight this trend. An active approach to reducing the occurrence of the harmful effects of divorce may aid affected children in being successful in the future. While therapy is a commonly acknowledged method for mitigating the effects of divorce and familial restructuring, there are other less formal strategies available, such as continuing to parent together and minimizing conflict.

With regard to the influence of parenting on children following divorce, *coparenting* is thought to be an effective way to alleviate the negative impacts on children, (Bastaitis & Mortelmans,

2016; Shulman et al., 2012). PsycINFO Thesaurus (2017) defined coparenting as a term “used to signify parenting behavior and responsibility by two or more unmarried individuals” (para. 1). This teamwork approach to parenting can manifest itself in many different forms, but research has shown that following divorce, children whose mother and father work together to parent are most successful (Bastaitis & Mortelmans, 2016). The decision to parent together following divorce may have significant positive effects on the future success of children.

Another key method for avoiding long-term consequences of divorce on children is the minimization of parental conflict. Prolonged exposure to such conflict leads to decreased future marital success for the children (Gager, Yabiku, & Linver, 2016). Additionally, as concluded by Cui and Fincham (2010), children who witness conflict between their parents later exhibit similar patterns of conflict in their own marriages. Efforts to avoid parental conflict facilitate greater marital success for children due, in part, to a decrease in learned conflict behaviors (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Efforts to avoid conflict and encourage coparenting may combat the transgenerational pattern of marital problems (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Shulman et al., 2012). Although dissolution of marriage is an increasingly common aspect of the modern family structure, the negative effects of divorce on children can be mediated through purposeful coparenting and a joint parental effort in order to minimize conflict because these deliberate interventions may facilitate the healthy formation of children’s future romantic relationships.

### **Coparenting**

Following divorce, the traditional family structure changes and the ways in which parents interact are modified; therefore, the methods by which parents work together and interact with their children must be redefined within the new familial construct. Research has shown that following divorce, positive effects of good mothering (Shulman et al., 2012) and involved and active fathering emerge—especially for daughters (Haaz et al., 2014). Bastaitis and

Mortelmans (2016) found that in such situations “both maternal and paternal parenting are important mediators in explaining the association between family structure and children’s well-being” (p. 2186). Continuing to parent together after divorce, though difficult, is important because failing to do so may put children at a long-term disadvantage.

### **Benefits of Joint Effort**

The ways divorced individuals work together as parents are necessarily different than parents of intact families due to divorce’s alteration of the family structure. Beckmeyer, Coleman, and Ganong (2014) identified three types of coparenting: “cooperative and involved,” “moderately engaged,” and “infrequent but conflictual” (p. 531). The researchers determined these groups based on divorced parents’ ratings of several different aspects of their parenting. Parents who were involved scored high on communication and cooperation but low on conflict, the conflictual group scored low on communication and cooperation but high on conflict, and the moderately engaged group had scores that fell between the other two (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). Additional research conducted on the coparenting relationship identified a fourth type of coparenting, termed “undermining coparenting,” in which parents struggle to divide their responsibilities and undermine the authority of the other parent (Lamela, Figueiredo, Bastos, & Feinberg, 2016, p. 724). Although there are many approaches to coparenting, Shulman et al. (2012) found that when divorced parents continue to be involved and supportive of their children, the negative effects of divorce are often ameliorated. This description resembles the findings of Beckmeyer et al. (2014) that examined cooperative coparenting. Bastais and Mortelmans (2016) also found that children who had supportive mothers and fathers following divorce fared best overall. The amalgamation of these studies’ findings shows the importance of high-quality parenting following divorce, including deliberate measures to cooperate and communicate. Without such efforts, higher conflict methods of parenting may arise and negatively affect the children involved.

## Impact on Daughters' Future Intimate Relationships

Several studies conducted to investigate the effects of divorce on children have focused specifically on daughters and the impact divorce has on their future marriages. Researchers have found that, in general, daughters of divorced parents often times have more difficulty in future intimate relationships than daughters from intact families; however, this effect can be lessened through involved parenting (Haaz et al., 2014; Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruuu, & Aro, 2011; Shulman et al., 2012). Some studies propose an indirect connection between parenting and future relationship success (Beckmeyer et al., 2014; Mustonen et al., 2011), while others offer a more direct connection between the two (Haaz et al., 2014; Shulman et al., 2012). Whether directly or indirectly, parenting appears to play an important role in mediating the negative effects of divorce in daughters' intimate relationships.

**Fathers and daughters.** Each parent plays a unique and important role in his or her daughter's life. The contribution of a father includes serving as the primary male role model for his child, even after divorce. In fact, the father–daughter relationship may become more important after divorce as explained by the following insight from Haaz et al. (2014):

If [daughters] are able to form a close bond with their father where they are encouraged to share openly and feel supported, then they are likely to perceive that other relationships with men should be similar and seek out emotionally intimate relationships with men. (p. 172)

A girl's relationship with her father informs her expectations of men in general, as well as her beliefs about what marriage can and should be. Similarly, Haaz et al. (2014) found that, in adult women whose parents divorced, the emotional intimacy of their marriage was strongly connected to the quality of their relationship with their father. Following divorce, a father's influence on his daughter is substantial, and care should be taken to keep the father–daughter relationship healthy and open so that the daughter has an increased likelihood of forming healthy romantic relationships in the future.

**Mothers and daughters.** A good mother–daughter relationship following divorce also factors in to the daughter’s future success in intimate relationships. Shulman et al. (2012) found that following divorce, when girls have a relationship with their mother that is open and supportive, they often have higher-quality romantic relationships. Specifically, when mothers could clearly articulate their experiences in romantic relationships, their daughters had a greater chance of having healthy intimate relationships (Shulman et al., 2012). Following divorce, mothers should not shy away from discussions about their relationships and/or marriage with their daughters because, although those subjects may feel awkward, a home in which these are safe topics fosters children who are better adjusted in future romantic relationships (Shulman et al., 2012). These studies on parenting convey a united message—each parent individually plays an important role in their children’s emotional development following divorce, and the greatest benefits occur when parents work together to coparent their children.

### **Importance of Minimizing Conflict**

Since parental conflict often accompanies divorce, the effects of each issue ought to be examined separately. Studies have shown that witnessing parents’ marital conflict negatively affects children’s success in marriage and relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Gager et al., 2016; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). Though it is normal for conflict to occur in life, parents should know how it affects their children so that they will be motivated to minimize conflict in their relationship. Fergusson, McLeod, and Horwood (2014) found that divorce itself is not the principal hindrance to children’s future success but rather that accompanying variables such as conflict play a primary role. Armed with this knowledge, an emphasis on conflict reduction following divorce should become a priority. If parents do not decrease the amount of conflict in their relationship following divorce, their children may be adversely affected.

### **Effects of Conflict on Children**

The effects of parental conflict on children regarding divorce manifest themselves in a variety of ways. When exposed to

continual conflict, children struggle because they obtain “a more disturbing view of the world” (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990, p. 754), and this altered worldview may lead to difficulty in future relationships as the children learn and internalize their parents’ conflict styles (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Gager et al., 2016). Fortunately, research has shown that when divorces effectively decrease the amount of conflict between parents, the negative effects of the previously experienced conflict may be lessened; children in these situations have relationship success comparable to those from low-conflict families (Gager et al., 2016). When parents divorce, if they take measures to have less conflict in their relationship, they can counteract the negative effects on their children due to previous conflict.

Sprague and Kinney (1997) identified problems with trust and selflessness in future marital relationships as another frequent consequence of conflict on children (see Table 1). Interestingly, these effects were not found in children from intact families, indicating that children from divorced families are particularly influenced by conflictual family dynamics (Sprague & Kinney, 1997). Although Braithwaite, Doxey, Dowdle, and Fincham (2016) reached a different finding—that the effects of conflict were seen in children only when fighting parents stayed married and not when parents divorced—many other studies have shown that conflict between parents does affect children even after their parents divorce (Franklin et al., 1990; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). Even though parental conflict may not appear to have long-term effects on children, exposure to conflict may translate to hardship for those children in forming healthy romantic relationships.

### **Transgenerational Patterns of Conflict**

Although parents may not realize it in the moment, when they argue they are modeling conflict behaviors for their children and are teaching by poor example. If parents take no measures to decrease the level of conflict in their relationship, their children may perpetuate the same problems in the future. Cui and Fincham (2010) found that when parents have a large amount of conflict

in their relationship, their children may struggle with discord in their future marriages because they may have learned unhealthy behaviors and habits from their parents. If parents are uninformed of the effects that arguing has on their children, they may think that divorce is a sufficient resolution; however, continued conflict factors significantly into children's future troubles in their own marriages.

Furthermore, Teachman (2002) found that when parents divorce, children are more likely to experience divorce in their own marriages. Research has also shown that effective parenting following divorce can reduce the negative effects that children experience (Beckmeyer et al., 2014; Haaz et al., 2014; Mahrer et al., 2014; Shulman et al., 2012). Additionally, the transfer of conflictual marriage and divorce from parents to children may be halted by decreasing the conflict in the parents' postdivorce relationship (Gager et al. 2016). Furthermore, Sandler et al. (2013) found that "even in high-conflict divorces, the quality of parenting . . . can have an important effect on their children's mental health" (p. 922). Improved mental health benefits children and may contribute to the decreased likelihood of experiencing divorce and other troubles in future relationships, as mental health disorders have been linked to higher likelihood of divorce (Breslau et al., 2011).

In a study examining conflict and divorce, Gager et al. (2016) revealed that "long-term exposure to high conflict had the most transformative effect on adult children's relationship conflict" (p. 257). Although this statement was given as a reason for high-conflict parents to divorce, it is equally valid as a warning against conflict following divorce. When parents divorce but maintain the same level of relationship conflict, their children will still experience the negative effects of exposure to such conflict, in addition to the effects of divorce. If parents fail to take measures to reduce their arguing following divorce, their children are likely to experience the same conflict-based issues in their own marriages.

### **Conclusion**

Although divorce is prevalent in modern society, the negative effects of marital dissolution on children's future romantic

relationships need not be. As the example of the Robison family illustrated previously, such problems exist but can be moderated if the parents know what measures to take. One strategy is coparenting; maintaining a cooperative and involved parenting style following divorce greatly reduces the negative effects of divorce, especially for daughters (Haaz et al., 2014; Mustonen et al., 2011; Shulman et al., 2012). While physical and emotional distance between parents frequently follows divorce, their efforts to continue parenting together greatly benefit their children.

Another tactic to reduce the adverse effects of divorce on children is a unified parental determination to minimize the conflict in the postdivorce relationship. Not only does the divorce itself impact children, but continued parental conflict has additional consequences, including learning and adopting the parents' conflict styles (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Gager et al., 2016), developing future struggles with selflessness and trust (Sprague & Kinney, 1997), and experiencing difficulty in future relationships due to a more negative worldview (Franklin et al., 1990). Parents who take measures to decrease their levels of conflict can decrease the likelihood that their children will experience these consequences in the future. Increased awareness of the effects of divorce on children could motivate parents to take actions that decrease the divorce rate by halting the transmission of negative learned behaviors from parents to children, such as frequent conflict and lack of commitment to marriage. Increasing parents' awareness of how to help their children successfully navigate divorce may lead to a decrease in the divorce rate, which may be due in part to the increased mental health of the children.

This area of study offers many opportunities for future research. The literature contains information regarding the effects of divorce on daughters, but would benefit from research devoted to the effects of divorce on sons. Additional research could be conducted to determine the most effective approach to raising awareness about the effects of divorce. Informing parents regarding the potential effects of divorce on their children may be most effective if incorporated into the process of filing for divorce. This

education could take the form of a mandatory class, an information meeting, or a video that divorcing parents must watch. The mode of delivery may not be as important as exposure to the information, which ideally would delineate not only the potential effects but also the steps parents can take to minimize those effects. Possible beneficial actions include efforts to continue parenting together and efforts to minimize conflict in the postmarriage relationship. Research has found each of these practices to be effective in reducing the consequences of divorce for children, as each contributes to the healthy formation of children's future romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Gager et al., 2016; Haaz et al., 2014; Shulman et al., 2014). If awareness of the effects of divorce on children is increased, parents may more easily take steps to mitigate these effects and thereby increase their children's future romantic relationship success.

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Table 1

*Relationship Dynamics in Children from Intact and Divorced Families*

<b>Family Dynamic</b>	<b>F</b>
Conflict in family of origin	24.47***
Trust in child’s romantic relationship	4.31*
Altruistic love in child’s romantic relationship	9.22**

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note.* Children from divorced families reported significantly higher levels of conflict in their families of origin than children from intact families. Children from divorced families also reported significantly lower levels of trust and altruistic love in their romantic relationships. Adapted from “The Effects of Interparental Divorce and Conflict on College Students’ Romantic Relationships,” by H. E. Sprague, & J. M. Kinney, 1997, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 27(1-2), pp. 85-104.