

Review Article

Exploring the Effects of Divorce on Children's Psychological and Physiological Wellbeing

Abstract

Divorce is the legal means of dissolving the union between two married couples before the demise of either spouse. Previous research reveals that divorce affects children psychologically, physiologically, emotionally, academically, and in other spheres of life. We are interested in learning how children deal with the adverse effects of divorce when there is a marriage disruption and how divorce affects their physical and psychological health. To explore this, we used the review of the literature on the impact of divorce on children. Next, four research questions were developed to guide the study. Answers were found in the literature to answer questions one and two. Little was found in the literature to address questions three and four. The remaining questions were answered by a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention program. The review identified that no data in the literature suggests the eradication or alleviating the rate of divorce in society. Finally, the paper proffered some research approaches to address the divorce problem. Our findings suggest the need for further investigation into targeted interventions and potential preventive measures for divorce. Specifically, we recommend conducting qualitative studies with a larger, more diverse population sample.

Keywords: Divorce, children, family structure, marriage, and violence.

Introduction

Divorce among couples is becoming an alarming situation that poses concerns for professionals interacting with families in our contemporary society. The divorce rate in the United States is the sixth highest worldwide, with about fifty per cent of married couples divorcing yearly. (World Population Review, 2022). National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) reported that around 4-5 million people get married each year in the United States, with 42-53% of those unions ending in divorce (NCHS, 2006). The divorce process is a painful circumstance and a major life event

that inhibits the family's togetherness and connectedness for both parents and children. Divorce is accompanied by a lot of malfunctioning psychologically, physiologically, mentally, and emotionally for family members that are involved, most especially the children. (Al Gharaibeh, 2015; Bastaits et al., 2016; DeAnda et al., 2020).

The Current Research and Research Questions

The concept of divorce and how it affects children were discussed in this paper, along with an overview of what the divorce process entails. Children are the most vulnerable family members; therefore, we are particularly interested in learning how they may deal with the adverse effects of divorce when there is a marriage disruption and how divorce affects their physical and psychological health. The ways by which divorce rates can be minimized are also discussed. More importantly, there would be the examination of previous studies done by researchers in coping with change in family structure because of divorce and possible intervention and prevention that can be of help to families, which will help us to provide a comprehensive synopsis of future research direction. It is essential to investigate this area of family internal dynamics and help to provide a guide to coping or alleviating the stress of divorce in families, most especially for children.

The significance of the topic and the detrimental effects of divorce on children's lives led to four research questions aimed at guiding this paper:

1. Does divorce have a noticeable impact on children's psychological and physiological well-being?
2. How does divorce affect children's academic performance?
3. Are there resources, such as literature or programs, available to help lower divorce rates?

4. How can programs aim to discourage divorce to enhance children's psychological and physiological well-being?

Answers were found in the literature to answer questions one and two. Little was found in the literature to address questions three and four. However, a program (framework) designed by Niolon et al. (2017) in collaboration with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta, was found to partly address questions three and four. This gap in the literature necessitated this study.

Defining Divorce and its Effect on Children

Divorce is the legal means of dissolving the union between two married couples before the demise of either spouse. Carlson & Magnuson (2011) opine that the family helps to play an important role in children before they can be psychologically, emotionally, and socially compatible. However, the interruption in the relationship that exists between children and parents because of the marital disruption might lead to parents being less available to support the children (Jackson et al., 2017). Some researchers have established the fact that divorce affects children either psychologically, physiologically, emotionally, academically and in other spheres of life (Al Gharaibeh, 2015; Bastaits et al., 2016; DeAnda et al., 2020; Guinart et al., 2014).

The effect of divorce is further demonstrated when children's medical needs are ignored because of spousal separation that is occasioned by the unavailability of their parents (Ah Gharaibeh, 2015). Children's cognitive function may be hampered by a shortage of essential nutrients in their diet. Additionally, they have a greater chance of having to repeat a grade. Numerous studies have discovered that poor eating and sleeping habits, chronic stress, and a lack of parental guidance can all contribute to health problems. This was the case, according to Wallerstein and

Lewis' (2004) research of 131 California children between the ages of 3 and 18. According to Nyaradi et al. (2013), children with low iron levels are significantly more likely to experience asthma, headaches, speech, and pronunciation issues, and are also much more prone to experience poor mood and weariness.

Significance of the Study

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of divorce on children's psychological and physiological well-being. The study will be particularly useful to teachers, school officials, and religious leaders as these people frequently work with children. Nowadays, divorce-related behavior in the classroom can take many different forms, including minor disturbances, bullying, grumpy disengagement, and poor academic performance of children (Nisivoccia, 1997). It is necessary to find out how divorce affects children's academic performance so that school counsellors, instructors, and parents may work together to help these at-risk kids succeed in school. One wonders what impact changes in family dynamics would have on students' academic outcomes, given that schools and teachers are frequently held accountable for students' subpar test scores and grades. Suppose it has been established by researchers such as Nisivoccia (1997) that divorce may have a negative impact on the academic performance of children. In that case, teachers, parents, curriculum developers, and government need to have a round table discussion on how to cater to the holistic needs and well-being of the children.

Impact of Divorce on the Psychological and Physiological Wellbeing of Children

Children tend to be affected psychologically when there is a disruption in the family's connectedness and togetherness (DeAnda et al., 2020). Researchers have examined if there is a relationship between children's behavior and psychological imbalances following a divorce. In a

longitudinal study involving 319 divorcing mothers and their children, DeAnda et al. (2020) found that a mother's separation distress was significantly associated with increased children's externalizing behaviors. Findings showed that children became unhappy, sullen, irritable, fearful, anxious, and strong-tempered and did not get involved following their parents' divorce. Similarly, Guinart et al. (2014) also found out that children struggled with sleep problems, mental confusion, anger, behavioral issues, low grades in school, animosity, and feeling of abandonment.

Additionally, children who suffered from parental separation when they were adolescents and in early adulthood have a higher propensity to suffer from depression. The psychological and mental well-being of children from divorced families is at stake. Using a sample of Spanish single parents, Guinart et al. (2014) carried out a qualitative study to investigate the immediate and long-term effects of family disruption on children. Their findings revealed that the children involved in the divorce process had behavioral issues, severe emotional disruptions, and subpar academic performance. Although this finding seems limited due to having just one participant's view and opinion, it can still help to support other related findings from other researchers who have done a quantitative survey in this direction. Guinart et al., (2014) further asserted that children are affected physiologically and psychologically due to the high level of psychological strain their parents go through. The essential needs for children to develop and grow properly, including a healthy diet and adequate intake of vitamins and minerals, are often overlooked due to marital disruption and the stress that comes with it (Al Gharaibeh, 2015). Hence, the children's physiological health is being affected. Huurre et al. (2006) also examined the long-term effect of spousal separation on a range of adult outcomes, including social relationship issues and unforeseen life contingencies. The sample included 2269 ninth-grade students in Tampere,

Finland, in the year 1983. The study participants were examined at the age of 16 and 32 years old. The results showed that participants from divorced households had a higher risk of smoking daily and drinking often, which can affect them physiologically over time.

The impact of parental separation on the psychological well-being of their offspring can be measured through clinical assessment. In recent days, there seems to be an increase in family instability-related consultations, which can be linked to elements that increase the likelihood of psychopathological disorders in children. Divorce has a negative psychological and physiological impact on the well-being of children. Much has not been done on the physiological impact of divorce compared to the psychological impact, which is a potential research pathway to venture into.

Mitigating the Negative Effects of Divorce and Family Structure Dynamics: Coping Strategies and Resilience

Coping with the negative effect of divorce and dynamics in family structure can be tough, but a direct relationship between the offspring and one of the parents after the divorce can assist in mediating the negative influence on the children (Bastaitis et al., 2016). Based on Bastaitis et al. (2016) findings in a study conducted making use of 618 parent-child pairs who took part in the divorce research, it can be inferred that the provision of parental care, even amid divorce, has been recognized as a crucial safeguard for children's welfare. It should be noted, nevertheless, that parents and other members of the family frequently find it difficult to help their children during the challenging period following a divorce. In essence, divorce is a painful and heartbreaking life experience in which adults have a tough time adjusting to life afterwards and may have a negative impact on how they interact with their children. Helping to provide a means of escape from the effect of divorce and to cope appropriately with the adjusting process leads to

examining the possible intervention and preventive measures that could mitigate the alarming rate of divorce in society.

De Anda et al. (2020) carried out a qualitative study on children's postdivorce adjustment. The study revealed that residential mothers' postdivorce separation distress has both direct and indirect implications for children's postdivorce adjustment. Through a longitudinal study involving 319 mother-child dyads, it was found that higher levels of separation distress in mothers were associated with increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors in their children. These findings highlight the interdependent associations between parents' and children's postdivorce adjustment and emphasize the importance of addressing separation distress and co-parenting conflict for positive outcomes in children. In a quantitative study carried out by Al Gharaibeh (2015) on the effect of divorce on children, the researchers discovered a correlation between divorce and a higher prevalence of a number of effects of divorce, including financial stress, inability to focus on class, sleeping disorders, and stubbornness. However, the study failed to consider the children's perspective regarding the divorce process, focusing solely on the viewpoint of their mothers. Examining the children's perception would be of great importance. Similarly, Jackson et al. (2017) examined the connection between the social support of persons affected by parental divorce, their expectations for their careers, and their confidence in their ability to find true love in a romantic relationship. The findings show that professional expectations and confidence in romantic relationships were considerably positively correlated with the level of social support. The study was based solely on quantitative data, which will not allow the participants to express themselves fully; adding qualitative data can be added to supplement the findings and will give the participants a voice in the research process.

Intervention and Measures for Preventing Divorce

Guinart et al. (2014) proposed that there must be an adequate and balanced development of the mind as a treatment strategy that can lessen the chance of developing psychosocial adjustment issues or perhaps a psychopathological issue in the future. It is of no value to analyze the impact of divorce on children's wellness if an appropriate methodology to curb the menace of its havoc in the lives of individuals is not proffered. A careful review of all selected literature did not proffer enough substantial possible intervention and prevention programs for families and children involved in a divorce. However, research on divorce education is found in the literature, such as Geasler and Blaisure (1998), who both asserted that an all-embracing purpose of divorce education is to assist parents and children in adjusting to divorce. Divorce education has not been proven to mitigate the rate of divorce but to manage the victims of divorce, especially the children. This paper aims to project divorce issues as a menace that can be mitigated. Hence, Niolon et al. (2017) of the Division of Violence Prevention (DVP) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta, Georgia, developed a program (Figure 1) titled Preventing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) across the lifespan. The program explained that IPV begins in adolescence and can be prevented. It is logical to state that if this program, as explained in Figure 1, is introduced early to adolescence and younger children, it has the tendency of furnishing those exposed to it with information that will make them have a successful marriage (without divorce) in the future.


 Preventing IPV	
Strategy	Approach
Teach safe and healthy relationship skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social-emotional learning programs for youth • Healthy relationship programs for couples
Engage influential adults and peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men and boys as allies in prevention • Bystander empowerment and education • Family-based programs
Disrupt the developmental pathways toward partner violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood home visitation • Preschool enrichment with family engagement • Parenting skill and family relationship programs • Treatment for at-risk children, youth and families
Create protective environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve school climate and safety • Improve organizational policies and workplace climate • Modify the physical and social environments of neighborhoods
Strengthen economic supports for families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen household financial security • Strengthen work-family supports
Support survivors to increase safety and lessen harms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim-centered services • Housing programs • First responder and civil legal protections • Patient-centered approaches • Treatment and support for survivors of IPV, including TDV

Figure 1: Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices

Proposed Research Approaches to Address the Negative Impact of Divorce on Children

It is important that the government takes proactive measures to allocate funds for conducting an extensive study on the profound effects of divorce on children's academic achievement. This critical research is essential to overcome the current limitations of practical solutions available to educators, who face an increasing need to provide effective support to children of divorced

families. Because many families have experienced divorce, it is imperative that our educational systems understand the unique challenges these families face.

Upon securing funding, it is imperative to prioritize teacher retraining, so that they are equipped with valuable insights and practical tips for supporting children from divorce backgrounds. To ensure that instructors are aware of the negative consequences divorce can have on children, it is essential to provide them practical ideas for creating classes that respond to their specific needs. School boards should develop a rule mandating that each school or group of schools hire one or two instructors with the necessary training to facilitate this process. To create and implement comprehensive programs to support children whose parents have divorced, educators should engage with school counselors and social workers. By encouraging a collaborative approach, these programs can offer the essential direction and tools to ease the difficulties and worries faced by classroom instructors who interact with children from divorced families. Furthermore, it is critical to acknowledge the inherent challenges classroom teachers encounter while trying to satisfy the requirements of all the students in the class while also giving children of divorced parents the particular attention they require. By ensuring that schools have adequately trained teachers who can plan and implement school- and classroom-based intervention programs, the burden on classroom teachers can be significantly reduced. These trained professionals can better address the specific needs of children from divorce backgrounds, fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Furthermore, it is advised that the parents of children going through a divorce work closely with the social workers, school counsellors, and trained instructors. It has been established that partnerships and frequent contact between schools, instructors, and parents are essential for pupils to succeed in school. To ensure that the children's academic performance is prioritized

even throughout the trying divorce transition, the qualified teachers and other counsellors would work with the parents to provide them with counselling, techniques, and programs that they could continue to participate in with their children.

Finally, we recommend that divorce education be incorporated into the school curriculum. If the mindset of children and adolescents is changed about divorce through the intervention of specially trained teachers/instructors and school counsellors, they will grow up to appreciate the sanctity of marriage and strive to make their marriages work. Men will respect their wives at home, and this will reduce the rate at which spouses abuse each other in the family.

Conclusion

Based on the review of the selected literature, so much has been done on the psychological impact and effects of divorce on children, but there is a paucity of data on the intervention and possible prevention. Although the implications of divorce on the psychological and physiological well-being of children and structural change in families because of divorce have been established, the appropriate intervention and prevention programs that can help to mitigate the rate of divorce have received limited consideration by researchers. Therefore, more focused studies about intervention and possible prevention of divorce need to be examined with qualitative studies. So also, more about the impact of divorce on the psychological and physiological well-being of children needs to be investigated, making use of a larger population sample.

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