

Effects of Divorce on Family Relationships

1. Parent-Child Relationships

When parents divorce each other, another sort of divorce occurs between the parents and their children. The primary effect of divorce (and of the parental conflict that precedes the divorce) is a decline in the relationship between parent and child.¹⁾ Immediately after a divorce, most parents have two sets of problems: their adjustment to their own intrapsychic conflicts and to their role as a divorced parent. The stress of divorce tends to weaken and even damage the parent-child relationship for divorced mothers.²⁾

1.1 Support

Children of divorced parents rated the support they received from home much lower than children of intact homes,³⁾ and these negative ratings become more pronounced by the time children are in high school⁴⁾ and college.⁵⁾

Children in divorced families receive less [emotional support](#), [financial assistance](#), and practical help from their parents.⁶⁾ Divorced homes show a decrease in language stimulation, pride, affection, [stimulation of academic behavior](#), encouragement of [social maturity](#), and warmth directed towards the children. The presence of fewer toys and games is common, as is an increase in physical punishment.⁷⁾ Though some studies show that parental divorce itself may not affect parenting,⁸⁾ it often leads to worry, exhaustion, and stress for parents. These factors affect both parenting and parental control.⁹⁾ Thus, divorce and separation result in less caring and more overprotective parenting during the adolescent years.¹⁰⁾

1.2 Trust

Though the child's ability to trust their parents, close friends, and others "is strongly linked to positive parent-teen relationships regardless of parental divorce,"¹¹⁾ parental divorce makes it more difficult for [children to trust their parents](#),¹²⁾ while a "decline in the closeness of the parent-child relationship mediates much of the association between parental divorce, marital discord, and offspring's psychological wellbeing in adulthood."¹³⁾

1.3 Child's Early Departure from Home

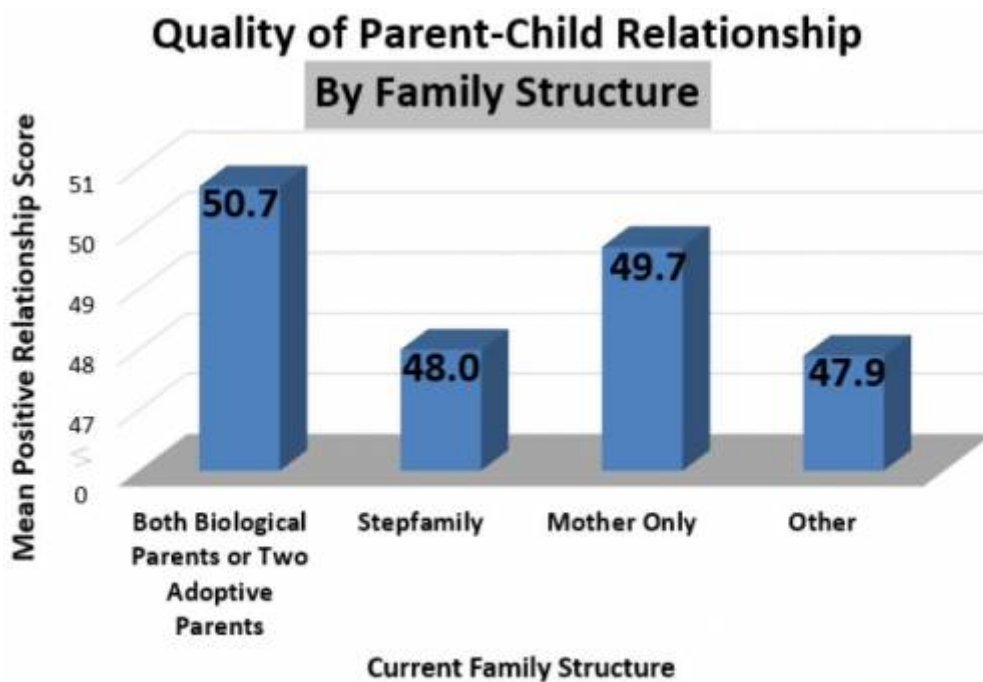
Children of separated parents move away from their families of origin in greater proportions¹⁴⁾ and earlier¹⁵⁾ than children of intact marriages due to low levels of family cohesion and harmony.¹⁶⁾ The greater the unhappiness in their parents' marriage, the earlier children leave home to get married, cohabit, or live on their own.¹⁷⁾ Some children who experience marital disruption in adolescence may leave home "at such young ages that it resembles running away from home."¹⁸⁾

Compared with children living in intact, two-parent families, runaway children with stepparents are only 70 percent as likely to return home.¹⁹⁾ Stepchildren are over 20 percent more likely to leave

home earlier.²⁰⁾ According to Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider, “children whose families gained a stepparent while they were adolescents...increase their odds of leaving home to marry by about 100 percent.”²¹⁾

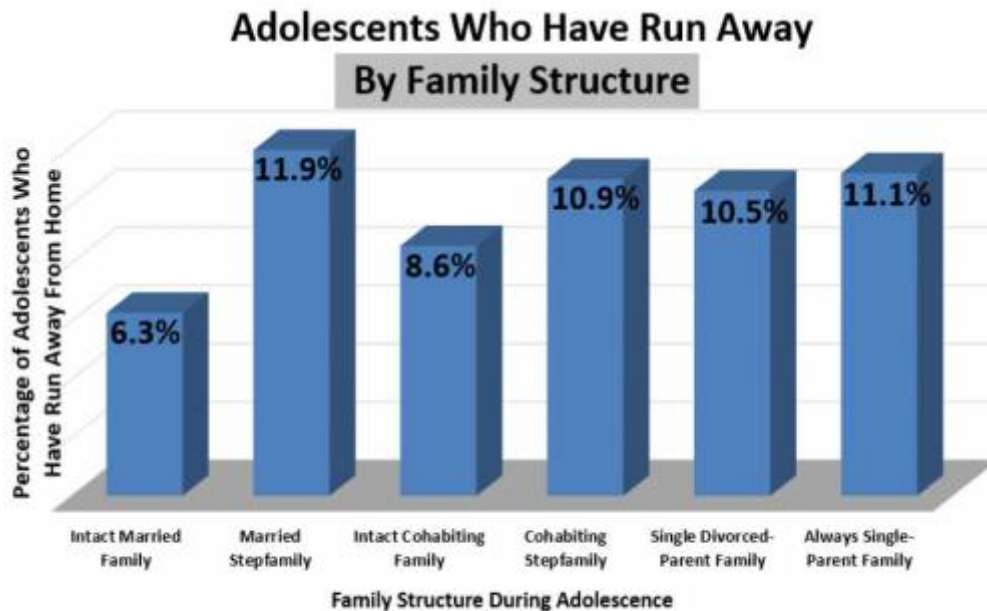
1.4 Related American Demographics

According to the National Survey of Children’s Health, children who live with both biological parents or two adoptive parents score higher on the positive parental relationship scale (50.7) than children who live with a biological parent and a stepparent (48.0), single mothers (49.7), or another family configurations (47.9), such as with their father only or foster parents.²²⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: National Center for Health Statistics in the National Survey of Children’s Health (2003)

The Adolescent Health Survey shows that 6.3 percent of students in grades 7-12 who live with their married, biological parents have run away from home. In contrast, 11.9 percent of adolescents who live with stepparents, 8.6 percent of youth who live with their biological cohabiting parents, 10.9 percent of children living with one biological cohabiting parents, 10.5 percent of youth from divorced homes, and 11.1 percent of adolescents from never married homes have run away.²³⁾ (See [Chart](#) Below)



Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Adolescents Grades 7-12.

2. Mother-Child Relationships

Children of divorced mothers have poorer and less stimulating home environments. Furthermore, divorced mothers, despite their best intentions, are less able than married mothers to give **emotional support** to their children.²⁴⁾ Divorce also causes a slight decline in children's trust of their mothers when parental divorce occurs between birth and age four; however, after controlling for the quality of the parent-child relationship, this effect all but disappears.²⁵⁾ Compared with continuously-married mothers, divorced mothers tend to be **less affectionate and communicative** with their children, and to **discipline them more harshly** and more inconsistently, especially during the first year following the divorce.²⁶⁾

Divorced mothers have particular problems with their sons, though their relationship will likely improve within two years,²⁷⁾ even if, as often occurs, discipline problems persist for up to six years after the divorce.²⁸⁾

3. Father-Child Relationships

Divorced fathers, especially non-custodial fathers, do not fare well with their children. Children from divorced families receive less emotional support from their fathers than children from intact families.²⁹⁾ Divorced fathers are less nurturing,³⁰⁾ and more likely to drift away from younger children if denied legal custody at the time of the divorce.³¹⁾

3.1 Contact

Divorce leads to a decline in the frequency and quality of parent-child contact and relationships,³²⁾ and it becomes difficult for nonresidential parents, 90 percent of whom are fathers, to maintain close ties with their children.³³⁾ For example, children spend significantly more nights with their mother than

their father.³⁴⁾ Nearly 50 percent of the children in one study reported not seeing their nonresident father in the past year, and the small number that had recently stayed overnight at the father's residence did so for a special visit, not as part of a regular routine.³⁵⁾ An analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households³⁶⁾ found that about one in five divorced fathers had not seen his children in the past year, and fewer than half the fathers saw their children more than a few times a year.³⁷⁾ By adolescence (between the ages of 12 and 16), fewer than half of children living with separated, divorced, or remarried mothers had seen their fathers at all in more than a year, and only one in six saw their fathers once a week.³⁸⁾ Fathers who have found new partners also have less contact with the adult children from their original marriage.³⁹⁾

Contact with the father declines over time after a divorce, though this pattern is less pronounced the older the child is at the time of the divorce.⁴⁰⁾ Daughters of divorced parents were 38 percent less likely than their peers in intact families to have frequent contact with their fathers, and sons of divorced parents were 20 percent less likely.⁴¹⁾ Fathers who repartner have further reduced contact with their adult children.⁴²⁾ A close father-child bond is important for adolescent outcomes.⁴³⁾

3.2 Emotional Closeness and Well-Being

Children's relationships with their parents **worsen after a divorce**.⁴⁴⁾ Marital disruption creates distance between parents and children,⁴⁵⁾ even compared to children living in married but unhappy families.⁴⁶⁾ Divorced parents also report significantly diminished satisfaction with their former spouse's relationships with their children,⁴⁷⁾ though parental divorce tends to affect the relationship of the child and the opposite-sex parent more than the child and their parent of the same sex.⁴⁸⁾

Divorced fathers, especially non-custodial fathers, do not fare well with their children. Children report more distant relationships with their fathers,⁴⁹⁾ and fathers report "a more negative change in their relationships with their children than [do] custodial mothers."⁵⁰⁾ The pattern of worsening relationships after the breakup holds for both sons⁵¹⁾ and daughters,⁵²⁾ and more conflict during the divorce process increases the likelihood of distance between the father and his children.⁵³⁾ However, as time passes after the breakup, conflict between father and child decreases. Additionally, older children typically experience less conflict with their nonresident fathers than do younger children.⁵⁴⁾

Divorce leads to a decline in children's ability to trust their fathers.⁵⁵⁾ Young adults who feel emotionally close to their fathers tend to be happier and more satisfied in life, regardless of their feelings towards their mothers.⁵⁶⁾ However, boys and girls from single father families have significantly lower life satisfaction than those from two parent families.⁵⁷⁾ Still, children and adolescents who do feel close to the father following a divorce experience better outcomes.⁵⁸⁾

Children from divorced families receive less emotional support from their fathers than children from intact families.⁵⁹⁾ Divorced fathers are less nurturing,⁶⁰⁾ and more likely to drift away from younger children if denied legal custody at the time of the divorce.⁶¹⁾ Nonresident fathers also "have considerably less opportunity to influence their children's attitudes and behavior."⁶²⁾ Fathers who repartner are less likely to remain in contact with their children than single fathers.⁶³⁾ Ultimately, the proportion of children who enjoy a consistently close relationship with their father is much higher among adolescents whose parents remain married (48 percent) than among those whose parents divorce (25 percent).⁶⁴⁾

3.3 Persisting Effects

Boys, especially if they live with their mother, respond with **more hostility** to parental divorce than girls do, both immediately following the divorce and for a period of years thereafter.⁶⁵⁾ Girls often fare worse than boys when living with their father or stepfather after a parental divorce.⁶⁶⁾ By the time children, particularly daughters, attend college, their affection for their divorced father wanes significantly.⁶⁷⁾

4. Sibling Relationships

Children of divorce are more likely to have hostile relationships with their siblings than children from married families.⁶⁸⁾ This can **last even into adulthood**.⁶⁹⁾

5. Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships

Divorce negatively affects grandparent/grandchild relationships. Paternal grandparents frequently cease to see their grandchildren as their grandchildren's contact with their own father, the grandparents' son, diminishes.⁷⁰⁾ Furthermore, compared to never-divorced grandparents, grandparents who were themselves divorced had less contact with their adolescent grandchildren, engaged in fewer shared activities with them,⁷¹⁾ and are less likely to believe that their grandchildren are a valuable part of their lives.⁷²⁾ Divorced paternal grandparents were less likely to play a mentoring role in the life of their grandchildren than divorced maternal grandparents.⁷³⁾

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- ¹²⁾ Valarie King, "Parental Divorce and Interpersonal Trust in Adult Offspring," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64, no.3 (2002): 648.
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²³⁾ This chart draws on a large national sample (16,000) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. This work was done by the author in cooperation with former colleagues at The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C.

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