

Divorced Fathers: Implications and Consequences for Children and Families

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Abstract

Divorce can have a significant impact on children. In the United States, following a divorce, only 31% of fathers have weekly contact with their children. Moreover, with more than one million families impacted annually, the implications are profound. Unfortunately, while the role of mothers is often cited in the literature too few school psychologists are aware of the issues involving fathers. From lowered grade point averages to impaired social relationships decreased parental involvement by fathers following a divorce can have significant impacts. This paper provides a thorough look at the literature on fathers, provides a case analysis, and generally examines the issues.

Keywords: Divorced fathers, family

In a fundamental way, the form and function of modern families is changing. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2013) observed, for example, that we can no longer speak of a typical, stereotypical, American family. Crespi and Uscilla (2014) noted that families overall are experiencing profound changes in structure with children commonly experiencing an array of structures ranging from shared custody to single parents. Summarily, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) noted that 3.3 marriages in 1000 experience divorce, impacting more than 1 million families annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011, 2009).

Divorce, then, can have a profound impact on children. More specific to this paper, Nielsen (2011a) noted that 80% of children see their fathers 10% to 15% of the time following a divorce. Elsewhere, Amato, Meyers, and Emery (2009) suggest of “nonresidential fathers”, those who no longer live with their children, only 78% contact their children within the first 2-3 years following the divorce and only 31% of fathers have weekly contact with their children.

Sadly, the consequences of divorce - and decreased paternal contact - effects children in multiple negative ways. Fundamentally, Ryan and Claessens (2013) observed that children are highly dependent and impacted by changes in family structure. Academically, for instance, Oxford and Lee (2011) indicated that changes in family structure can impact school performance. Psychologically, Current Strohschein (2005) suggested that children of divorce exhibit more mental health problems when compared to children whose parents remain married.

Fundamentally, there are notable consequences of divorce on children’s emotional well being and academic performance. Cooper, Osborne, Beck, and McLanahan (2011) suggested that changes in families, such as divorce have increased the exposure of children to parental relational instability, which carries untoward consequences, including impacts on academic performance. In fact, Vennum and Vennum (2012) indicated that a virtual national health crisis faces children and suggest that Marriage and Family Therapists are in a critical position to offer school-based assistance. In fact, though, Smith (2013) noted that Connecticut is the sole state to specifically offer a State Department of Education credential for school marriage and family therapy, leaving an important area for needed services (personal communication, American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, October 28, 2013). Unfortunately, then, the impact of divorce, and the implications of decreased involvement by fathers, remains a critical area of need. This paper explores key issues impacting families,

examines issues relative to fathers, and highlights implications and possible interventions. Of particular note, a single case study is also included.

Divorce and Children's Mental Health

Changes in family structure can dramatically impact children's mental health. Ryan and Claessens (2013) noted, for instance, that children are highly dependent and impacted by changes in the family. Looking at the effect of divorce on the mental health of children, Strohschein (2005) explored the different mental health trajectories of children whose parents remained intact and married compared to those children whose parents divorced. The results revealed that levels of anxiety, depression and antisocial behavior were higher for children whose parents were divorced. In fact, it was revealed that children who come from divorced homes experience a sense of instability, demonstrating increased levels of anxiety and depression as a way they have learned to cope with the stress of divorce.

The author also noted an initial difference, before divorce, between children whose parents' marriage ended in divorce and those whose parents remained married. It is critical to note, children whose parents eventually divorced also came from families with little access to adequate mental health resources. It is possible, then, that families which experience divorce function in different ways than more stable families, and it is also possible that these adults are intentionally or unintentionally projecting feelings of dissatisfaction onto the children resulting in increase levels of anxiety and depression.

Looking at fathers, having a father present in the life of a child significantly effects the well-being of children as well as their mental health (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Aquilino, 2006; Averdijk, Malti, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2012; Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011). Nielson (2011b), for example, in a critical review of existing research, found that children living with a mother who did not encourage a relationship with the father led to a significant difference in the child's wellbeing. In point of fact, the consequences of decreased father's involvement are not new. More than 23 years ago, Amato (1991) explored the consequence of parental absence during childhood, noting that any type of parental absence lowers standard of living, and knowing that losing a parent denies children a critical source of direction and guidance, the author suggests that the loss of one parent exposes children to numerous stressful outcomes. When experiencing a separation from a parent during childhood, the greatest effects were seen in the levels of depression. Notably, the results found that for African

American children, growing up without a parent increases the risk that these children will become involved in multiple negative activities ranging from drug use to delinquency.

In contrast, and most powerfully, active paternal involvement demonstrated multiple positive outcomes including higher levels of academic achievement (Jones, 2004) as well as lower levels of depression (Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013).

It is evident, then, that there are multiple dimensions impacting children of divorce. Of particular interest is the post-divorce relationship of parents and the effects on children. Baxter et al. (2011) investigated relational factors following divorce and the consequences for children. The authors found, despite having contact with their fathers, children whose parents had a hostile relationship experienced more negative affects when compared to peers whose parents had a non-hostile relationship. However, children with no paternal contact experienced fewer negative effects, when compared to those who were in contact with their parents with a hostile relationship. Truly, the relationship that parents share has a significant influence on their children's wellbeing!

Vanassche et al. (2013) discovered parental conflict is positively correlated to feelings of depression and negatively to life satisfaction. It is unfortunate to note, children who have little to no contact with their fathers are considered "better off" than those children who remained in contact with their fathers but whose parents were hostile to one another. Despite that, engaging parental relationships act as a protective factor for a child's mental health when parents have a low conflict relationship. In fact, though, although a father-child relationship promotes greater emotional wellbeing for a child, the interpersonal relationship that parents have with one another then has a direct link to this outcome.

Still, in truth many factors can influence the relationship between a father and child following the divorce and impact children. Aquilino (2006) wondered if continuing paternal contact would increase the likelihood that the father and child would remain connected. While 59% of children in the sample reported contact with their fathers at least monthly, with the remainder experiencing less than monthly or no contact, only one in five stated they would talk to their fathers if they felt depressed. Nearly two-thirds did not feel as though they could talk to their fathers. Put simply, two-thirds of the sample reported a weak or no relationship with their fathers despite contact.

Contact, then, is not the only factor to influence the father-child relationship. Time and investment also seems critical. Finley and Schwartz (2007) found that short visits are less

likely to benefit children. Since the majority of children see their fathers less than 22% of the time following a divorce (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008), the vast majority of children are left with unmet desires for paternal involvement that remain prominent for years. Of note, the authors also reported that less than 10% of children are placed in the sole custody of their fathers following divorce. Overall, their data indicates that young adults from divorced families perceive their fathers to be less involved and nurturing to them as children.

As adults, the consequences are salient. Adults from intact families report their current contact with their fathers as more than two times as frequent as those from divorced families. Finley and Schwartz (2007) also highlight the importance of “instrumental fathering” in monitoring schoolwork, providing income, and providing discipline. In their sample of 1,989 young adults, 69.7% of males and 74.3% of females from divorced families wished for more “instrumental fathering” when compared to peers from intact families.

In short, contact between a father and child is critical to the maintenance of a father-child relationship. At the same time, face-to-face contact alone does not mitigate the best outcomes. In addition to frequent physical presence, a father must engage in parenting that provides discipline and structure along with support, mentoring and guidance. Without frequent and deliberate contact, long-term relationship with children falters.

Fathers, Sons, and Daughters

While divorce and comorbid father distancing can create a negative outcome little has been researched on the impacts relative to sons versus daughters. This in hand, Mitchell, Booth and King (2009) examined this issue. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, greater benefits were reported for increased father involvements for boys than girls. In fact, even when time was comparable, there were areas, including playing sports and watching movies, which offered more opportunities for interaction between the fathers and sons. Further, there was a significant difference in how close sons and daughters reported feeling toward nonresident fathers. Specifically, daughters experiencing a positive relationship experience a sense of stability and security that can continue into adulthood and which can mitigate depressive symptoms, negative life outlook and low self-esteem.

Elsewhere Peters and Ehrenberg (2008) note young adult females from divorced parents, living away from home, report higher levels of involved and affective fathering. This reinforces the notion that having an involved nonresident father is a protective factor. Interestingly, Troilo and Coleman (2012) found that men described themselves as a “good

father” despite the vast range of perceptions of their relationships with their children. Likewise, DeGarmo (2010) found a positive correlation between father identity and positive, salient father-child contact. The author also noted that father identity was an important predictor of the days per month, overnights per month and the number of father-child activities reported following a divorce.

Given that many children see their fathers in accordance with a visitation schedule, changes in relationships are expected. Troilo and Coleman (2013) noted geographic location and the relationship shared with the former wife had the most influence on motivation and ability to remain in contact with children. Likewise, a hostile interpersonal relationship between parents can have negative consequences in terms of a child’s wellbeing (Baxter et al. 2011).

Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that parents in a highly conflictual relationship communicate infrequently, often following legal visitations strictly. Since contact with nonresident fathers is not sufficient to promote positive wellbeing for children it is important to underscore that conflictual parent interactions following a divorce can negatively impact father-child relationships. Yet, Troilo and Coleman (2013) found that despite significant negative consequences of advocating for interactions following a conflictual divorce 70% of fathers felt they had the ability to reframe obstacles and remain an involved father. This data noted that a sample in this group, 14 fathers, felt they were able to identify their children as their first priority, and were able to reframe their own needs in order to remain an active part in their children’s lives. Fundamentally, maintaining an involved father identity assists in creating salient father-child relationships following a divorce. Further, men who hold the father identity central in their lives are more likely to have increased motivation and contact to be a fundamental part of their child’s life.

In a basic way, then, it is evident that having a father present in a child’s life has a significant positive impact years following a divorce (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Aquilino, 2006; Averdijk et al., 2012; Baxter et al., 2011). Truly, a father has a number of different roles in a child’s life and the way a role is carried out impacts their mental health and academic trajectory. For professionals, such as school psychologists and clinical psychologists, it is important to understand the complex implications that an absent father has on a child’s academic and social trajectory.

Clearly, considerable research has been conducted exploring the connection between the father-child relationship following divorce and the implications for children’s mental

health and wellbeing. In addition, though, there are academic implications. Jones (2004) found boys with nonresident fathers scored lower on an academic success scale when compared to their peers with resident fathers. The authors highlight the importance of a dependent father-son relationship on the sample's academic outcome.

King and Sobolewski (2006) found children with a positive father-child relationship also received higher grades, suggesting a significant difference between children with this relationship and those without. By providing these children with the resources they need immediately, they will be able to create their own coping strategies that they can apply to a number of different situations.

Education and Training in Marriage and Family Therapy

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), founded in 1942, is the premier organization for the practice and profession of marriage and family therapy. Given this stature, while many readers might not have an interest in AAMFT Membership nor credentialing, the standards are depicted as a template for discussing education and training, which can have applicability for the Certified School Psychologist, Licensed Psychologist, or various Psychotherapists working actively with children, adolescents, and families.

Given the issues discussed, education and training in family therapy can be important. This in hand, AAMFT offers varying membership levels, each requiring specific standards for education and training. Members noted as a "Clinical Fellow" have met one of two tracks to become an AAMFT Clinical Fellow. The first path, the licensure track, is designed for individuals submitting proof of current licensing or certification as a marriage and family therapist. The second path is an evaluative path for individuals with degrees and credentials in a profession other than MFT.

- 1) A qualifying graduate degree from a regionally accredited institution.
- 2) Completion of 11 specific courses in 5 topic areas:
 - a. Marriage & Family Studies
 - b. Marriage & Family Therapy
 - c. Human Development
 - d. Research Methods
 - e. Professional Ethics
- 3) Supervised client practicum hours.

- 4) Two years of Post degree experience involving 1000 client contact hours with 200 hours of concurrent supervision from an AAMFT Approved Supervisor or someone deemed equivalent. One hundred hours must be individual.

Professionally, clinicians trained to offer marriage and family therapy services can be trained in both the practice and/or profession of marriage and family therapy. The distinction is notable as a Licensed Counseling Psychologist, as example, may offer marriage and family therapy services while not necessarily trained in the profession of marriage and family therapy. For school counselors or school psychologists this training route, without qualifying degrees, may be appealing as a program of continuing education. Clinical supervision may be a viable route for skill acquisition while others might pursue credentialing as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. In either case, the AAMFT Standards offer an engaging template to examine in developing an educational plan. At the same time, given that AAMFT's Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) has been recognized by the United States Department of Education as the national accrediting body for marriage and family therapy education, these standards represent an important point of discussion in planning a continuing education program.

Sophia: A Child of Divorce

Sophia was 13 years old when she learned her parents were filing for a divorce. Her younger brother Joel was 10 years of age. For Sophia, a Freshman in high school, the news seemed devastating. Would they have to move? Where was her father going to live? On learning the news she promptly called her best friend and broke down in tears.

Tragically, such news is increasingly common. In this case Sophia's parents were married 14 years at the time of the divorce, having met in college, and marrying shortly after graduation. The mother was employed as an elementary school teacher: The father was an engineer. Quite rare, the father purchased a condominium approximately 5 miles from the family's home. Still, weeks after learning the news, Sophia was shocked to meet Dad's new girlfriend. Had he "cheated" on her mother? Who was this woman? What should she call her?

As the divorce progressed, Sophia's grades declined, she lost weight, she often looked lost in thought, and she developed a nervous laugh. She also began staying out late, and increasingly would respond to her mother with bursts of anger. While her father had explained he would see her each weekend she found the relationship confusing. In fact, when his girlfriend suggested they go shopping together she seemed more irritated.

The mother finally called the school and was connected with the school psychologist. When the school psychologist called Sophia to her office, Sophia appeared withdrawn. Equally noteworthy, the school psychologist lacked training in family systems theory, and although trained in individual and group counseling, was not trained in family therapy. What this suggests, is that the case was beyond her areas of competence.

What would you do? Most clearly, families are experiencing structural changes. Sophia, like many children, became one of 21.8 million children being raised by 13.7 million single parents. Given the dynamics it was not surprising she was struggling. Unknown to many readers, perhaps, marriage and family therapists are actively working in schools. Smith (2013) has noted (personal communication, American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, October 28, 2013) that while Connecticut is the sole state to offer a State Department of Education credential for school marriage and family therapy, four other states have passed laws that allow LMFT's to work in the schools (New Mexico, Maine, Texas, and Illinois), and Massachusetts allows MFT's to work under a general mental health designation. Such signs mean some states have schools with therapists with specific knowledge and skills able to offer assistance with such challenging family issues.

In this case it is important to realize that clinicians can be trained in both the practice and profession of marriage and family therapy. The distinction is critical. To help children of divorce one need not necessarily be trained as a marriage and family therapist. School psychologists, as example, might take additional coursework and acquire clinical supervision as a way to acquire additional skills and knowledge. The AAMFT standards, fundamentally, can offer an educational template.

In a basic way, training in family systems is not a classical part of school psychology training, nor of training in many related mental health disciplines. Yet school psychologists work with children and families regularly – daily – and can offer children of divorce immense aid. In this case, Sophia might benefit from individual therapy approached from a family perspective, she might benefit from participation in divorce groups – where she would hear other young people experiencing similar feelings – and she might also benefit from family counseling targeted toward helping her understand the way her family is changing.

It has been more than two decades since Nicoll (1992) explored the link between family dynamics and academic and behavioral adjustment in children. Clearly children such as Sophia are not alone. The problems are notable. With additional education and training, or

with referrals to school based marriage and family therapists, children can more effectively traverse these changes.

Summary and Conclusions

Modern families are changing. In fact with 3.3 marriages in 1000 experiencing divorce in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011, 2009), divorce can have a profound impact on children. Nielsen (2011a) noted, as example, that 80% of children see their fathers 10% to 15% of the time following a divorce. Elsewhere, Amato, Meyers, and Emery (2009) suggest of “nonresidential fathers”, those who no longer live with their children, only 78% contact their children within the first 2-3 years following the divorce and only 31% of fathers have weekly contact with their children.

Sadly, the consequences of divorce effects children in multiple negative ways. Profoundly, Oxford and Lee (2011) indicated that these changes in family structure can impact school performance. Psychologically too, Strohschein (2005) suggested that children of divorce exhibit more mental health problems when compared to children whose parents remain married.

Looking at fathers, having a father present in the life of a child significantly effects the well-being of children as well as their mental health (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Aquilino, 2006; Averdijk, Malti, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2012; Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011).

Nielson (2011b) found that children living with a mother who did not encourage a relationship with the father led to a significant difference in the child’s wellbeing. In point of fact, the consequences of decreased father’s involvement are not new. More then 23 years ago, Amato (1991) explored the consequence of parental absence during childhood, noting that any type of parental absence lowers standard of living, and knowing that losing a parent denies children a critical source of direction and guidance, the author suggests that the loss of one parent exposes children to numerous stressful outcomes. When experiencing a separation from a parent during childhood, the greatest effects were seen in the levels of depression. Notably, the results found that for African American children, growing up without a parent increases the risk that these children will become involved in multiple negative activities ranging from drug use to delinquency.

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Overall, current research suggests that a father's role has a profound impact. Still, many clinicians are not knowledgeable surrounding these issues, nor aware of the training often received by clinicians trained in marriage and family therapy. This paper was intended to provide a look at the issues, while also offering an educational template clinicians might use if creating a continuing education plan for further education and training for family therapy. Given the large numbers of children and families impacted, such points seem valuable.

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