



Effect of Divorce On Kids

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It may be true that marriages are made in heaven, but it's also clear that they have to be maintained in this world, requiring a sincere and consistent two-person effort.

Relationships are complicated and the impact of their breakdown is even more so, especially when dependent and vulnerable children are involved. Therefore, a simple cause and effect concept will not be enough when evaluating the impact of parental separation and divorce on the well being of children. It was widely believed that negative effects are short-lived, but recent family studies suggest that the disadvantage and damage can be long term.

Understanding The Impact Of Divorce

Marriage is an important institution in all countries, perhaps more so in India, where majority are arranged, and typically it's the union of individuals as well as their families. In addition, it is expected that marriages have to be happy ever after. Understandably, the breakdown of such a relationship can be incredibly stressful for families and dependents.

Divorce was and is still considered one of the most traumatic experiences in a person's life, leaving an emotional and psychological scar that lasts a lifetime. It is devastating for both parents and children.

We form attachment to our parents and family from a very young age, and learn a great deal from them. And the consistency of these relationships enables our ability to relate, feel secure, and develop coping resources. In other words, it leads to the development of our personality, identity and sense of self.

Unsurprisingly, a break in continuity or breakdown of these attachments will affect the above process and result in a host of problems, particularly where the children are in their younger years.

The magnitude of the effect depends on a number of factors including:

- ◆ Duration of conflict that leads to separation

- ◆ Formal divorce
- ◆ Arrangement of ongoing access and contact of children with both parents

Indeed, the primary effect of breakdown of relationship and divorce is the deterioration of relationship between parent and child. This may be due to the mother becoming preoccupied with her adjustment problems and father either unable or not allowed adequate access to child. In either case, remarriages can lead to unintended neglect of the child.

How Divorce Affects Children

Evidence from family studies indicate that negative effect can vary depending on the age of children at the time of divorce and their resilience to adapt to change. For example, children whose parents divorce later in life (late teenage years and early adulthood) have fewer difficulties than children whose parents divorce during their childhood.

There are recognised negative effects of divorce on children.

Socially and Personally:

- ◆ Weakening of relationship with one or both the parents, leading to diminished social competence and ability to form relationships.
- ◆ Poorer coping abilities can contribute to escapism or destructive ways of handling situations.
- ◆ Insecurity leading to unhealthy attachment or unstable or undesired relationships due to fear of being isolated or unaccepted.

Educationally:

- ◆ Children may be disadvantaged with diminished learning capacities, poorer school and college achievements.
- ◆ Some children are likely to drop out of school. This may be due to reduced parental support and encouragement.

Divorce results in a host of problems, particularly where the children are in their younger years

Health and Well being:

- ◆ Research suggests children from separated families, as compared to those from intact families, are at higher risk of mental health and well being outcomes including depression, anxiety, aggression, and delinquency (*Amato and Keith, 1991*).
- ◆ Increase of behavioural, emotional and psychological disturbances, especially during the early/initial phase of adaptation and adjustment.
- ◆ There is plenty of evidence that shows the emotional effect of parental divorce on children continues well into adulthood.

Make It Amicable

Whilst marriages may not last forever, every effort must be made to make the separation as amicable as possible.

- ◆ Children will adapt better when parent demonstrate positive action like cooperation with access and support, and spend quality time with children during and after divorce. These will make children more resilient and decrease maladaptive and negative outcomes.
- ◆ Most importantly parents must avoid communicating conflicting views and poisoning thoughts about each other to the child, as this can result in resentment.



Its Not Always Bad!

Parental separation and divorce is not always bad. It may be better for two individuals with varied expectations and desires to part, rather than to live a compromised life together, and damage the children with mixed messages about relationships and world around them. Most experts agree that children are better off living in a conflict-free divorced family rather than a conflict-ridden married one. Perhaps parental separation can make the children more prepared for eventuality, including learning that relationships don't last forever and that there is a need for ongoing effort to maintain it.

When going through marital difficulties, support from friends or family might not always be ideal as there can be some degree of personal/emotional bias that will skew advice and objectivity. Ideally, an independent professional support from a Counsellor or Marital Therapist / Psychiatrist will facilitate resolution or closure, and even minimise negative impact on children.