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Children's Adjustment to Divorce Largely in Hands of Parents, with One Exception: Dad's Departure Depresses Boys

Divorce is a distressing experience, both for the couple in conflict and the children caught in the middle. But comprehensive, new research from Iowa State University presents strong evidence that parents, even those no longer living in the home, have a great deal of control over children's adjustment to the break-up of the family.

The research, reported in the November edition of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, is the first to examine all the major factors commonly associated with divorce and child development problem. While the findings provide encouraging information, they also reveal some critical gender differences in the ways divorce and parental reaction can affect adolescents. Divorced parents can substantially reduce the probability that their children will experience developmental difficulty by continuing effective parenting and avoiding hostile exchanges. However, boys remain at risk for depression even under the most optimal post-divorce conditions. (Journal publication date is Nov. 22.)

Even though divorce more than doubles the risk for emotional and behavioral problems in both boys and girls, the good news is that the vast majority of children from divorced families do just fine, says lead author Ronald L. Simons, who conducted the research with colleagues at Iowa State's Department of Sociology and Institute for Social and Behavioral Research.

"What is essential for kids is that they be parented well," says Simons. "If mom and dad continue to persevere in their parenting, are warm and supportive, monitor the kids and are consistent in discipline, the risk for conduct problems is no greater than in two-parent families. This is a more optimistic scenario than is often asserted."

The latest findings are part of Iowa State's Transitions Project, a longitudinal study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. For the past decade, this study

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Children of Divorce – 2

has followed approximately 600 families, both married and divorced. This on-going

study has produce a flow of data, generating greater understanding and raising new questions about how changes in family structure and processes impact the family unit and its various members.

Regardless of family structure, girls are more likely to experience depression and boys to show conduct problems, according to Simons. However, the new research reveals a significant exception -- divorce increases a boy's chances of becoming depressed, regardless of other mediating conditions. "Even when those parents remain involved and supportive, boys often become depressed due to the departure of their father from the home," he says.

The research examined all the major explanations for the association between divorce and child developmental problems: loss of family income, parental conflict, psychological adjustment and parenting practices of the custodial parent (most typically the mother), and involvement of the non-custodial father. Previous studies have considered only one of two of these more popular theories.

Targeting adolescents with an average age of 14, the Iowa-based study involved 534 families -- 328 two-parent and 206 divorced mother-headed households. Researchers focused on two dimensions of child adjustment: whether they externalized problems, manifested by aggressive or delinquent behavior, or internalized their concerns, resulting in emotional distress and depression.

Findings largely support the argument that family structure influence child development through its impact on family processes. In other words, children of divorce are at risk for adjustment problems because their parents are less likely to engage in competent, consistent parenting and are more likely to engage in conflict exchanges than parents who are married to each other.

Divorce, with its emotional turmoil, time demands and often financial stress increases the custodial mother's own chances of becoming depressed, which in turn tends to disrupt the quality of her parenting, Simons explains. This, in turn, increases the child's risk for adjustment problems.

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Children of Divorce – 3

Data also show that being a non-residential parent is often a confusing role for fathers, who too often relinquish their parenting role and form a more buddy-type relationship with the children. Compared to fathers in intact families, the divorced,

non-residential dads were less likely to help their children solve problems, discuss standards of conduct or enforce discipline, increasing the probability that boys would display conduct problems.

“It is essential, especially for sons, that fathers continue to function as a parent,” Simons emphasizes. “Simply showing the kids a good time and being a pal doesn’t make any difference in terms of developmental outcomes for kids.”

Quality of the custodial mother’s parenting was the only factor that was related to both internalizing and externalizing problems of children. Findings indicate that quality of mother’s parenting reduces much of the association between divorce and adjustment for both boys and girls. However, effects of the other factors differ by type of adjustment problem and gender of the child. For example:

- The quality of the custodial mother’s parenting and the father’s involvement in parenting are key indicators in boys’ externalizing problems, while mother’s parenting and post-divorce conflict increase girls’ risk of adverse behavior.
- Pre-divorce conflict increases the chances of depression in boys while post-divorce conflict elevates a girl’s risk for conduct problems. It may be that the threat of parental loss, rather than parental conflict per se is disturbing to boys and that deviant behavior is a way for a girl to express emotional anxiety produced by her parents’ fighting. Or parental conflict could serve to model and legitimate a daughter’s antisocial behavior.
- The quality of father’s parenting has little effect on the association between divorce and girls’ antisocial behavior. Mom’s parenting is the most consequential factor.
- Conflict isn’t as destructive for kids in two-parent families as long as it doesn’t spill over into the quality of parenting. Except for girls in divorced families, conflict doesn’t have much impact. Simons says researchers were surprised that parental conflict did not have more of an effect.

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Children of Divorce – 4

- Active engagement in the role of parent, not simply contact, by the non-custodial father substantially reduces the probability that boys will display conduct problems.
- Parental divorce is more emotionally disturbing to boys than to girls. Boys in divorced families experience higher rates of depression than those in intact families, even when their mothers show positive psychological adjustment and practice competent parenting.

Past research has shown that divorce can contribute to adverse behavior such as lower achievement in school, early entry into sexual activity, delinquency and substance abuse, by both boys and girls. But the effects of divorce on children are widely stereotyped and not

nearly as uniform as people generally believe, according to Robert Milardo, editor of the Journal of Marriage and the Family and professor of human development at the University of Maine. “Longitudinal studies of family relationships and dynamics, such as the work at Iowa State, are providing important new knowledge about how parents might ease the impact of a drastic change, such as divorce, on their children,” he says.

Simons’ Iowa State colleagues in the study, “Explaining the Higher Incidence of Adjustment Problems of Children of Divorce,” and on-going research are: Rand D. Conger and Frederick O. Lorenz, professors of sociology; Leslie C. Gordon, post-doctorate fellow; and Kuei-Hsui Lin, graduate student in sociology.

-30-

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