



2018

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### Recommended Citation

Eaton, Mariah (2018) "Negative Effects of Divorce and Possible Intervention Program Development and Improvement," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol13/iss1/4>

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# Negative Effects of Divorce and Possible Intervention Program Development and Improvement

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## Abstract

Current psychological research demonstrates that parental divorce can have negative effects on children (Amato, 2005). This review compiles and compares research regarding the different effects of divorce on emotional, social, physical, and mental well-being of children of divorce. The research outlined in this review studies children ages 0-18 in the United States but focuses on children in elementary and middle schools. Present intervention programs for children of divorce are compared and the different goals and methods of each are then identified. These methods are compared based on their effects on the participants. By looking at the improvements in social, emotional, physical, and mental health of the participants in each program, the most successful methods are identified. The successful aspects of each program are compiled to suggest the development of a new program including all these components. Suggestions for further research on effects of divorce, current intervention programs, and possible future programs are then discussed.

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## Negative Effects of Divorce and Possible Intervention Program Development and Improvement

In 2014, the Center for Disease Control showed that about 50% of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. High divorce rates have stimulated more research regarding the negative effects divorce has on children. Valdez (2007) said, “The children of the conflict-filled divorces, whom I call America’s Little Warriors, often endure both emotional and physical trauma as their parents try to maneuver their way through their own conflict (p. iii).” This literature review explores the extensive negative effects of divorce on children’s mental, emotional, social, and physical health. It explains that, as compared with children of continuously married parents, children of divorced parents are at increased risk of have difficulty trusting others and forming relationships (Emery, 1996), struggling with behavior problems like violence (Rex, 1996), performing at a lower level academically than children whose parents don’t divorce (Kim, 2011), and having decreased physical health (Arkes, 2013). By presenting specific studies examining potential negative outcomes for children of divorced parents, this literature review shows the need for more intervention programs to help children overcome these effects.

While there is much research on the negative effects of divorce on children, there is not adequate research on how to alleviate these effects. While many intervention programs have been developed to help children of divorce, the research suggests that many of these programs are insufficient. This review will explore five of the most researched intervention programs and their strengths and weaknesses. Since each program has different goals and methods, they have different outcomes. Some focus more on improving parent-child relationships, others strive to help students overcome emotional problems, while yet others seek to improve social skills (Angacian, Bray, Kehle, 2015). This literature review compares the different methods in each of the five programs to demonstrate which are the most effective and important for a child overcoming the negative effects of divorce. The purpose of this literature review is to present the severity of the effects of divorce on children in

order to demonstrate the need for intervention programs, as well as to suggest what kind of programs and methods will be most successful with further research, development, and implementation.

### **Methodology**

Relevant research about effects of divorce on children and available intervention programs was found by searching social sciences databases including EBSCO and Scopus for primary research material. Then, 31 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1990 and the present (2017) were reviewed. In order to explore a broad variety of research on the topic, terms such as “effects of divorce,” plus “children or youth,” were searched to find potential negative effects of divorce. Terms such as “intervention programs for children of divorce” were searched to examine the intervention programs already in place. Studies were then considered in this review if they: (a) addressed effects of divorce on children’s emotional, physical, and social well-being or academic performance; or (b) discussed the qualities of a particular intervention program and its results.

The 31 original articles were narrowed down to 12. Articles were eliminated that (a) focused more on the effects of divorce on the parents than on the children, (b) discussed divorces resulting from abuse, or (c) simply focused on any type of family disruption or dispute, as the aim of this review is to focus solely on the effects of divorce on children. Articles that focused on long-term effects were kept and considered to be especially important. Similarly, journal articles that pointed out gaps in research for intervention programs were considered particularly valuable.

### **The Negative Effects of Divorce on Children**

Because the negative effects of divorce on children are extensive, this section breaks them into categories. The research in this section presents the effects of divorce on emotional, social, and physical health as well as on academic performance.

#### **Emotional Health**

Divorce and the conflict leading up to it can be detrimental for the emotional health of the children involved and can lead to too much stress and anxiety. Children whose parents are constantly

arguing are more likely to have a hard time learning to trust and connect to them (Emery, 1996). Similarly, frequent family conflict creates stress and threatens a child's environment and sense of security (Emery, 1996). Jekiel (1998) demonstrated this phenomenon in a study conducted over a four-year period with 241 families in the United States that experienced divorce and found that children in divorced homes had higher levels of depression and other emotional problems than children in the families that stayed intact. Amato (2005), in reflection of his 67 studies in the 1990s, agreed that although the difference is small, the emotional well-being of children with divorced parents is lower than that of children with intact families. He speculates that some of the emotional problems seem to result from the fact that children with divorced parents often have a lower standard of living than other children. Along with this, they are not as likely to receive the same quality parenting or to continue creating important emotional bonds with their parents as other children who live with both biological parents (Amato, 2005). During a family's process of divorce, the children are more likely to have internal conflicts, depression, and lower self-esteem (Kim, 2011). These emotional problems often linger for a few years. This data demonstrates that children of divorce may have decreased emotional well-being due to the stress in their lives.

### **Social Health**

Not only does divorce affect the emotional health of children, but, according to Emery and Rex (1996), it also affects their social health by causing behavioral problems such as increased aggression and lower communication skills. Children learn by the example of their parents, and by witnessing their parents' ineffective problem-solving strategies on a regular basis, they adopt these unproductive, and sometimes violent, approaches. Moreover, parents often become stricter and harsher with their punishments during times of greater marital conflicts, especially before and during the divorce process. Such intensified punishment has shown a positive correlation with behavioral problems in children including increased violence, anger, and bullying (Emery, 1996).

Children of divorce have also shown difficulty in having healthy relationships later as adults. Fergusson, McLeod, and Horwood (2013) report such phenomena in the Christchurch Health and Development Study, which followed 1,265 people from birth until age 30. They found a positive correlation between people who experienced the divorce of their parents as children and later had an increased amount of poor, violent, and dysfunctional relationships. Kim (2011) found similar results when he studied children from kindergarten through eighth grade. His results indicated that during and after the divorce of their parents, children had a harder time making and keeping friendships. They also had a hard time talking about their feelings and communicating with others. These problems can greatly affect the social life of a child, especially during the two years that immediately follow a divorce (Kim, 2011).

### **Physical Health**

Physical health is another aspect of well-being affected by divorce. Britt, Haack, Muth, and Scisco (2010) found that children of divorced parents were more likely to have higher blood pressure and heart rate when they were exposed to public displays of affection (PDA). Research conducted by Arkes (2013) reveals the physical health problems caused by divorce may include increased likelihood of their partaking in harmful substances such as alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana. Arkes (2013) also indicates that this increase in substance abuse often begins before the actual divorce as a result of the conflict and stress in the home and may worsen during and immediately after divorce. Alcohol, drugs, and tobacco are associated with decreasing physical health. This is especially harmful to youth who are still developing because these substances can stunt their learning (Brown, 2001). Thus, divorce indirectly influences the physical health and addictions of the children involved.

### **Academic Performance**

Kim (2011) demonstrates that divorce causes a decline in the academic performance of children, as shown in lower reported test scores than children from intact families. Kim's interpretations of

the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class, which observed children from kindergarten until they ended eighth grade, also reveal that children with divorced parents or with parents in the divorce process received lower math test scores on average than the other students. Recently, Arkes (2013) performed research that further supports Kim's ideas. He studied over 4,000 children (ages seven to 14) over a four-year period—half of them experienced a divorce of their parents. His findings illustrate that not only are children affected academically after a divorce, but also before, due to tensions and stress in the home. They have lower math and reading scores than children whose parents do not eventually get divorced. His studies also demonstrate that for about two years after the divorce of their parents, children score significantly lower on reading tests than other students. While most academic habits returned to normal over time, reading comprehension scores stayed significantly low over the years (Arkes, 2016). This research shows that there may be a correlation between children of divorce and lower academic performance compared to children of intact families. This, along with the other research presented about negative effects of divorce, supports the need for more intervention programs.

### **Interventions for Children of Divorce**

While there are many intervention programs for children of divorce, few have been able to help children overcome all the emotional, social, physical, and academic setbacks. Failures may relate to ineffective development and implementation. The five most researched programs are presented here. Their strengths and weaknesses are also evaluated. While some focus their methods on improving the ability to form relationships, others focus on overcoming other emotional problems such as self-blame and low self-esteem, and others target other emotional and behavioral problems. None of these programs, however, target all the areas of health affected by divorce.

## In-School Programs

Angacian, Bray, and Kehle (2015) suggest that besides the home, the school setting is one of the best settings for children to receive nurturing, counseling, and support for their problems. They discuss a few programs that have been implemented in different school systems to specifically help children whose parents get divorced; one of these is the New Beginnings Program (NBP). This program focuses on improving the mental health and the relationship between parents and children of divorce. NBP involves therapy sessions for the parents and children and aims to change certain aspects of the children's environment to improve their coping skills. Therapists adjust a child's exposure to parental conflict and improve the parental discipline methods. Sigal, Wolchik, Tein, and Sandler (2012) investigated the outcomes of implementing this program in community settings. He found that NBP helped to improve parent-child relationships, decrease behavioral and psychological problems, and decrease drug and alcohol use of the participants. These positive results imply that this program and others, if further developed and implemented on a larger scale, could help more children of divorce.

Another program is the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP). Unlike NBP, which focuses on changing a child's environment and his reactions to his environment, CODIP concentrates instead on improving children's ability to identify and express their feelings and emotions (specifically about divorce). Its goal, like that of NBP, is to help children develop skills to eliminate their anxiety about family problems and, thus, decrease emotional and behavioral problems. Unlike NBP, CODIP does not provide sessions for the parents or focus on parent-child relationships. CODIP accomplishes its goals through counseling and the use of board games that target specific ages and problems to help the children develop these coping skills. It is a worldwide program that has been instigated by some school systems as a counseling experience (Angacian et al. 2015). CODIP has been very successful in lowering behavioral problems and helping children have positive feelings about divorce and less anxiety (Durlak, 2013).

Another unique program is called COPE. Angacian et al. (2015) conducted a study regarding the COPE program, which includes a peer-modeling component of helping children of divorce have social interactions with their peers to improve social skills. He found that this program was successful in increasing the ability to respond and initiate conversations in an appropriate manner with the children of divorce that were studied. This program also helped decrease the children's number of inappropriate verbalizations well as inappropriate responses to questions. These inappropriate verbalizations and responses are defined as anything not relating to the context, swearing, name-calling, or anything sexually inappropriate. This demonstrates that programs like COPE seeking to improve social skills may have positive effects on children of divorce.

### **Community-Based Programs**

In addition to intervention programs implemented in school systems, some communities strive to help children of divorce with other programs or forms of counseling. Pelleboer-Gunnink, Van der Valk, Branje, Van Doorn, and Deković (2015) discuss the effectiveness of one such program called Kids in Divorce Situations (KIDS). This program is similar to NBP in that it aims to decrease emotional problems as well as improve the relationship and communication between parents and their children after divorce. It is unique in the fact that a typical session in the KIDS program includes role-play, assignments, and conversations that help children learn to recognize their feelings, deal with change, and understand that they aren't responsible for the separation of their parents (Pelleboer-Gunnink et al. 2015). Along with the meetings for children, there are two sessions for the parents to inform them of their children's progress and instruct them on how to help. Pelleboer-Gunnink and colleagues (2015) studied a group of children in the KIDS program both before they participated in the program and after. Their control group was made of children of divorce who did not participate in the program. They found that the KIDS group had a significant decline in emotional problems, while

the control group had no decline. Similarly, the communication between mother and child and between father and child significantly increased in the KIDS group whereas there was no change in the control group. These results are similar to those of the NBP program and also demonstrate that post-divorce intervention has a positive effect on children.

Another program that has a positive correlation with helping children and families of divorce is called Building Healthy Families (BHF). According to Slavkin (2008), this program aims to identify the factors that cause each specific divorce. It then teaches emotional skills to the parents and children involved, helping them react in a more positive way. This is similar to the NBP approach of identifying environmental factors that may be harmful to a child's well-being, but is different in that it doesn't aim to change the environment, but instead teaches how to react to it. As well as providing counseling services for children, this program also provides educational workshops for the parents, similar to those of NBP and KIDS, which teach them how to help their children in these situations. Slavkin (2008) tested 600 children by giving them questionnaires before the intervention program and after. They were asked to answer different questions about self-blame, feelings of neglect, sexual abuse, feeling torn between parents, and feelings of anger. He found a significant difference in average scores post-intervention versus pre-intervention. The children reported in post-intervention questionnaires that they felt less anger, neglect, responsibility for their parents' actions, and tension between parents. They also blamed themselves less for receiving verbal abuse from their parents (Slavkin, 2008). This program is unique from the others previously mentioned because it focuses on decreasing self-blame.

### **Comparing the Existing Intervention Programs**

As demonstrated by the studies of the intervention programs for children of divorce, the qualities that seem to make a program successful are ones that target specific problems that affect children after the divorce of their parents. The programs discussed in this

literature review all help children learn how to recognize and deal with their emotions. Some, like CODIP and KIDS, also seek to improve communication with the parents and decrease behavioral and emotional problems. Others, including KIDS, COPE, and BHF, teach children coping skills that help them adjust to change and to not blame themselves for family conflict. Some like NBP and KIDS provide workshops to educate the parents and incorporate games and role-play assignments to improve emotional and behavioral well-being. Slavkin (2008) suggests that programs should focus on increasing self-esteem and provide counseling to help parents and children transition from a two parent to a one parent home. Along with this, Angacian (2015) argues that there still aren't enough programs to improve social skills in children of divorce. He claims that this is a key area because children's social skills affect their academic success as well as their future relationships. Improving social skills may help eliminate severe behavioral problems in children of divorce. While all of these are desired results of an intervention program, no one program has been able to produce them all. Table 1 demonstrates the previously mentioned qualities of successful intervention programs as well as which of the five programs discussed in this literature review incorporate which qualities. In Table 1, three represents high influence, two represents moderate influence, and one represents little influence.

Table 1 demonstrates that the most common goals of the existing intervention programs are to provide counseling, improve parent-child relationships, and improve coping skills in children of divorce. There is less of a focus on improving social skills, decreasing self-blame, overcoming feelings of being torn between parents, and overcoming problems that result from change in caretaker roles.

### **Limitations**

While this literature review provides strong evidence and research that divorce has negative effects on children and that there is a need to develop more and better intervention programs, more thorough work and research should be done to identify

exactly what kinds of programs to develop. This study does not include research on all of the intervention programs available or their success rate. It also doesn't include much research on where intervention programs are implemented and what areas still need them.

### **Implications**

Each of the interventions discussed here have proven to be successful. Some improve emotional well-being, others decrease behavioral problems, some improve social skills, and most improve child-parent relationships. Unfortunately, however, researchers have yet to discover a method to achieve all of these results from a single program. Because of this, future work on this topic should focus on doing more research on how to combine the different techniques from the different programs into one program that obtains all of the desired results. Psychologists should strive to develop a program that provides counseling for children and workshops for parents, improves coping skills, increases ability to identify and talk about feelings and emotions, improves parent-child relationship, decreases child exposure to parental conflict, decreases self-blame, improves social skills, helps families overcome challenges that arise from changes in caretaking roles, and decreases feelings of being torn between parents. While developing a program with all of these goals and methods may be a difficult and expensive pursuit, future research should focus on how to make it possible. Researchers could focus on how to develop intervention techniques that address more than one of the desired solutions to help children of divorce. Further research should be done on how to implement this program all across the United States and, if it is successful, the world.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this literature review was to explore the range of negative effects that divorce has on children and to highlight the need for additional research and intervention programs. The intent was also to explore the different intervention

programs in place for children of divorce and the qualities that make a program like this successful. The expectation was to find a lack of high-quality intervention programs for children, and it was found that while there are successful ones, they may need to be improved and expanded to be more effective.

As the research included in this literature review has demonstrated, divorce can have long-lasting emotional, social, physical, and academic effects on children. Unfortunately, the well-being of children of divorce is often either forgotten about or seen as less important than that of the parents (Slavkin, 2008). Slavkin's (2008) research demonstrates that the quality of child-parent relationships decreases during and after divorce because many parents are too busy and stressed to focus on their children. Children of divorce, or "America's Little Warriors" as Valdez (2007) refers to them, often face the emotional, physical, social, and academic setbacks caused by divorce alone. As shown earlier in this review, Kim's (2011) and Arkes' (2013) research supports the idea that children of divorce have a harder time doing well in school, which makes it harder for them to succeed in future careers and life pursuits. Along with this, Ferguson et al. (2013) suggests that children of divorce have a harder time making and sustaining important relationships, and Emery (1996) adds that it is also more common for children of divorce to develop behavioral problems and become violent, thus affecting their future families and children. As we have seen in this review, much research has been done about the negative effects of divorce on children and many intervention programs have been developed as a result. However, a lack of research exists to further develop these programs and implement them as part of every community in the country and hopefully world.

This literature review extends the work of Kim (2011) on the effects of divorce on academic performance of children by comparing his results to similar results found by Arkes (2013), thus substantiating both studies. Both studies found that experiencing divorce in the family leads to a drop in children's test scores—sometimes lasting for a few years (Arkes, 2013; Kim, 2011). This

literature review similarly extends the work of Emery (1996) on the effects of divorce on social well-being of children by including the research of Ferguson et al. (2013). Emery (1996) focuses on behavioral problems such as violence and poor communication skills that arise in children of divorce where Ferguson et al. (2013) take this research a step further by demonstrating that these problems can be long lasting and affect future relationships and social skills.

Additionally, this review supports the work of Angacian (2015) by showing that most of the intervention programs in place for children of divorce lack the components and research to improve social skills. He gives the example of the COPE program, one of the few that focuses on overcoming social problems caused by divorce. This program was shown to have helped many children have successful careers and future relationships. This review demonstrates that the intervention programs outlined focus more on addressing emotional effects of divorce than the effects on social health.

This study compiles the research done on the negative effects of divorce on children and adds some new information to the field of psychology by examining what methods are necessary in an intervention program. Different intervention programs were examined and then broken down into what qualities or components make them successful. Each program is unique in its way of counseling and helping children of divorce. Some focus mainly on improving relationships with parents, some strive to help children develop coping skills and improve self-esteem, others help children stop blaming themselves for the separation of their parents, a few work on improving social skills, and many provide workshops for the parents. A truly successful program, however, needs to implement all the components found in the five intervention programs listed in Table 1. A single intervention program should strive to help children overcome self-blame, improve self-esteem, improve abilities to form relationships, improve social skills, and improve relationships with parents. By doing so, a program may potentially be able to help children of divorce overcome the emotional, social, physical, and academic setbacks that arise. A program like this could be implemented globally to help children all over the world.

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<b>Components of Programs</b>	<b>NBP</b>	<b>CODIP</b>	<b>KIDS</b>	<b>BHF</b>	<b>COPE</b>
Counseling for children	3	3	2	3	3
Workshops for parents	3	2	3	2	1
Improving coping skills	3	3	1	3	3
Expressing emotion/feelings	1	3	3	1	1
Improve relationship with parents	3	1	3	3	1
Decrease exposure to parental conflict	3	1	2	1	1
Role-play and assignments	1	1	3	1	1
Decrease self-blame	1	1	3	3	1
Improving self-esteem	2	2	2	2	1
Improving social skills	1	1	1	1	3
Overcome changes in caretaking roles	1	1	1	1	1
Decrease feeling of being torn between parents	1	1	1	3	1

\*3=high influence, 2=moderate influence, 1=little influence)

Table 1. Qualities Found in Each Intervention Program (Angacian et al. 2015), (Sigal, 2012), (Pelleboer-Gunnink et al. 2015), (Slavkin, 2008)