

Effects of Divorce on Children's Future Relationships

Research Synthesis Paper: [Effects of Divorce on Children](#)

Persons raised in divorced families tend to have less positive attitudes towards marriage, and more positive attitudes towards divorce. This negative attitude about marriage leads to decreased commitment to romantic relationships, which in turn is related to lower relationship quality.¹⁾ Divorce can also affect [children's sexual behavior](#), thereby compromising their emotional and relational stability.

1. Trust in Relationships

Parental divorce often leads to [low trust](#) among children,²⁾ and those who casually date exhibit “the strongest effects of parental divorce, suggesting that the repercussions of parental divorce may be in place before the young adults form their own romantic relationships.”³⁾ The divorce of their parents makes dating and romance more difficult for children as they reach adulthood. Parental divorce horrifies young adults’ heterosexual relationship experiences though the connection is more evident for women than for men, according to one study.⁴⁾

The effects carry into adulthood. When compared with women from intact families, women from divorced families also reported less trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships.⁵⁾ Children of divorced parents fear being rejected, and a lack of trust frequently hinders a deepening of their relationship.⁶⁾ One study showed that individuals whose parents divorced were more likely than individuals whose parents remained married to believe that relationships were beset by infidelity and the absence of trust, and they were also more likely to believe that relationships should be approached with caution.⁷⁾

2. Hesitancy Toward Marriage

Persons raised in divorced families tend to have less positive attitudes towards marriage, and more positive attitudes towards divorce. This negative attitude about marriage leads to decreased commitment to romantic relationships, which in turn is related to lower relationship quality. In Sweden, where parental rejection is very high, no significant differences were found between individuals from divorced and intact families in their attitudes towards marriage and divorce. Thus the more common divorce and rejection is among adults, the more the attitudes and expectations of rejection are mainstreamed among children, even those raised in intact married families.

Adult male children of divorced parents show more ambivalence than men from intact families about becoming involved in a relationship, though they invest more money and tangible goods in casual dating relationships. Women share this ambivalence and demonstrate even more conflict, doubt, and lack of faith in their partner’s benevolence and tend to place less value on consistent commitment. Unwed teen mothers, who have expectations of rejection and divorce in relationships, seem to retain negative attitudes towards men instilled by their parents’ divorce.

3. Acceptance of Divorce

Compared with children of always-married parents, children of divorced parents have more positive attitudes towards divorce⁸⁾ and less favorable attitudes towards marriage.⁹⁾ Specifically, “adolescents who have experienced their parents’ divorces and remarriages may feel that marriage is unpredictable and unstable.”¹⁰⁾ People raised in divorced families are less likely than those from intact families to believe that marriage is enduring and permanent,¹¹⁾ are less likely to insist upon a lifelong marital commitment,¹²⁾ and are less likely to think positively of themselves as parents.¹³⁾ Parental breakup also increases children’s acceptance of cohabitation, at least until adulthood. However, [religious participation](#) can reduce this effect.¹⁴⁾

These attitudinal differences among children of divorced parents are noticeable even as early as kindergarten.¹⁵⁾ Children from divorced families are more tolerant of divorce than are children from intact families, though this is only likely if their parents had remarried. Without remarriage, the effect on their views of divorce was not significant.¹⁶⁾ The mothers’ accepting attitudes toward divorce cause more children to be accepting of divorce themselves.¹⁷⁾ These positive attitudes towards divorce affect not only likelihood of divorce, but also overall relationship quality.

After controlling for age, high levels of post-divorce inter-parental conflict are associated with less positive views of marriage among adolescents.¹⁸⁾ One study of adolescents after a parental divorce reported that many children fear that their future marriages will lack love, trust, or communication, and that they will be beset by infidelity, conflict, or abuse. They also worry that their marriages will fail or that their spouse will abandon them,¹⁹⁾ a finding common to another study published that year (2008).²⁰⁾

In her study of children of divorced parents from Marin County, California, Judith Wallerstein found that the children of divorced parents still had persistent anxiety about their chances of a happy marriage a decade after their parents’ divorce. This anxiety interfered with their ability to marry well: Some failed to form satisfying romantic ties, while others rushed impulsively into unhappy marriages. This may explain why children of divorced parents tend to have a lower relationship quality as adults.²¹⁾ The evidence shows that “adult children of divorce who eventually wed are more likely to divorce than are adult children from intact families.”²²⁾

3.1 Girls

Young women from divorced families will feel a need for love and attention and yet fear abandonment; they will also be prone to both desire and anxiety.²³⁾ Women whose parents divorce are likely to be hampered or even overwhelmed by anxiety when it comes time to make decisions about marriage,²⁴⁾ though some “women with no ill effects from paternal divorce, may develop [the] security of friendship-based love quite well.”²⁵⁾ One study linked parental divorce to lower relationship commitment and confidence in women but not in men.²⁶⁾

3.2 Boys

While parental divorce affects the child’s view of marriage, girls may be less influenced in their

attitudes towards divorce “because they have more role models of intimacy and marriage as the ideal in their environment than boys do, especially in the media.” By contrast, boys have fewer role models of intimacy outside of their families. Hence a father’s modeling of interpersonal skills is more important for boys.²⁷⁾ Men from father-absent homes also experience less masculine sexual identification and more feminine sexual identification.²⁸⁾

Men whose parents divorced are inclined to be simultaneously hostile and a “rescuer” of the women to whom they are attracted, rather than the more open, affectionate, cooperative partner, more frequently found among men raised by parents of an intact marriage. They are also more likely to be more violent toward their partner.²⁹⁾ By contrast, the problem of being overly meek or overly dominant is much more prevalent in the romantic relationships and marriages of the daughters of divorced families than it is among daughters of intact marriages.³⁰⁾

4. Expectations to Marry or Divorce

The children of divorced parents, stepfamilies, or single parents are less likely to expect to marry.³¹⁾ Children who have experienced parental divorce are more likely to expect to divorce, compared with children of intact families.³²⁾ Children of divorce also have more negative attitudes towards marriage³³⁾ and a preference for smaller family sizes, although the negative attitudes are mitigated by their parents’ remarriage.³⁴⁾

5. Likelihood to Marry or Divorce

One generation passes on its marital instability to the next.³⁵⁾ Sons of divorced parents with less educated mothers have an increased tendency to forgo marriage.³⁶⁾ Additionally, parental divorce raises children’s likelihood of divorce.³⁷⁾ Children who have experienced parental divorce are more than twice as likely to divorce, compared with children of intact families.³⁸⁾ One study found that adults who experience parental divorce have chances of divorce 38 percent higher than adults raised in intact families. Significantly, this increase is not seen in children whose parents’ marriage ended because of the death of one of the parents.³⁹⁾

Children of divorce are 39 percent more likely to marry other children of divorce, after controlling for education. Couples with one spouse from a divorced home are nearly twice as likely to divorce as couples with both spouses from non-divorced families. Worse still, couples with both spouses from divorced families are over three times more likely to divorce than couples with both spouses from non-divorced families.⁴⁰⁾

Children who experience three or more transitions in family structure are much more likely to divorce later in life, compared to children who did not experience such family transitions.⁴¹⁾ That is, 59 percent of the individuals who have never experienced a transition are predicted to never end a marriage, compared to those who experienced three or more transitions, whose likelihood to never divorce is about 33 percent.⁴²⁾

Daughters of divorced parents divorce more than sons of divorced parents do.⁴³⁾ The risk of divorce in the first five years is 70⁴⁴⁾ to 76⁴⁵⁾ percent higher for the daughters of divorced parents than for daughters of intact marriages.⁴⁶⁾

6. Marital Behavior

Adult male children of divorced parents show more ambivalence than men from intact families about becoming involved in a relationship,⁴⁷⁾ though they invest more money and tangible goods in casual dating relationships. Women share this ambivalence and demonstrate even more conflict, doubt, and lack of faith in their partner's benevolence and tend to place less value on consistent commitment.⁴⁸⁾ Unwed teen mothers, who have expectations of rejection and divorce in relationships, seem to retain negative attitudes towards men instilled by their parents' divorce.⁴⁹⁾

Parental divorce is also associated with lower marital quality for their children. This manifests itself in arguing more about the family,⁵⁰⁾ increased rates of jealousy, moodiness, infidelity, conflicts over money, excessive drinking, and drug use.⁵¹⁾ Analysis of the 1987-1988 wave of the National Survey of Families and Households showed that children of divorce whose marriages were less than "very happy" communicated less and were more than twice as likely to argue frequently and to shout and hit when they argued.⁵²⁾

The child with an available father, both in the early and the adolescent years, is more companionable and responsible as an adult.⁵³⁾ In particular, "boys who feel close to their fathers, regardless of biological status, have better attitudes about intimacy and the prospect of their own married lives than boys who do not feel close to their fathers."⁵⁴⁾

7. Cohabitation

Children of divorced parents are more likely to have more positive attitudes towards cohabitation⁵⁵⁾ and more negative attitudes towards marriage than children of always-married parents.⁵⁶⁾ When they leave home, they are two to three times as likely to cohabit⁵⁷⁾ and to do so earlier,⁵⁸⁾ especially if their parents divorced during their teenage years.⁵⁹⁾

Daughters of divorced parents anticipated cohabiting before marriage, regardless of the amount of affection between them and their fathers. Among daughters of intact marriages, it was mainly those with poor relationships with their fathers who anticipated they would cohabit.⁶⁰⁾

8. Related American Demographics

According to the General Social Surveys (GSS), 18 percent of adults who were raised in an intact family have ever been divorced or separated, compared to 28 percent of those who lived in a non-intact family.⁶¹⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



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