

Effects of Divorce on Children's Social Skills

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

Also see: "[Effects of Divorce on Children's Behavior](#)"

1. Social Skills

Gerald Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Center concluded that "[p]oor social skills, characterized by aversive or coercive interaction styles, lead directly to rejection by normal peers."¹⁾ Fear of such peer rejection is twice as likely among adolescents of divorced parents.²⁾ Their social relations are likely to be damaged in several ways³⁾ and characterized by more problems relating to peers,⁴⁾ fewer childhood friends, and a greater tendency to complain about lack of peer support.⁵⁾ Kent State University faculty members conducted a major national study on the effects of divorce in 1987. The study found that, compared to children from intact families, children of divorced parents did worse when rated by both parents and teachers on peer relationships, hostility towards adults, anxiety, withdrawal, inattention, and aggression.⁶⁾ A 2015 study published in the *Journal of Family Psychology* reiterated these findings.⁷⁾

1.1 Related American Demographics

According to the National Survey of Children's Health, children who live with both biological parents or two adoptive parents score higher on the social development scale (50.8) than children who live within other family configurations.⁸⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



2. Psychological Outcomes

A variety of psychological outcomes are associated with parental divorce that lead to vulnerability in some children and resiliency in others.⁹⁾ According to one study, child antisocial behavior decreases after the dissolution of marriages in highly dysfunctional families,¹⁰⁾ and "the higher the level of family dysfunction prior to divorce, the greater the reduction in child antisocial behavior after the divorce."¹¹⁾ Nevertheless, children whose parents divorce will exhibit more anxiety and depression and antisocial behavior than children from intact families.¹²⁾

Children who experience divorce at any age will continue to be affected their whole lives, tending to "exhibit higher malaise scores at age 33 than their contemporaries whose parents remained married."¹³⁾

3. Behavioral Problems

Children of divorced or separated parents exhibit increased behavioral problems,¹⁴⁾ and the marital conflict that accompanies parents' divorce places the child's social competence at risk. Studies indicate that divorce contributes to an increased risk for a wide facet of undesirable behaviors, including an inability to handle conflict, promiscuity, difficulty in school, increased crime rates, increased drug and alcohol use, and increased rates of suicide.

¹⁾ John M. Gottman and John T. Parkhurst, "A Developmental Theory of Friendship and Acquaintanceship Processes," *Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology* (1978). As cited in Gerald R. Patterson and Thomas J. Dishion, "Contributions of Families and Peers to Delinquency," *Criminology* 23 (1985): 63-79.

²⁾ Dorothy Tysse Breen and Margaret Crosbie-Burnett, "Moral Dilemmas of Early Adolescents of Divorced and Intact Families: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis," *Journal of Early Adolescence* 13 (1993) 168-182.

³⁾ Paul R. Amato, "Children of Divorce in the 1990s: An Update of the Amato and Keith (1991) Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 15 (2001): 355-375.

⁴⁾ David H. Demo and Alan C. Acock, "The Impact of Divorce on Children," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 50 (1988): 619-48.

Hyun Sik Kima, "Consequences of Parental Divorce for Child Development," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 76 no. 3(2011): 506-507.

⁵⁾ Sylvie Drapeau and Camil Bouchard, "Support networks and adjustment among 6 to 11 year-olds from maritally disrupted and intact families," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 19 (1993): 75-97. Daughters of divorced parents, in a University of Michigan study, had significantly greater difficulty in having and keeping friends and were more frequently depressed while at college. See Kristen M. McCabe, "Sex Differences in the Long-term Effects of Divorce on Children: Depression and Heterosexual Relationship Difficulties in the Young Adult Years," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 27 (1997): 123-134.

Green, Julii M., and Alan R. King, "Domestic Violence and Parental Divorce as Predictors of Best Friendship Qualities Among College Students," *Journal Of Divorce & Remarriage* 50, no. 2 (February 2009): 100, 110, 113.

⁶⁾ John Guidubaldi, Joseph D. Perry and Bonnie K. Nastasi, "Growing Up in a Divorced Family: Initial and Long-term Perspectives on Children's Adjustment," *Applied Social Psychology Annual* 7 (1987): 202-237.

⁷⁾ Weaver, Jennifer M., and Thomas J. Schofield, "Mediation and moderation of divorce effects on children's behavior problems," *Journal of Family Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2015): 39, 43.

⁸⁾ Nicholas Zill, "Children's Positive Social Development and Family Structure," Mapping America Project available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF09G09.pdf>

⁹⁾ , ¹⁰⁾ , ¹²⁾ Lisa Stroschein, "Parental Divorce and Child Mental Health Trajectories," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (2005): 1286.

¹¹⁾ Lisa Stroschein, "Parental Divorce and Child Mental Health Trajectories," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (2005): 1297.

¹³⁾ Frank F. Furstenberg and Kathleen E. Kiernan, "Delayed Parental Divorce: How Much Do Children Benefit?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (2001): 452.

¹⁴⁾ Donna Ruane Morrison and Mary Jo Coiro, "Parental Conflict and Marital Disruption: Do Children Benefit When High-Conflict Marriages Are Dissolved?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 626.

Weaver, Jennifer M., and Thomas J. Schofield, "Mediation and moderation of divorce effects on children's behavior problems," *Journal Of Family Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2015): 39, 43, 45.

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