

The effects of Divorce on Children

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**Introduction**

Divorce has become very common throughout our society. Divorce can be viewed as an Adverse Childhood Experience. Adverse childhood experiences are “traumatic events that occur throughout a child's lifespan between the ages of 0-17 years” (CDC, 2020). This paper will discuss the growing affects the ACE; divorce poses on children. Divorce has a deplorable overall effect on children through its negative influences on the educational attainment, health and mental stability of the child it affects.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, there are 2,236,496 marriages in the U.S. and 787, 251 divorces (CDC, 2017). The average marriage rate is 6.9 per 1,000 total population whereas the divorce rate is 2.9 per 1,000 population (CDC, 2017). It is evident that divorce has become increasingly prevalent within our culture as the divorce rate is nearly half the average marriage rate. Correspondingly, the number of children being affected is rising as well.

Divorce and other adverse childhood experiences have one main thing in common, the copious amount of stress put on the child. This stress that young children are subjected to endure is categorized as toxic stress; a prolonged period of stress (CDC, 2020). Children who are raised facing a higher rate of ACEs have a harder time adjusting into adulthood. This is because these individuals usually lacked guidance and support as a child to know right from wrong. As a result, these individuals face a heightened risk of injuries like sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, sex trafficking, and a wide range of chronic diseases: cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and suicide (CDC, 2020). In this capstone paper, the lenses of the paper will focus on the education and health outcomes encountered by the child by reason of divorce.

### Effects based on Age

Divorce has the greatest effect on children. In a research study, with a sample of over 170 children, young children, less than 5 years old, ages “15, 24, 36 months of age, performed more poorly than children in two parent households at the same age” (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). Depending on the age of the child, divorce has a more substantial affect. Research proposes that “divorce can have detrimental effects on school-age children and adolescents” (Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, Vandell, Owen & Booth, 2000). This research study was exploring the effects of marital separation on children in the first 3 years of life and concludes, when age was controlled amongst the case groups children in two-parent households, did better when tests were run on their social/cognitive abilities, attachment security and behavior opposed to children within a one-parent household (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). Research has concluded that, “younger children are more dependent on their parents and less able to use school activities or peer relationships as an escape from parental conflict” (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin & Kiernan, 1995). As a result, the disturbance of divorce happening within their life, is very affecting as it takes away the sense of security going from two main people in a child’s life to only one.

On the other hand, though younger children are exposed to more trauma and hurt from the divorce of their parents, adolescents; older children do also face some hardships as well. It is thought, that since adolescents become more independent amongst their teen years, they do not face much effect or backlash from the adverse childhood experience of divorce, but this is not true. In fact, a research study on adolescent girls’ states, “girls of early divorce are more likely than girls in nondivorced families to demonstrate more antisocial behavior, depression and withdrawal” (Chase-Lansdale, 1995). During the adolescent years, this is when children are discovering themselves and figuring out who they truly are. Mental health for many children is

heightened and encouraged to be practiced as it's during these years' children need the most help and guidance. As a result, this time in the child's life is very fragile and divorce enforces a threat during this time of self-discovery. In a study analyzing the long-term effects of divorce on the mental health of 17, 414 adolescents, while controlling for economic status, emotional problems and school performance, the study proved different from younger children Adolescents have different outlets that allow them to handle divorce less impactfully than younger children. "Besides family members, adolescents can seek comfort from friends, school, or even afterschool activities" (Chase-Lansdale, 1995) unlike younger children. Following the study, researchers concluded, despite having these outlets that younger children lack, divorce still places a major obstacle to climb within adolescent's life (Chase-Lansdale, 1995) because a parent's position in one's life cannot be replaced by friends or even after school activities. Instead these pose as buffers and distractions from the toxicity of divorce on their life.

### **Effects on the Educational Attainment of the child**

To start, divorce has a negative affect on the educational attainment of children. Research proves, "The educational level of children, living with their separated/divorced mother, is lower than the educational level of children of married parents" (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009). For children facing divorce this increases even more as these children no longer have the ambition to be great or achieve due to the disruption and chaos happening within their homes. Researchers state, "that in all lone parent families there is an over representation of children with only an elementary school diploma" (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009). Unfortunately, due to the rate of divorce happening when children are young, children face the blunt of the divorce by only graduating elementary school.

Correspondingly, following learning the basics of Elementary school, students begin to learn valuable techniques that will aid them throughout life. Elementary education being one's highest education level is awful and divorce being the cause to this makes matters even worse. It is in the schooling after elementary school that children learn how to count to 100, how to multiply and so on. These essential aspects that'll help them through life they are missing out on due to divorce. Being that elementary school diploma is the highest educational attainment, these children then do not have the necessary skills and techniques to flourish and build a career for themselves. Without a highschool diploma many individuals are left with low-paying jobs or become unemployed.

In addition to elementary school for young children affected being the highest level of educational, studies also propose "that the percentage of those living in separated/divorced families who get a diploma higher than that of middle school is clearly lower than that of children living with married parents or with a widowed mother" (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009). Not only do these children suffer by not being able to further succeed in their academics but they also are lacking social & cultural resources and due to the lack of schooling are more prone to having lower quality of socialization and interpersonal skills (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009). In addition to low attainment, this lack in resources and skills may be due to economics as well. In the study on educational attainment for children, when researchers account for the variables of economic conditions, family-size and the educational level and occupation of the parent, "The educational level of the parent and income are positively related to the educational attainment of the child" (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009). Therefore, children whose parents are experiencing poverty or in a low social class, are more likely than those of married children or children whose parent are in a higher social class to perform as high in academics. Subsequently, these children

not only miss out of furthering their education but also various resources one learns and obtains throughout their schooling to help them become successful.

Children who face divorce in highschool are then subjected to the “push-out, pull-out, and fall-out theories” (Saphara, Estell, Doran & Waldron, 2016). The push-out theory suggest students may be “pushed out” of school due to low academic progress, behavioral issues discipline actions for low attendance or misbehavior. Children may be “pulled out” due to reasons that would take their attention away from schooling like tragic familial events leaving them to drop out to focus on those events. The fall-out theory suggests “many children show poor academic progress due to a lack of personal and educational support, including a lack of support from parents, teachers and peers, which also increases risk of dropout” (Saphara, Estell, Doran & Waldron, 2016). Many of these theories, especially the fall-out theory, explains the negative effect placed on the child’s educational attainment due to divorce. High school students facing divorce are ranked more likely to be “held back, earn lower grades in core courses (i.e., reading, math, science), and have lower overall GPAs” (Saphara et al., 2016). Due to the children facing this traumatic experience their attainment levels begin to drop and they lose that motivation they once had. These repercussions students face begin to slowly affect them in the long run where their low GPAs affect their ability to get into their intended college of choice or even college alone. Consequently, the educational drive that the children had while their parents were married is now gone due to the stressor of divorce, resulting in forward progression and achievement to no longer be their top priority.

Educational attainment for children facing divorce is also stunted due to children having to grow up faster than expected and take on adult roles. Some of these adult roles are due to the economic decline for the single parent. For instance, due to the divorce financially the parents

begin to struggle placing a strain on the child to support the single parent they live with. It is statistically proven that a switch from a “two-parent to a single-parent household is typically associated with a decrease in household income where children have significantly fewer financial resources compared to children raised in intact, two-parent households” (Saphara et al., 2016). Older children in highschool take it upon themselves to work in hopes of assisting the single parent with finances and expenses. As a result of this, they fall victim to the pull-out theory as the tragic event of divorce leads them to be a school dropout. Furthermore, another adult role these children might take on is teenage pregnancy. Due to the lack of educational attainment and inability to be at school these children turn to making wrong decisions. While the child could be in school, they instead are with other friends/individuals who can impact them negatively into making these decisions. Being that the child has more time on their hand, this increases the likelihood of them having children at a young age. When this occurs, the child now has taken on another responsibility of being a parent, thus causing them to drop out of school to care for their own child (Saphara et al., 2016).

Furthermore, educational attainment for children is affected negatively following a divorce because the single parent can no longer provide their full attention to the child due to increased responsibilities. Due to the parents coming home late in the day from work, having to cook for the child, clean the house and more the single parents load gets busier and the child cannot receive the parental support they need/deserve. Studies state, “regarding schoolwork, single parents provide reduced support with class assignments and are less involved with other school-related activities compared to married parents” (Saphara et al., 2016). When this occurs, the child becomes less motivated to continue to thrive in school being that they don’t have the support of continued guidance from their parent. While children are in school, parents being

engaged and monitoring the child's performance, motivates and encourages the child to continue forward and do well since they notice the moral support they have. Therefore, divorce presents a significant disadvantage to the educational attainment for children as the parents are less likely to be fully involved in the children's life, leading to a drop-in attainment and educational execution.

### **Effects on the Health of the child**

On the other hand, despite negatively affecting educational attainment divorce also affects the health of children as well. Statistics state, "fewer children in nuclear families were considered to be in poor health than children in non-nuclear families" (Anderson, 2014). This can be backed as children of divorce parents tend to face more health issues due to the strain and negative impact the divorce has on the child. For instance, children facing divorce are at an increased risk of experiencing colds as adults (HealthDay, 2017). A recent study analyzing 200 healthy adults exposed to common cold virus compared to those parents who were divorced showed to be three times more likely to develop a cold opposed to those whose parents remained together during their childhood. (HealthDay, 2017) "Early life stressful experiences do something to our physiology and inflammatory processes that increase risk for poorer health and chronic illness" (HealthDay, 2017). Due to the increase need for children to adapt to traumatic experience, this causes a decrease and weakening of their immune system due to heightened inflammation (HealthDay, 2017) from the ongoing stress in response to viral infections like upper respiratory illness'.

Due to the increased risk of parents facing divorce to turn to unhealthy lifestyles like drinking and smoking. These unhealthy lifestyles the parents take on have a substantial effect to the child's health and wellbeing. For instance, these children face an increased risk of asthma-related emergencies, and contract cancer of "the upper aerodigestive tract, the esophagus, anus,



pancreas, lungs, and cervix” (marripedia, n.d.) these are all either “tobacco-related, alcohol-related and sex-related illness’ (marripedia, n.d.) due to the parent’s negligence. As a result of this, these illness’ lead the child to a heightened increase to their mortality at 44% and a lifespan shortage to about 4.5 years compared to children not facing the retaliation of divorce (marripedia, n.d.).

### **Effects on the Mental Health of the child**

Lastly, divorce’s negative affect on the mental health of the child is also seen throughout studies. In terms of the child’s behavior following the divorce, statistics state, “children from divorced families had significantly more behavior problems than peers from intact families, and these problems were evident immediately after the separation and later on, in early and middle adolescence” (Weaver & Schofield, 2015). Being that such a tragic event has happened to the children, they are more likely to take their anger and aggression out on others around them/ cause behavioral issues within their life. As a result, following the divorce children are more likely to have increased negative behavior. They turn to this negative behavior as an outlet from the adverse childhood experience occurring in their life. This same behavior continues into children’s adult years as, in comparison to students from intact families, college students from divorced families are more likely to perform aggressive and physically violent actions or behaviors in response to conflict with peers (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

Due to the divorce, less attention, love and awareness is given to the child, inevitably punishing the child. Because of this, “these children are more likely to perceive their social milieu as unpredictable and uncontrollable” (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). When this happens, they engage in more negative activity like stealing from other children or fighting during school. Statistics prove, children facing divorce opposed to intact marriage children are more likely to

commit crimes such as “hurting someone enough to need a doctor, gotten drunk under the legal age, damaged school property and more” (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). All of these behaviors and more stem due to the lack of guidance and instilling of good behavior by the parents. But since the parents are dealing with the crisis of divorce at hand, and have less time to dedicate to their children, they turn to these bad behaviors. In turn, doing these negative behaviors causing many of the children to end up getting into legal trouble or trouble within their school. For instance, studies report, “youngsters whose parents’ divorce before the children are 6 or 7 years of age are more likely to display behavior and achievement problems in middle childhood and early adolescence than those whose parents’ divorce after the children have started primary school” (Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993). This then affects their life trajectory for instance, for those who have trouble with the law they may receive jail time depending on the negative behavior they commit or may even be less likely to receive a job offer due to their actions. As a result, this cycle of deviance continues for the child due to the lack of being taught right from wrong.

Lastly, not only has divorce affected the mental health of children through its increase on negative behavior for children but also its effect on the child’s psychological processing. Due to parents experiencing less energy and greater stress they devote less time to their children (Weaver & Schofield, 2015). As a result of this, children face increased mental health difficulties since they are not receiving the same attention they were once able to receive. Children look forward to sensitive care including, playing and affection when they are at younger ages as a way to further grow and help in reducing anxieties and fears (Weaver & Schofield, 2015). Divorce takes this away from children as it takes the parent away from giving the child their time and devotion. In addition, the environment in the home of a divorced family may be less supportive of children’s growth and further enrichment. Research states, “this is due to because parents are

distracted and distressed and unable to provide the same level of cognitive and social stimulation” (Weaver & Schofield, 2015). The involvement and presence of both parents within a household is much more valuable and sustainable within a child’s life for the child’s mental stability and wellness.

Additionally, these psychological adverse effects of divorce on children lasts a long time even throughout the child’s development into their adulthood. Studies states, “more than a decade after their parents’ breakup, many children of divorce are still troubled by the marital failure and fear that their own attempts to establish lasting, intimate relationships will end as disastrously as those of their parents” (EBSCO, 1989). Evidence based research has proved that depending on the gender of the child, their negative psychological effects may vary. For example, many research studies prove that boys tend to handle negative events with aggression and violence whereas girls take the blunt of the event and in turn face mental consequences. In the article, “*Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce on Parent-Child Relationships, Adjustment, and Achievement in Young Adulthood*” the author states, “boys and girls tend to show different kinds of reactions to parental divorce. Boys are more likely to respond with conduct problems and acting out at home and in school, whereas girls are more likely to respond with depression and “overcontrolled” behavior” (Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993). Despite these changes in reaction based on gender it is still important to note its due to divorce why the children are having these mental effects that are affecting their overall growth through these adjustment difficulties.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that the adverse childhood experience of divorce initiates many rippling negative effects throughout the child’s life like reducing educational attainment, increasing health risk and mental instability. Not only do these negative effects of divorce end at

childhood, but it also perpetuates to the child's adulthood. The child's actions of escalating conflict, lack of communication and shouting/ being physically abusive continues. Thus, the likelihood of divorce for the child when they are older is "transmitted across generations" (Fagan & Churchill, 2012) creating a continuous cycle for those affected.

There are current policies and organizations in place to reduce the harm placed upon the child's life. Rainbows for All Children is an organization with the mission of helping children affected by a loss. They have main objectives such as; helping children develop and strengthen problem-solving skills, improve school attendance, alleviate depression, improve communication and more (rainbows, n.d.). Similar to the main goal of the organization of spreading awareness of the ACE this can bring about the needed change and implementation in order to reduce the negative harm placed on children. Furthermore, this organization pushes for the "reducing the likelihood of destructive behavior such as involvement with gangs, alcohol and substance abuse" (rainbows, n.d.). This stance taken by the organization is an effective way providing a positive support group with the intent to deviate from the negatives placed on the child following divorce.

Moreover, the Parents Without Partners, Inc., is another social movement established to help those children and parents affected by divorce as well. This organization, similar to Rainbows for All Children, this organization is also hands-on and "conducts comprehensive, varied programs of educational, adult-social and family activities" (PWP, 2014). This organization provides to parents facing divorce a support group and "practical services to make significant contributions to post-divorce adjustments" (PWP, 2014). Like these organizations it is essential to be the change and implement the changes. These changes ranging from educating, support groups, building up the importance of this adverse childhood experience and more.

A divorce is a hard event for anyone to get over, especially children. Therefore, I believe it is important to educate others on its impact on children in order to spread awareness and decrease its negative consequences. Educating parents of their actions aid in reducing the prevalence of divorce as more and more parents are made aware of the negative effects that the child endures due to the inability of the parents to stay together. As a result, in addition to having programs like Rainbows for All Children and Parents Without Partners Inc., for the children. I think it is also imperative to have programs for adults to educate them on the negative effects ahead of time to reduce the risk of divorce happening. In addition, there should be more programs for parents following the divorce to help them in adjusting to this new lifestyle and still manage their roles a parent by helping them to still be present and engaged throughout the child's life.

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