ENCYCLOPEDIA
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Development

Consequences of Separation/Divorce for Children

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Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed dramatic changes in family life in all industrial countries.[1] The increase in the divorce rate in the second half of the 20th century was striking; in fact, the divorce rate more than doubled in most Westernized countries from 1960 to 1980.[2] The increase in divorces has been particularly consequential for children, as millions of them have experienced parental divorce. Moreover, recent increases in non-marital births, driven largely by rising rates of childbearing among cohabiting couples, have also resulted in a greater number of children experiencing the separation of their never-married parents.[3] Because cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages, many children who are born into these unions also will experience the dissolution of their parents' union when the cohabiting relationships end.[4]

Subject

Numerous studies have found that parental separation and divorce is associated with a range of negative outcomes for younger children and adolescents across various domains.[5-7] Parental

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separation/divorce is associated with academic difficulties, including lower grades and prematurely dropping out of school, and greater disruptive behaviours (e.g., being oppositional with authority figures, getting into fights, stealing, and using and abusing alcohol and illegal drugs). Children and adolescents who experience the divorce of their parents also have higher rates of depressed mood, lower self-esteem, and emotional distress.

Parental divorce is also associated with negative outcomes and earlier life transitions as offspring enter young adulthood and later life. Children of divorce are more likely to experience poverty, educational failure, early and risky sexual activity, non-marital childbirth, earlier marriage, cohabitation, marital discord and divorce. In fact, emotional problems associated with divorce actually increase during young adulthood.[8] Understanding the magnitude of these problems and the causal mechanisms through which divorce influences these behaviours, therefore, has important social consequences.

Problems

First, research needs to specifically identify the magnitude of the effects of divorce because so many other risk factors frequently co-occur with parental separation. So, the question is how large are the differences between offspring who do and do not experience parental separation? Second, it is difficult to examine the causal effects of parental separation/divorce on offspring adjustment because researchers cannot use random assignment. As such, researchers must consider and test both causal and non-causal mechanisms that could explain why parental separation/divorce is associated with problems across numerous areas of functioning.

Research Context

Research on parental separation/divorce is now using more representative samples, utilizing stronger research designs to test competing theories, including measurements of offspring functioning before and after the separation, and better assessing of multiple domains of functioning.[5,9] These advances are enabling researchers to answer questions that are important for public policy.[10-11]

Key Research Questions

Three research questions will be addressed here:

1. What is the magnitude of the effects associated with parental separation?

2. Are the associations between parental separation/divorce and offspring functioning causally related to the experience of marital transitions or due to factors that both increase marital disruptions and offspring functioning?
3. To which extent are the associations causal and what are the specific environmental factors that mediate (or explain) the associations?

Recent Research Results

Parental separation/divorce is associated with approximately a one-and-half to two-fold increase in the risk for impairing outcomes in the offspring, such as dropping out of school or experiencing their own divorce.[12] Yet, a majority of offspring who have experienced a parental separation do not experience these serious outcomes. The magnitude of the effects are typically described as small to medium by social science researchers,[13] meaning that parental separation is associated with increased risk but parental separation/divorce is not the largest or most important risk factor when considered by itself. It is important to note, however, that many offspring of separated/divorced parents experience many distressing thoughts and emotions, regardless of whether they have diagnosable problems.[14] A recent meta-analysis, a study that combines numerous studies on a topic, also has found that the differences between offspring who have and who have not experienced parental divorce have increased since the 1980s.[15]

There are two main and competing explanations for the increase in problems seen among children of divorce. The first, the causal hypothesis, suggests that divorce itself harms children and causes their subsequent problems. In contrast, the selection hypothesis emphasizes that divorced parents are different from those who do not divorce and that these differences lead both to divorce and to later adjustment problems in the children. Research studies have used numerous designs to test the causal and selection factors. For example, genetically-informed approaches,[16-21] studies that help rule out genetic and environmental selection factors, and longitudinal studies with measures of offspring functioning before and after the separation[8,22-23] suggest that risk factors specifically associated with parental separation/divorce are responsible for most of the increased risk of psychological, academic and social impairments.[5-6]

Recent research has focused on identifying the family processes that specifically account for (or mediate) the association between parental divorce and offspring impairment. The research has highlighted the role of ongoing (or perhaps increased) parental conflict after the divorce, poorer parenting before and after the separation, subsequent economic stressors, lack of contact and

meaningful parent-child interactions with the nonresidential parent, and increased residential mobility.[5-7,24] The research suggests that these family processes account for most of the increased risk associated with parental divorce. There is strong support that targeting these processes will consequently reduce the problems seen in offspring of separated/divorced parents.

Research Gaps

Future research needs to examine the causes and consequences of multiple family transitions,[9] especially into and out of the ambiguous status of not married but not divorced.[5] More research is necessary to understand the diversity in responses (heterogeneity) to parental separation/divorce.[5-6] For example, are such transitions worse for families from lower socioeconomic levels, where separations and divorce are more prevalent?[25] Also, what risk and protective factors, including child-specific factors, are important? Furthermore, there are enormous gaps in the research on interventions for divorcing/separating couples.[26] An important next step for the field is to translate the enormous amount of social science research on the causes and consequence of divorce into empirically supported interventions that reduce the psychological, academic and social impairments associated with parental separation. More rigorous research, especially studies that randomly assign families to different interventions, is absolutely essential.[27]

Conclusions

Parental separation/divorce is associated with increased risk for numerous psychological, academic and social problems throughout the life-course. Experiencing parental separation is associated with roughly a two-fold increase on average, but an overwhelming majority of children and adolescents do not exhibit impairing problems after parental separations. In other words, recent research highlights an increased risk for negative outcomes but parental divorce separation does not necessarily doom a child to have major, impairing problems. Children and adolescents who experience parental divorce, however, frequently experience great emotional distress during the separation and afterward. Recent research that uses numerous designs to test the underlying causal mechanisms suggests that the increased risk for impairing problems is not due solely to selection factors (risks that increase both parental separation and problems in the offspring). Rather, ongoing conflicts between the co-parents after the separation, problems with poor parenting, financial difficulties resulting from the separation, and loss of contact with the non-residential parent help explain the association between parental divorce and offspring

functioning.

Implications

Policymakers, scholars and professionals are currently engaged in a debate about the importance of marriage and the consequences of divorce. Many researchers and commentators point to the “small” effects found in studies of divorce and the fact that an overwhelming majority of people from divorced families do not have significant or diagnosable problems. Other professionals have pointed out that small effects, when multiplied by the millions of people who experience parental separation/divorce, constitute a very serious public health problem.

Debates about how to improve the lives of children frequently propose initiatives that focus either on (a) cultural and legal policies to strengthen marriage or (b) programs that focus on economic, social and psychological resources to improve the lives of families. A strict dichotomy, however, fails to recognize that family structure, family processes and contextual factors influence and interact with each other. Families are more likely to flourish in environments where marriage is strong and where families have access to the material, social and psychological resources they need. Thus, public policy reforms should take a comprehensive approach toward reducing the risks in children’s lives, including parental separation/divorce.

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