

foundations

Divorce and separation: The outcomes for children

Research over many decades about the impact of divorce and separation on children has generated useful knowledge, but also led to confusion and misunderstanding. A comprehensive review of over 200 research reports, summarised here, finds:

- Parental separation is most usefully viewed as part of a process beginning before divorce itself and continuing long after. Support may be needed and intervention required at any stage to reduce possible detrimental effects on children.
- Although short-term distress at the time of separation is common, this usually fades with time and long-term adverse outcomes typically apply only to a minority of children experiencing the separation of their parents.
- However, these children have roughly twice the probability of experiencing specific poor outcomes in the long term compared with those in intact families.

Children of separated families have a higher probability of:

- being in poverty and poor housing;
- being poorer when they are adults;
- behavioural problems;
- performing less well in school;
- needing medical treatment;
- leaving school/home when young;
- becoming sexually active, pregnant, or a parent at an early age;
- depressive symptoms, high levels of smoking and drinking, and drug use during adolescence and adulthood.

Factors affecting outcomes:

- financial hardship can limit educational achievement;
- family conflict before, during and after separation can contribute to behavioural problems;
- parental ability to recover from distress of separation affects children's ability to adjust
- multiple changes in family structure increase the probability of poor outcomes;
- quality contact with the non-resident parent can improve outcomes.

- Some widely held views about separation are not supported by the evidence:
 - the absence of a parent-figure is not the most influential feature of separation for children's development;
 - the age at which children experience separation is not in itself important;
 - boys are not more adversely affected than girls.

Policy implications

- Support for parents to deal with the distress of separation is needed to enable them better to help the children. GPs, teachers and family lawyers need to be equipped to help as they are often approached for this support.
- Information needs to be provided for parents that says separation does not necessarily lead to adverse affects, but that factors such as conflict can be detrimental for their children.
- Support services should facilitate the continuing involvement of non-custodial parents in their children's lives (except where protection from abuse/violence is necessary).
- Support at times of forming step-families may be as important as support following separation.

If recent trends continue, more than a third of new marriages will end within 20 years and four out of ten will ultimately end in divorce. More than one in four children will experience parental divorce by age 16. Divorce rates in England and Wales (but not Scotland or Northern Ireland) are among the highest in Europe, though considerably less than in the United States (where most research has been carried out).

This *Foundations* reviews the existing research into the nature of, and possible underlying causes of, particular outcomes for those experiencing parental separation. The factors responsible for poorer outcomes are not well understood. The review presented here identifies the main areas in which children from separated families are likely to be disadvantaged, both in the short and long term, and evaluates possible explanations.

Children's experience of parental separation

Interviews with children around the time of separation show that most wish their parents had stayed together and hope they will get back together. They are likely, in the short term, to experience unhappiness, low self-esteem, problems with behaviour and friendships, and loss of contact with a significant part of their extended family.

Good, continuing communication and contact between children and both parents appear especially important in assisting children to adapt. Clear explanations about 'what' is happening and 'why' can help, as can reassurance for younger children that they are not being abandoned and that a parent can still be a parent even if he/she leaves the home to live elsewhere.

The immediate distress surrounding parental separation usually fades with time and most children settle into a pattern of normal development. Nevertheless, studies have found that there is a greater probability of poor outcomes for children from separated families than others - and that these can be observed many years after separation, even in adulthood.

Disadvantages among children of separated families

Typically, the areas of disadvantage identified by research only apply to a minority of those whose parents have separated during childhood. There is no simple or direct relationship between parental separation and children's adjustment, and poor outcomes are far from inevitable. As a rule of thumb many adverse outcomes are roughly twice as prevalent

among children of divorced families compared with children from intact families. Outcomes which research suggests occur with a higher probability among children of separated families are listed in the box.

Children of separated families:

- tend to grow up in households with lower incomes, poorer housing and greater financial hardship than intact families (especially those headed by lone mothers);
- tend to achieve less in socio-economic terms when they become adult than children from intact families;
- are at increased risk of behavioural problems, including bedwetting, withdrawn behaviour, aggression, delinquency and other antisocial behaviour;
- tend to perform less well in school and to gain fewer educational qualifications;
- are more likely to be admitted to hospital following accidents, to have more reported health problems and to visit their family doctor;
- are more likely to leave school and home when young and more likely at an early age to: become sexually active; form a cohabiting partnership; become pregnant; become a parent; and give birth outside marriage;
- tend to report more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence and adulthood.

Although the differences in outcomes are clear, it cannot be assumed that parental separation is their underlying cause. The complexity of factors that impinge on families before, during and after separation indicates a process, rather than a single event, that merits careful examination. Much of the confusion seen in media coverage, and even academic debate, about 'the effects of divorce on children' reflects a failure to distinguish between separation as a process and separation as an event. An understanding of process and of the factors that influence this process is crucial if ways are to be found of optimising the chances that children experiencing the separation of their parents will emerge relatively unharmed.

Step-families and lone-parent families

There are many adjustments that children whose parents separate may have to make, most obviously that of no longer living with both parents. If their parents subsequently form new partnerships, they may experience a further transition into a household comprising one birth parent, another adult and, sometimes, step-siblings. Research findings for children from step-families suggest a number of ways in which they do not fare as well as those from intact families - and, in some instances, not as well as those from lone-parent families. The risk of adverse outcomes for young people in step-families compared with those in lone-parent families appears higher for older children, especially in areas of educational achievement, family relationships and sexual activity, partnership formation and parenthood at a relatively young age. Young children in step-families seem to fare better, possibly because it is easier to adapt to a new family structure at an age when they have had a relatively short period of living with either both or just one birth parent.

Parental death and parental separation

Children from separated families and children who have experienced the death of a parent share the impact of parental loss and the longer-term experience of parental absence (more often of fathers than mothers). Research suggests that bereaved children are adversely affected, but not across the same range of outcomes as children whose parents have separated. In particular, parental death does not carry the same risks of poorer educational attainment, lower socio-economic status and poorer mental health. There is evidence for an impact of bereavement on some behavioural outcomes in childhood and adolescence, including substance use and leaving home at an early age, but these do not appear to persist as disorders in adulthood.

Factors affecting outcomes

Studies in the United Kingdom and elsewhere that have sought to explain the links between parental separation and the poor outcomes experienced by some children have highlighted the following points:

- The relative well-being of children in bereaved families and the poorer outcomes identified among children in step-families suggest that the absence of a parent figure is not the most influential feature of separation for children's development.

- The age at which children experience their parents' separation does not, in itself, appear important.
- The popular view that boys are more adversely affected by parental separation than girls is not supported by consistent evidence. It is possible that girls and boys exhibit distress in different ways.
- Financial hardship and other socio-economic circumstances, before as well as after separation, play an influential role in limiting children's educational achievements. They appear less important where other outcomes, such as mental health, are concerned.
- Family conflict before, during and after separation is stressful for children, who may respond by becoming anxious, aggressive or withdrawn. Conflict appears to be an important influence in a number of adverse outcomes, including behavioural problems.
- The ability of parents to recover from the psychological distress associated with their separation is important for children's own ability to adjust. Parental distress is influenced by factors such as social and economic well-being and the presence or absence of conflict. In turn, it affects parent-child relationships and thereby influences outcomes for children.
- Multiple changes in family structure - experiencing the breakdown of two or more parental relationships, for example - appear to have an especially detrimental impact on children, either in themselves or because of associated adversity. The likelihood of multiple changes will, inevitably, be greatest for children who are young when their birth parents separate.
- Continuing contact with the non-resident parent may benefit children's adjustment following separation, but there is no simple relationship with frequency of contact. It is the quality of contact, rather than quantity, that appears important.

Future research

A major strength of British studies concerned with the welfare of children whose parents separate has been the use of large-scale longitudinal cohort studies to analyse long-term outcomes. This provides a firm basis for further research. Future studies should, however, avoid the tendency to treat parental separation as if it were an event, rather than a process where circumstances before, during and after can exert a critical influence on some children.

Another current area of weakness is the shortage of studies concerned with the more immediate impact of separation and the role of underlying factors, such as family conflict. Greater understanding of the way that short-term distress relates to longer-term outcomes is essential.

There is also a lack of research into the part that family support initiatives and other interventions might play in reducing the risks of adversity for children whose parents separate.

More needs to be learned about the extent of multiple family transitions and their impact on children.

Policy and practice implications

Although there are deficiencies in current knowledge about children and parental separation, it would be unreasonable to delay improvements to the support offered to families until the research gaps (see box above) have been filled. A number of policy and practice implications can be drawn, with caution, from the existing research findings:

- Some children and parents need professional support at the time of separation. Help for parents in dealing with their distress will assist them in supporting their children through the transition from one household structure to another. The availability of support services should be made known to parents going through separation.
- Support cannot be provided by specialist services alone. Parents are most likely to seek advice from GPs, teachers and family lawyers, who are often ill-equipped to help. Information and training for these groups may enable them to deal with families who do not require or wish for specialist help.
- Information for parents can also be helpful. It is important to allay the worries of many parents that

separation itself can have a damaging and permanent effect on their children. It is equally important to convey the message that present and future factors, such as family conflict, could have detrimental effects. Parents should be encouraged to minimise the involvement of children in their disputes.

- There are likely to be benefits from enabling children to maintain contact with both their parents. Aside from circumstances where it is necessary to protect children from family violence or abuse, support services should facilitate the continuing involvement of non-custodial parents in their children's lives.
- Acknowledgement of diverse family forms by policy makers and support groups is vital if families are to be helped to function in ways that are best for the health and well-being of their individual members. Support may be just as important at times of forming step-families as it is following separation.

About the study

This study reviewed the findings of about 200 research reports from overseas and the UK, but concentrating on the latter, and covered research over several decades.

Further information

The full report, *Divorce and separation: the outcomes for children*, by Bryan Rodgers and Jan Pryor is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 043 7, price £11.95 plus £1.50 postage and packing). It is available from York Publishing Services, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ (Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868).

Related Findings

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- Lone parenthood and family disruption: the outcomes for children, Jan 94 (*SP44*)
- Children living in re-ordered families, Feb 94 (*SP45*)
- Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown, Feb 95 (*SP54*)
- Parenting in the 1990s, Oct 96 (*SP106*)
- Young, single, non-residential fathers: their involvement in fatherhood, Dec 97 (*SP137*)

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