

Impact of Divorce on Children

The Arguments: Wallerstein vs Hetherington

Wallerstein's research and conclusions are not discussed in depth in the *Time Magazine* article. The article does tell readers the following: Wallerstein focused on qualitative microanalysis and concluded that divorce leads to serious psychological debilitations in children, often continuing on through adolescence and adulthood. She describes the children of a divorce "as adults...frightened of failure, frightened of commitment, afraid they were going to follow in their parents' footsteps."

Hetherington, in contrast, focused her research on quantitative analysis. While Hetherington agreed that a significant percentage of children from divorced families have serious maladjustments affecting their social, emotional, or psychological skills and health, her research indicates that these children only constitute 25% of the overall population of children from divorced homes. This 25% is only a 15% difference from children who grew up in intact families, of whom 10% have serious social, emotional, or psychological issues. Furthermore, Hetherington's research indicates that many parents are much happier after divorce, which may provide an improved environment for children.

Ultimately, the difference between the two researchers comes down to their focus. Wallerstein is strongly concerned by the depth of issues that her research uncovered in the children of divorced families; Hetherington is concerned with both social awareness of the "resiliency of children" and the fact that, according to her research, the vast majority of children recover from the trauma of divorce. In a society that has both a high divorce rate and an

increasing focus on the needs of its children, an understanding of the impact of divorce is essential in determining what issues may affect the next generation of adults and their children.

The Research: Five Articles on Divorce and Children

Five research studies published from 1999–2001, despite various differences, provide relatively stable results regarding the impact of divorce on children.

Wolfinger (1999) notes that the effects of divorce have changed since the 1970s when Wallerstein did her research; the effect of parental divorce on a child's likelihood of later divorcing fell from 2.5 times the risk to less than 50%. However, his research did indicate that parental divorce influenced the child's risk for personal divorce. These results remained regardless of race, presence of siblings, Catholicism, rural origins, and gender.

Hanson (1999), using data from 1977–8, found that children who experienced high levels of pre-divorce parental conflict neither benefited nor suffered as a result of parental divorce; children from families with low levels of pre-divorce parental conflict, however, experienced strong disadvantages as a result of divorce. The effects of divorce on children differed by gender, and were affected negatively by parental remarriage. Hanson concluded that pre-divorce conflict and divorce have a strong effect on delinquency, health, and psychological well-being; however, his research also indicated that divorce did not correlate with higher rates of disliking school or picking fights at school, despite self-reported increase of lower grades.

Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, and Frye (1999), researching data collected in 1971–2, concluded that while parental divorce significantly affected daughters' likelihood of divorce, children's likelihood of obtaining a college degree, and lowered a daughter's age at her first marriage, parental divorce did not significantly affect their children's future income, likelihood

of having their own children, their marital quality, or daughters' likelihood of being employed. They also found that the effect of divorce on marital quality appeared to be moderated by parent and child gender.

Amato and Sobolewski (2001), largely studying children whose parents had divorced after 1980, found that the quality of a child's relationship with his parents was a significant factor in the child's psychological well-being in adulthood. While divorce and parental conflict were predictors of lower psychological well-being among children, this was mediated by the quality of the child-parent relationship. Divorce tended to cause a decline in the parent-child relationship; this was especially true for the father-daughter relationship, which was the only gender difference this study found. This research study also found that it was not until three or more family transitions occurred that a child's well-being was significantly lower than that of a child from a low-discord two-parent family.

Amato and Booth (2001) studied families in 1980 with follow-ups in 1992 and 1997. Their research concluded that the divorce of a low-conflict marriage had negative effects on children, while the divorce of a high-conflict marriage had beneficial effects for children. They also concluded that parental divorce lowered the quality of parent-child relationships regardless of the level of conflict prior to divorce.

Conclusions

As Amato and Sobolewski (2001) found, many interrelated factors affect offspring adult well-being. Wolfinger's research (1999) makes the time period of the data used in each study relevant to reaching an overall conclusion about the impact of divorce on children. Furthermore, researchers' approach to studying the impact of divorce changed significantly between 1999 and

2001. Rather than focusing on divorce and remarriage as broad generalizations, Amato, working with both Sobolewski and Booth, considered the number of family transitions a child went through. The difference in decade and approach could both explain the differing conclusions between the Hanson and Feng et al studies, and the Amato studies. However, even the Hanson and Feng et al studies, in their findings on the impact of conflict and the impact of gender, hint at what Amato et al would later conclude. Regarding Hanson's study, increased conflict between parents likely affects the quality of the parent-child relationship, resulting in a better relationship after divorce; furthermore, a divorce without conflict may leave a child at a loss as to the cause of divorce, which may lead to the child blaming themselves. It is possible that this self-blame could be moderated by parent-child communication. Regarding Feng et al, divorce is very likely to affect the relationship between children and parents of opposite genders. The issues correlated with divorce also tend to be issues affected by parent-child relationships, such as early marriage and educational attainment. It is also quite possible that the level of pre-divorce conflict and the typical parent-child relationship has changed since the 1970s, leading to differing results in these research studies. Further research would be needed to verify these possibilities.

Ultimately, Wallerstein's and Hetherington's research do not need to contradict. Wallerstein's qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of children who suffer from divorce; Hetherington's quantitative research supplies a sense of how widespread the issues are. The five research studies considered offer the extra step of providing a possible conclusion as to what determines whether a child is traumatized by divorce or not: the relationship between the parent and child.

Personal Response

This project came at a time when the impact of divorce was strongly relevant. A member of my immediate family was divorced several years ago, and her two sons continue to react to the divorce as they move between homes, celebrate family events, and adjust to newborn half-siblings. I was unaware of the complexities that research has found regarding the reactions children and adolescents have to parental divorce, and having an understanding of the research that supports each side of the issue broadens my understanding of the issue itself.

I gained two main lessons from this project. The first is a deeper understanding of the impact of divorce, which will be useful when I work with children and adolescents. Although I plan to work in informal education, community outreach is an important aspect of my future plans and understanding the issues relevant to the populations I intend to work with will help me shape my responses and actions. The second is the need to consider both quantitative and qualitative research when reaching a conclusion on an issue. Hetherington and Wallerstein both provide important insights into the issue of divorce, but each study made more complete by the other.