ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Divorce and Separation: Comments on D'Onofrio, Vélez, Wolchik and Sandler, and Pedro-Carroll

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November 2011

Introduction

The three review papers in this section highlight important themes that have emerged from several decades of research on children whose parents divorce. By extension, we assume that these findings may also apply to children of unmarried parents who separate, although there is little research on this group of children. D'Onofrio's careful synthesis of the research indicates that divorce is associated with significantly higher rates of child adjustment problems that often continue into young adulthood, but that only a minority of children affected by divorce show problems that would warrant diagnosis or treatment. D'Onofrio, Vélez et al., and Pedro-Carroll all emphasize that children's experiences in the family, rather than divorce per se, may be most helpful for understanding the variations in child adjustment after divorce. Key examples are children's exposure to interparental conflict before and after divorce, and lower economic standing and disruptions in parenting associated with the transition to a single parent household.

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Finally, Vélez et al. and Pedro-Carroll review promising evidence that research-based prevention programs and parenting programs can promote better adjustment in children affected by divorce, with benefits seen in socioemotional, behavioural and academic outcomes. Unfortunately, as Vélez et al. point out, these programs reach relatively few children.

Research and Conclusions

The authors' conclusions are sound, as are their recommendations for continued research and for research-based prevention programs for children affected by divorce. With these shared perspectives in mind, we will highlight several themes that emerged in this set of review papers. These themes, some of which are represented in these authors' general work, provide an opportunity to examine current challenges in the field and to consider avenues for future research and practice.

A central issue concerns the conceptualization of risk, especially as it is translated into applied work. Here it is helpful to distinguish risk and protective factors on the one hand, and risk and protective processes on the other.[1] Risk and protective factors do not lead directly to certain outcomes, but they tend to increase or decrease the child's chances of showing problems. Risk and protective processes, on the other hand, are causally related to child outcomes; these processes explain why some children fare better than others in the face of adversity. Pedro-Carroll and Vélez et al. describe several interventions designed to reduce modifiable risk factors such as a chaotic home environment, or to increase modifiable protective factors such as general coping skills, as a way to promote better child adjustment during the divorce transition. They also point to intervention programs that have targeted risk processes such as divorce-related disruptions in discipline, disruptions in parent-child relationships during the divorce process and children's attributions about the divorce.

The terms "risk factor" and "risk process" are used inconsistently in the literature, and the problem is compounded because similar constructs can legitimately be conceptualized as a risk factor as well as a risk process. For example, a longstanding pattern of inconsistent parenting might be a risk factor to the extent that it can exacerbate the effect of divorce on children, but inconsistent parenting related to the divorce transition might also be a risk process that explains the association between divorce and certain child outcomes. Similarly, ineffective coping might act as a risk factor, but the child's methods of coping with the divorce in particular may constitute a risk process that would explain divorce-related outcomes. Hypothetically, changing

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either a risk factor or a risk process might produce better outcomes in children affected by divorce, although interventions focused on risk processes may be preferable given that these processes are thought to have a direct causal link with child adjustment.[2] Risk factors and risk processes also interact in complex ways. Careful articulation of the intervention model would promote the design of more efficient and effective interventions over time, and would allow further tests of the conceptual models on which they were based.[1]

A second issue concerns the benefits of having a conceptual framework or theory to guide the design and interpretation of empirical work. Notably, interventions for children of divorce that have the strongest empirical support are also based on clearly stated conceptual models. Models of stress and coping[3] and of effective parenting[4] have provided the basis for interventions targeting key factors and processes that have received empirical support in the literature. These include children's appraisals of conflict and divorce, children's coping strategies and coping efficacy, and mothers' support, discipline and monitoring. The emotional security model[5] also has potential as the basis for interventions for children affected by divorce. This model holds that interparental conflict creates emotional distress– reflected in part in the child's emotion dysregulation, attempts to regulate the parents' conflict, and fears about the family's future– that in turn predicts children's adjustment problems. This model informed a successful parent education program designed to improve marital conflict in a community sample.[6]

Implications for Development and Policy

The articles in this section all convey, either implicitly or explicitly, the idea that research findings can and should be translated into interventions that serve children's psychological needs, although they also note the need for economic solutions as well. At this point, the field faces a dilemma: should we continue to conduct small-scale efficacy studies, or is it time to move on to effectiveness studies based on what we know to date? The fact that the three papers in this section show agreement on many key points suggests that there may be enough evidence to justify moving ahead to more widely disseminated interventions. Whether population-based or focused on the subset of families most in need of help, these interventions need to be brief and implemented in community settings (see Vélez et al.).

The most well evaluated intervention programs in this area (some child-focused, some parent-focused), reviewed by Vélez et al., and the parenting programs reviewed by Pedro-Carroll, are multiple-session programs that address a relatively large number of topics. Some of the topics

are generic in the sense that they might be included in any parenting program or program for at-risk youth. Examples of these general topics include authoritative parenting, general stress reduction and positive relationships with extended family. Similarly, the targeted outcomes– such as improved self-esteem, fewer classroom problems and lower internalizing and externalizing– are common goals in a wide range of interventions, not just those for children affected by divorce. As we move toward briefer interventions, there may be a need to focus on divorce-specific topics such as the relationship between the child and non-custodial parent; interparental conflict after the divorce; and co-parenting and children's stress surrounding transitions between two households (see Pedro-Carroll). Outcome measures would also need to be more closely tied to the child's adjustment to divorce, such as children's divorce-related perceptions (see Vélez et al.).

Pedro-Carroll notes the value of working with the legal system, and indeed, working with the courts may be the key to large-scale dissemination of interventions for children affected by divorce. Three examples illustrate the potential of this kind of coordination. First, most jurisdictions require that parents involved in custody disputes take a parenting class that would typically provide education about the effects of conflict on children, parenting and co-parenting, and legal procedures for dispute resolution.[7] One avenue to reaching many families would be to implement a brief research-based intervention in the context of these required programs. Second, practitioners might develop programs that target the most contentious cases, and seek collaboration with local magistrates who could require or recommend that certain parents attend the program.[8] Third, researchers and practitioners have a role to play in shaping policy (see Emery[9]), by making research-based information available to state law makers who determine mandates related to mediation, parenting classes, parenting plans and default visitation schedules.

Research-based programs have focused almost entirely on children of married parents who divorce, and this excludes a large number of children who are affected by the dissolution of their parents' relationship. Unmarried partners include couples who live together but choose not to marry; couples who cannot marry legally, such as gay and lesbian couples in many areas of the United States; and brief romantic partners who do not maintain their relationship (see D'Onofrio). We would expect that interventions for children affected by divorce would also be helpful to children affected by these other forms of relationship dissolution. At the same time, programs that provide information to parents about legal issues would need to be up to date

regarding legal procedures that apply to unmarried couples. In many jurisdictions, custody disputes between divorced partners and custody disputes between unmarried partners are handled in different courts, and the legal requirements (e.g., for mediation) may differ for the two groups of parents.

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