

Is Divorce Always Bad for the Kids?

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Battling parents who stay together for the sake of the children may be doing their kids more harm than good.

That is the finding from a Canadian study, which was one of the first to measure the mental health of children both before and after divorce.

Children living in very dysfunctional families actually exhibited higher levels of antisocial behavior before their parents divorced than afterwards. The more dysfunctional the family was prior to divorce, the greater the children's behavioral improvement following the event.

Kids whose parents eventually divorced also displayed higher levels of anxiety and depression before the breakup, compared with children whose parents did not divorce.

Researcher Lisa Stroschein, PhD, tells WebMD that the presumption that divorce is always bad ignores the negative impact of living in an unhappy, conflicted family.

"Perhaps we should pay more attention to what happens to kids in the period leading up to parental divorce rather than directing all our efforts to helping children after the event occurs," she says.

Dysfunction, Depression, and Divorce

In Canada, roughly half of all marriages end in divorce. Roughly 20 million American children live with only one parent, according to government figures.

Most previous studies examining the impact of divorce on children's mental health have compared children of divorce to those who live with both biological parents. But few have looked at the family situation before divorce as it related to children's mental health.

Using data from an ongoing child health registry in Canada, Stroschein followed roughly 2,900 children for four years. The children were on average about 5.5 years old, and were living in a household with both biological parents when they entered the study. The divorces occurred between 1994 and 1998.

Mental Health Problems Before Divorce

Stroschein found that mental health differences between children whose parents broke up and children whose parents remained married existed long before the divorce took place.

Compared with parents who remained married, parents who divorced tended to be younger during the initial interview and they reported higher levels of family dysfunction, depression, and, not surprisingly, lower levels of marital satisfaction.

Children who lived in highly dysfunctional families exhibited more antisocial behavior, such as lying, cheating, and bullying. There was a significant decline in these behaviors following divorce.

The study is published in the December issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

"When kids are living in a noxious family environment where tensions are really high, the removal of one parent can relieve the stress," Stroschein says.

Kids from unhappy, dysfunctional families also had more depression than other children both prior to and after their parents' divorce.

'Not Just Conflict'

Divorce researcher and psychologist Judith Primavera, PhD, says it is clear that children often fare better emotionally when embattled parents divorce.

Primavera is a psychology professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut.

"It is inescapably harmful to grow up in a highly dysfunctional, two-parent home, particularly one where there is any type of domestic violence going on," she tells WebMD.

She adds that parents who do not fight, but, instead deal with unhappy marriages by having little to do with each other may also cause emotional harm to their children.

"It isn't just conflict," she says. "If mom and dad lead separate lives and the children see that there is no connection, staying married probably isn't doing them any favors, either. Children learn about relationships by watching their parents."

SOURCES: Stroschein, L. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, December 2005; vol 67: pp 1286-1300. Lisa Stroschein, PhD, assistant professor, department of sociology, University of Alberta, Alberta, Canada. Judith Primavera, PhD, professor of psychology, Fairfield University, Fairfield, Conn.

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