

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

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the multifaceted effects of divorce on children, focusing on their psychological and physiological well-being. It highlights the significant disruption divorce causes in family dynamics, leading to profound changes in children's emotional states, behaviors, and academic performance. The paper notes a substantial body of research documenting the psychological consequences of divorce, such as increased anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues. However, it identifies a notable gap in studies concentrating on intervention and prevention strategies. Additionally, the physiological impacts of divorce, such as health problems and developmental challenges, are not as comprehensively studied. The paper advocates for qualitative research to delve into the personal experiences of affected children and suggests expanding the scope of research to larger and more diverse population samples. It highlights the need for developing comprehensive strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of divorce on children, emphasizing a holistic approach to supporting affected families. The paper aims to guide future research directions, focusing on both understanding and preventing the negative impacts of divorce on children's well-being.

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



## **Introduction**

Divorce among couples is increasingly becoming a critical issue, garnering attention from professionals in family dynamics and child development. In the United States, the divorce rate ranks as the sixth highest globally, with approximately 50% of marriages ending in divorce each year, as reported by the World Population Review (2022). This statistic is further substantiated by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS, 2006), which indicates that of the 4-5 million people marrying annually in the United States, 42-53% of these marriages ultimately dissolve. The divorce process is a significant life event and a catalyst for family unity and connectedness disruption. This disruption extends profoundly to parents and children, instigating a cascade of psychological, physiological, mental, and emotional challenges. Research by Al Gharaibeh (2015), Bastaits et al. (2016), and DeAnda et al. (2020) highlights the multifaceted impact of divorce on family members, especially children. Divorce can influence how well children do in school and affect their cognitive, physical, and social development as they interact with peers in the classroom. For some kids, the emotional strain of their parents' separation can lead to them becoming more reserved and distant from others, which could lead to dropping out of school. Parental divorce leads to more frequent changes in relationships, which can disrupt children's lives and their education (Brand et al., 2019). Children from divorced households may encounter difficulties in adapting to frequent changes, including one parent establishing a new residence, enrolling in a different school, and forming new social connections. These circumstances may lead to instability in the children's lives.

The concept of divorce and how it affects children were discussed in this paper, along with an overview of the divorce process. 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?

The profound impact of divorce on children's lives is a significant area of concern, with extensive literature underscoring its effects on mental health, emotional stability, and physical well-being. Studies such as Anderson (2014) have shown that children of divorced parents often face heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, alongside physiological impacts like sleep disturbances and altered eating patterns. Furthermore, the detrimental influence of divorce on academic performance is well-documented, with factors like emotional distress, decreased parental involvement, and instability in living arrangements leading to

declines in grades, school attendance, and academic motivation, as evidenced by Brand et al. (2019). However, while a rich body of research addresses these consequences, a notable gap exists regarding proactive measures and resources aimed at reducing divorce rates. Much of the existing literature focuses on coping mechanisms following divorce rather than on prevention strategies. Our literature review finds that this gap is only partially addressed by existing programs. For instance, in collaboration with the CDC, a program developed by Niolon et al. (2017) offers a framework for strengthening family relationships and enhancing parental support, indirectly benefiting children in families undergoing marital challenges. Yet, the limited focus of this program on directly targeting divorce rates and enhancing children's well-being post-divorce highlights the need for more comprehensive research and intervention development. This gap in the literature, particularly in terms of preventive measures and resources to lower divorce rates and improve children's well-being amid marital dissolution, emphasizes the crucial need for this study. Our research aims to explore and develop comprehensive strategies that address the aftermath of divorce and proactively work towards reducing its incidence and mitigating its impact on children. In doing so, we hope to fill a significant void in current research and interventions, emphasizing the importance of understanding and preventing the negative effects of divorce on children.

### **Defining Divorce and its Effect on Children**

Divorce is the legal procedure through which the obligations and roles within a marriage are rearranged or terminated, resulting in the formal dissolution of the marital union, as governed by the laws of a specific state or nation (Douglas, 2020). Divorce, legally recognized as the dissolution of marriage, significantly alters the familial landscape, with profound effects that reverberate through the lives of the children involved. As Carlson & Magnuson (2011) noted, the

family unit is foundational to a child's development, providing the essential psychological, emotional, and social scaffolding necessary for healthy growth. Yet, when the structure of a family is compromised through a divorce, the resulting disruption can lead to a noticeable void in parental availability and support (Jackson et al., 2017). This reduced parental engagement can have cascading effects on a child's ability to navigate social complexities and form stable, secure relationships. The ramifications of divorce extend well beyond the immediate emotional turmoil. They encompass a spectrum of psychological disturbances, including increased risks for anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (Al Gharaibeh, 2015). Physiologically, children may experience stress-related health issues, with research pointing to potential disruptions in normal growth and development patterns (Bastaitis et al., 2016). The emotional upheaval often associated with divorce can manifest in children as mood instability, withdrawal from social interactions, or aggression, further complicating their ability to cope with the seismic shifts in their family dynamics. Academically, the impact of divorce is equally significant. Studies have correlated parental separation with a decline in academic performance, noting that emotional distraction and potential instability in living situations can detract from a child's focus and engagement with educational pursuits (DeAnda et al., 2020). The effects of divorce may also permeate into other life spheres, influencing children's peer relationships, self-esteem, and even future romantic partnerships (Guinart et al., 2014). Moreover, the consequences of divorce on children can persist into adulthood. Longitudinal studies have observed that children of divorced parents may carry the weight of their childhood experiences into their own adult relationships, employment stability, and mental health outcomes. These long-term effects' societal and economic implications are substantial, warranting a deeper exploration into preventative strategies and support mechanisms that can mitigate these outcomes. Additionally, divorce can often lead to a

socioeconomic decline for the custodial parent, usually the mother, which further exacerbates the challenges faced by children. Financial instability can limit access to resources and opportunities, potentially widening the gap in educational and social equity for these children compared to their peers from intact families. In understanding the multi-dimensional impact of divorce on children, it becomes crucial to adopt a holistic approach to their care. Interdisciplinary collaboration between educators, healthcare providers, and mental health professionals is essential to address the full scope of children's needs post-divorce. Stakeholders must recognize these children's nuanced challenges and work collectively to create support systems that foster resilience and provide stability in all areas of their lives.

The repercussions of divorce on children's health can be profound and long-lasting, often exacerbated by the reduced availability of parents to tend to their children's medical needs. The disruption caused by spousal separation can create a gap in the care and attention required for maintaining children's health. Al Gharaibeh (2015) suggests that during and after divorce, the focus of parents might shift away from the day-to-day necessities of their children's health, leading to potential neglect of medical issues. Children's cognitive development can be significantly impacted by nutritional deficiencies that arise from changes in household dynamics. Essential nutrients, crucial for brain development and function, may be less prioritized, and as a result, children might face cognitive delays or impairments. This nutritional neglect can also increase the likelihood of academic setbacks, including the need to repeat grades, as proper diet and nutrition play a critical role in children's ability to learn and retain information. The research of Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) further illustrates the health implications of divorce on children, highlighting that the psychological stress associated with parental separation can manifest in unhealthy eating and sleeping patterns. These disruptions are not merely inconveniences

but determinants of a child's overall health and well-being. Chronic stress, a common byproduct of divorce, is known to compromise immune function and can lead to a host of physical health issues. Nyaradi et al. (2013) draw attention to the specific impact of iron deficiency, a common nutritional shortfall among children experiencing the upheaval of divorce. Iron is a vital mineral for cognitive development, and its deficiency is linked to various health concerns. Children lacking adequate iron in their diets are at a higher risk for developing respiratory conditions like asthma, suffering from frequent headaches, and encountering speech and pronunciation difficulties. Moreover, iron deficiency can affect a child's energy levels and mood, leading to fatigue and a predisposition toward irritability or depression. In addition to direct health effects, the indirect consequences of divorce on children's health can include a lack of consistent health care monitoring and follow-up. Regular pediatric appointments and health screenings may become less frequent, causing early signs of health issues to go unnoticed. The psychological toll of divorce can also lead children to engage in risky behaviors in adolescence, potentially leading to adverse health outcomes that could extend into adulthood. Given these significant health concerns, the impact of divorce on children requires a multidimensional approach to care. This approach should integrate nutritional counseling, mental health support, and educational assistance to ensure that children facing the challenges of divorce receive the holistic care they need. Through such comprehensive support, it is possible to mitigate some of the adverse effects divorce can have on a child's physical and mental health, thereby promoting more positive developmental outcomes.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this research transcends academic interest, addressing a pressing social issue with real-world implications. Divorce, while a personal family matter, has the

potential to reverberate through the educational system and community at large, manifesting in behavioral and academic challenges within the classroom. This study aims to rigorously investigate the impact of divorce on children's psychological and physiological well-being, an area that, despite its critical importance, remains under-explored. The repercussions of marital dissolution on children are multifaceted and enduring. These children may face emotional upheaval that can manifest in a variety of behaviors, ranging from subtle withdrawal to overt aggression. The resulting disturbances not only disrupt their own learning experiences but can also affect the classroom environment. Understanding these reactions' psychological and physiological nuances is vital for developing effective support systems within educational and community settings. Teachers, school officials, and religious leaders who serve as important figures in children's lives will find this study's outcomes particularly beneficial. These influencers can tailor their approaches to meet the needs of affected children more effectively. In addition, the study will offer insights into how school counselors, educators, and parents can collaboratively foster environments that support the academic and emotional needs of children navigating the complexities of a changed family landscape.

Moreover, the findings of this study have the potential to initiate a much-needed dialogue among stakeholders, including curriculum developers and policymakers. There is an urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address the holistic well-being of children from divorced families. With a significant number of students experiencing divorce as a part of their childhood, it is paramount for educational policies and curricula to reflect supportive measures that can mitigate the negative impacts identified by researchers like Nisivoccia (1997). The study will also contribute to a broader understanding of how shifts in family dynamics influence students' academic outcomes at a time when educational institutions are under increasing scrutiny for their

role in student performance. This paper will inform policy and practice, ultimately leading to more resilient educational systems that are responsive to the needs of all students, particularly those facing the challenges of divorce. In essence, this study not only seeks to add to the academic discourse on the effects of divorce on children but also to catalyze change in how society, and specifically educational systems, respond to and support children affected by divorce. It is an imperative step towards ensuring that the next generation receives the empathetic support and comprehensive education necessary to thrive, regardless of their family circumstances.

### **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 feelings 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) conducted 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 effects 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 afterward 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 several 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; 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), whom 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a technical package aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect by implementing measures to counter Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). This approach involves introducing youth to these preventive measures at an early age before they encounter such situations (Niolon et al., 2017). The technical packages include policies that focus on recognizing and addressing the links between various types of violence, which could result in a reduction in divorce rates among married couples. When young people are educated on the warning signs in dating relationships, they can make better choices and potentially avoid marriages that might end in divorce, thereby preventing the psychological and physiological impacts such as divorces could have on their children. 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 adolescents and younger children, it has the tendency to furnish those exposed to it with information that will make them have a successful marriage (without divorce) in the future.


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

Figure 1: Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices (Niolon et al., 2017). Note: Content adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

### **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 divorced backgrounds. To ensure that instructors are aware of the negative consequences divorce can have on children, it is essential to provide them with 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. The burden on classroom teachers can be significantly reduced by ensuring that schools have adequately trained teachers who can plan and implement school- and classroom-based intervention programs. These trained professionals can better address the specific needs of children from divorced 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 social workers, school counselors, and trained instructors. It has been established that partnerships and frequent contact between schools, instructors, and parents are essential for pupils to succeed. To ensure that the children's academic performance is prioritized even

throughout the trying divorce transition, the qualified teachers and other counselors would work with the parents to provide them with counseling, techniques, and programs they could continue participating 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 counselors, 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.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study endeavors to provide comprehensive insights into the effects of divorce on children's psychological and physiological well-being, it recognizes several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of the literature reviewed may not encompass all existing research on the topic due to the vastness of the field. Consequently, some relevant studies might not have been included, which could influence the comprehensiveness of the findings presented. Secondly, the study relies heavily on secondary data from previously published research. While this methodology allows for an extensive overview of available literature, it also means that the conclusions drawn are limited to the perspectives and data of those studies. Primary research, such as direct interviews or surveys with affected children and their families, would provide valuable firsthand accounts that are not included in this study. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of most divorce research, including that cited in this study, does not allow for the observation of long-term effects over time. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to understand the enduring consequences of divorce on children's well-being. The research also focuses predominantly on the negative impacts of divorce, potentially

overlooking any resilience or positive adaptation strategies that children might develop. Furthermore, there may be a variation in the effects of divorce based on factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, which are not extensively explored in this study. Lastly, the study acknowledges the potential for publication bias in the literature reviewed, as studies with significant findings are more likely to be published than those with null or negative results. This bias could skew the representation of the impact of divorce on children. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for interpreting the study's findings accurately and for guiding future research to build on the knowledge base with a more nuanced understanding of the effects of divorce on children.

## **Conclusion**

The review of the current literature reveals a significant amount of research focused on understanding the psychological impacts of divorce on children. These studies have shed light on the myriad ways in which divorce affects children's mental health, ranging from increased anxiety and depression to behavioral changes and academic challenges. However, there is a notable gap in research regarding effective intervention and prevention strategies. While the adverse effects on children's psychological and physiological well-being are well-documented, efforts to develop comprehensive programs that address these issues are comparatively limited. This lack of focused research on interventions and preventive measures indicates a crucial area for future studies. More in-depth research is needed to explore and develop targeted strategies that can effectively support children and families navigating the complexities of divorce. This could include the design and evaluation of counseling programs, support groups, and educational initiatives aimed at helping children cope with the emotional and psychological stress of parental separation.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need for studies that employ qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into the personal experiences and needs of children from divorced families. Such research could provide valuable information on the specific challenges these children face and the types of support that would be most beneficial to them. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to include larger and more diverse samples is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the varying impacts of divorce across different communities and cultural backgrounds. When these gaps in the literature is addressed, future research has the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of the effects of divorce on children. This, in turn, would inform the development of more effective intervention and prevention programs, ultimately aiding in mitigating the negative impacts of divorce and promoting the long-term well-being of affected children and their families.

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