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“The Effect of Divorce on Children’s Behaviors and Mental Health”

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PSY496 Senior Research in Psychology

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6/6/2023

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Introduction:

Background:

Divorce is the end of a marriage and a stable family setting. Divorce happens when both spouses start to disagree on simple tasks and opinions. Sometimes it is a solution for a couple, other times more conflicts will originate especially when children are involved. In this research I will be focusing on the positive and negative effects that divorce has on children. Parents who end their marriage on bad terms affect their children heavily. Whereas parents who separate peacefully, their children will have minimal psychological effects. Different children hold one's own struggles in various ways. Whether the outcome is good or bad, children face a lot of difficulties trying to live and adapt to their new life. Parents must educate themselves in order to help their children pass through this challenging period with little to no consequences.

Literature review:

"Children are the real victims of divorce." This article was posted in the Saudi Gazzete magazine. It was an interview between the mother and Dalia Gazzaz. This interview/study was aiming at children who are in constant fear and worry that their parents might separate. The interviewee's daughter frequently asks if they love each other and warns her mother about divorce. Children who fully understand divorce are afraid of the consequences they will be facing if they don't live in a home with both parents. They are affected by their friends' situation after learning that their parents

divorced, and feel worried that maybe one day it will happen to them. When parents separate, their children tend to feel helpless and vulnerable because they can not help with fixing this situation. This results in the child to have mental illnesses such as depression. Most Saudi parents bypass their children's mental health state and how the divorce can affect them. They view their divorce progress as a competition and are selfish to living peacefully.

The second article is about the psychological aspects of children with divorced parents. Children who experience divorce go through emotional distress and mental illness factors because they are moving through a phase of life that will change everything for them. The first couple of months to a year is the toughest on the child, where they are learning to cope with the separation situation. Children of different ages are influenced differently. Young children, as toddlers, do not understand the true meaning of divorce and why their parents live in separate houses, and they would often fear that their parents don't love them anymore. Children who go to school usually blame themselves for the divorce. They might believe that their bad behavior led to the separation. Meanwhile, teenagers get furious and blame one of the parents for their behavior that resulted in a divorce. Children's mental health, behaviors, and academic performance always go downhill once their parents separate. Many children with divorced parents are at risk to unpredictable behaviors such as drug intake, early sexual activity, and drinking. Researchers concluded many factors that will help a child manage their daily tasks and emotional stability without being severely affected by the divorce. Parents must not include their kids in their problems because it will affect them psychologically. With co-parenting, they should frequently discipline and look after their children more closely now that one parent is out of the picture. If they can not handle this situation alone they could use professional help in order not to lose their kid.

This article highlights the main emotional symptoms children experience when their parents divorce. Children are most likely to feel angry and anxious. They might

also have some issues with their school performance. Their sleep schedule will also be affected. Most children would isolate themselves from their friends and family. They will also feel less interested in hanging out or joining activities. Parents must cope with their children to help them regain their confidence and be able to socialize again. Parents with toddlers might notice that they are being more clingy and don't want to leave their side. This is how a toddler acts when they are feeling stressed from their current situation. Children might face eating problems, whether they are eating too much or they lose appetite. They also may find themselves stuck in a loyalty conflict in which they will cut off one parent and stay with the other. Most teenage boys would reconsider their thoughts on marriage and relationships.

Divorce not only has negative effects on children, it also has positive aspects. Most children who are emotionally and physically abused by one parent feel relieved that their parents got divorced. Other children who feel mentally drained from all the arguments and yelling that happen on a daily basis view this divorce as a blessing and emotional calmness. An interesting effect is that children with divorced parents tend to cope and adapt with other situations easily; because they adapted with the big shift that happened to them in an age. Children who go through divorce are most likely to be more empathetic when it comes to seeing their friends going through the same experience. Another positive aspect is that children start to be more independent and mature quite early, but not all children do. When parents start dating other people after the divorce, they give their children hope that they could still find love and be happy or even happier than before. Children will develop a healthier and stronger relationship with both parents after the separation. They will have time to spend with each parent individually and will get more focus from them. This will lead to building a stronger bond each time they spend time with one parent. Not only will they have a stronger relationship with their parents, they will also have a much stronger relationship among each other. No one would understand what one sibling is going through except another sibling, since they both went through the same situation. In conclusion, divorce is hard

for children, but living in an environment without negativity and fighting would be beneficial to them.

Gap in lit/rationale:

The effect of divorce on children's behaviors has different outcomes, and some could be unpredictable or unnoticeable. Parents often overlook certain aspects when it comes to their children's behavior by using the excuse "He/She is just a kid, they'll grow out of it". Children express their emotions differently. It could be by a violent act, or the child would just be living in a state of shock. In the second case, parents begin to develop worry and take action swiftly. Usually in the Arab culture, families do not pay close attention to their children's behaviors and mental health after a separation, and only few studies have been conducted. The awareness of mental health is not well known around the Arabic cultures with adults, so how will it be with children? However in the western cultures, where there is vivid mental awareness, they most of the time seek professional help if they could not manage their children's behaviors well.

Research aim and question:

The main aim of this research is the effectiveness of divorce on children's behaviors and mental health. This research targets children who are going through a difficult period in their life after their parents divorced. How does divorce affect a child? What are the changes that happen to his behaviors? How do they cope and adapt to this situation? What are the side effects of a separation on a child? Do they view it as a trauma later in their adulthood? This research will provide all the answers and information to these questions.

Methodology:

A semi structured interview will be conducted and then analyzed using a thematic analysis. Patterns of thoughts, feelings and experiences as well as coping mechanisms will be explored for each participant before, during and after their parent's divorce.

Participants:

The participants being interviewed in this research are young Saudi adults ages 18-25, both males and females.

Interview:

During the interview the interviewee will be asked questions regarding the changes in their behaviors and mental health after their parents separated. A series of questions will be addressing their feelings during and after the divorce decision was made. They will also be asked about their relationship with each parent, and their childhood/life before the divorce took place. On the other hand, the interview conducted on the adults will target their past and present experiences. They will be asked to talk about themselves as children witnessing the separation and their life changing, whether to the worse or better. Questions about the effect the divorce had on them mentally will be included as well. An important question that will be asked is about the person they became today, and if their parents divorce and past trauma changed them.

Main Theme	Sub Theme
Participants	Ages 16-20 5-6 people interviewed
Mental health	PTSD Anxiety disorders Attachment disorders Depression disorder
Feeling during	Mental health at the time of the separation Conflicts with self
Feeling after	Mental health better/worse Coping strategies New life (two houses)
Relationship	Both parents Siblings One's self
Minor/Major trauma	Divorce happened on good/bad terms physical / mental abuse Neglect

Implication:

The effect of divorce on children is an important factor in psychology. It also is very important for people, especially parents, to be educated on such matters. It is important to the field of psychology of children. Psychologists must understand and figure out the connection of divorce and children's mental health. Many children suffer with major or minor symptoms of mental illnesses after their parents separate. In Riyadh, KSA there is a divorce case approximately every 10 mins; meaning almost 7 cases every hour. With the increasing rate of divorce happening on a daily basis, people should learn how to deal with their children after. The more people educate and people get educated, the better children will be dealt with. This research's goal at the end is to help children who are having mental health issues due to divorce.

Interview #1:

21 year old male

Mental health during:

Q1: How old were you when your parents separated?

Interviewee: I was in grade 3, so about 8 years old.

Q2: How would you describe your mental health at the time of the divorce?

Interviewee: I was always afraid, and I used to run away from everything. I also developed trust issues over time.

Q3: Did you experience any internal conflicts?

Interviewee: Yes.

Relationship:

Q1: How would you describe your relationship with each parent?

Interviewee: Before the divorce I had a normal mother and son relationship with my mom, but after our bond became weaker. As for my father, I was very dependent on him before, and now we are distant and our relationship is kind of formal but we have our fun moments.

Q2: How was your relationship with your siblings before?

Interviewee: I am the youngest in my family. I have an older brother and a sister, the most beautiful girl. I would say that I was also very dependent on them.

Q3: Did you form a strong bond after?

Interviewee: As I got older I felt like they're my responsibility, especially my sister. I make sure I'm always there when she needs anything, and I help her with my connections.

Q4: Did the separation teach you something new about yourself?

Interviewee: Yes. I became more self accountable, self dependent, and it taught me how to value myself.

Q5: Did you change your perspective of life?

Interviewee: Yes. Trust God's plan, and know that you can walk through whatever comes in your life.

Mental health after:

Q1: How are you feeling now? Elaborate more on your life now. How is it different from your past?

Interviewee: I am the best version of myself mentally, physically, and financially. The distance between my prime and I is more than earth to the moon to Pluto to the black hole completely in and out, knowing that every second of my life is the best. All I seek is more tests from God and obstacles knowing I'll be fearless, merciless, ruthless, and unstoppable in fixing them. I know and strongly believe that I am the creator's favorite creation, since I know this I will prove that I am destined to be his favorite.

Q2: Does your parents' divorce still affect you?

Interviewee: No, but positively.

Q3: Is your mental state better at the moment?

Interviewee: Yes.

Q4: How did you cope with the situation? What strategies did you use?

Interviewee: I used to run away from problems, until I learned how to face them. I used to do anything I enjoy like hanging out with my friends and going to the gym.

Interview #2:

19 year old male

Mental health during:

Q1: How old were you when your parents separated?

Interviewee: I was 12 years old.

Q2: How would you describe your mental health at the time of the divorce?

Interviewee: I did not care.

Q3: Did you experience any internal conflicts?

Interviewee: I was sad because I had 2 houses.

Relationship:

Q1: How would you describe your relationship with each parent?

Interviewee: My relationship with my mom is the same as before, but growing up she was strict and was easily irritated. Growing up our relationship got better. My relationship with my father in the past was distant and formal, but now we have a great relationship.

Q2: How was your relationship with your siblings before?

Interviewee: My relationship with my siblings was a normal relationship.

Q3: Did you form a strong bond after?

Interviewee: Not really it's the same.

Q4: Did the separation teach you something new about yourself?

Interviewee: No.

Q5: Did you change your perspective of life?

Interviewee: No.

Mental health after:

Q1: How are you feeling now? Elaborate more on your life now. How is it different from your past?

Interviewee: I feel normal, I'm okay. I have more responsibilities now because I feel like I grew up young.

Q2: Does your parents' divorce still affect you?

Interviewee: No.

Q3: Is your mental state better at the moment?

Interviewee: Yes.

Q4: How did you cope with the situation? What strategies did you use?

Interviewee: I just go with the flow.

Interview #3:

23 year old female

Mental health during:

Q1: How old were you when your parents separated?

Interviewee: I was 15 years old.

Q2: How would you describe your mental health at the time of the divorce?

Interviewee: My mental health was at its lowest. I was depressed for almost 3 years. I even isolated myself from my family, I used to only see my parents and siblings. I lived in my grandmother's house with my mom. During our weekly family gatherings I used to sleep when they came over and woke up when they left.

Q3: Did you experience any internal conflicts?

Interviewee: Yes, I had a lot of insecurities. My mental health caused my physical health to go downhill. My hospital visits became a weekly thing.

Relationship:

Q1: How would you describe your relationship with each parent?

Interviewee: My relationship with my mother was complicated and we did not know how to get along with each other. Now it is at its best. Our bond got stronger, and we consider ourselves best friends more than mother and daughter. As for my father, we had cute bonding memories because I was his first born. His career made him travel a lot, so we did not see him as much. This resulted in me being always shy around him, and not feeling the normal father daughter bond. During the time of the divorce we lost contact, and our relationship became formal. Now that I got older, I felt empathy towards him and started to take care of him and try to spend more time with him.

Q2: How was your relationship with your siblings before?

Interviewee: Like any siblings we used to fight on a daily basis.

Q3: Did you form a strong bond after?

Interviewee: Since I am the eldest, I feel like now I am more protective over them, and that they are my responsibility. I try my best to be there for them and provide them with the affection, care, and support they need. My relationship with my brother now is like we are friends, I am a bit overprotective, but I don't show it. My little sister is like my daughter. I give her all my love and spoil her a lot, since she was a toddler when my parents separated.

Q4: Did the separation teach you something new about yourself?

Interviewee: I learned to love myself and put my mental health on top of everything. I became a much stronger lady because I had a huge responsibility given to me at such a young age.

Q5: Did you change your perspective of life?

Interviewee: I am more of a family girl now, and I am proud of it. I learned that everything is in your life for a reason, and God doesn't test you unless he loves you.

Mental health after:

Q1: How are you feeling now? Elaborate more on your life now. How is it different from your past?

Interviewee: I am the happiest now, even though I had my ups and downs with life. My main priority now is to provide for my family emotionally, and spending enough time with each one individually. I am in the process of creating the best version of myself, chasing dreams and reaching goals.

Q2: Does your parents' divorce still affect you?

Interviewee: No, I got used to this lifestyle. Most of the times I feel sad because my father lives alone.

Q3: Is your mental state better at the moment?

Interviewee: Yes, it changed 180 degrees.

Q4: How did you cope with the situation? What strategies did you use?

Interviewee: It was not the best strategy to cope with the situation, but it helped me survive and stress less. I used to run away and hang out with my friends and cousins every weekend. I also isolated myself from my family.

Superordinate Themes	Master Themes	Emergent Themes	Participants' Comments
After - mental health	Wellbeing	Mental health stability and working on becoming a better person.	Participant A (male): "I am the best version of myself mentally, physically, and financially."
During - mental health	Wellbeing	Fear, isolation, trust issues, and not caring.	<p>Participant A (male): "I was always afraid, and I used to run away from everything. I also developed trust issues over time." Participant B (male): "I did not care." Participant C (female): "My mental health was at its lowest. I was depressed for almost 3 years. I even isolated myself from my family, I used to only see my parents and siblings. I lived in my grandmother's house with my mom. During our weekly family gatherings I used to sleep when they came over and woke up when they left."</p>
	Coping Mechanisms	Running away from problems and responsibilities, and spending time away from home.	<p>Participant A (male): "I used to run away from problems, until I learned how to face them. I used to do anything I enjoy like hanging out with my friends and going to the gym." Participant B (male): "I just go with the flow."</p>
Relationship	Parents	Unstable relationship, formality, normal, and complication.	<p>Participant A (male): "Before the divorce I had a normal mother and son relationship with my mom, but after our bond became weaker. As for my father, I was very dependent on him before, and now we are distant and our relationship is kind of formal but we have our fun moments." Participant B (male): "My relationship with my mom is the same as before, but growing up she was strict and was easily irritated. Growing up our relationship got better. My relationship with my father in the past was</p>

distant and formal, but now we have a great relationship.”

Siblings

Responsibilities, protectiveness, and parental role.

Participant C (female): “Since I am the eldest, I feel like now I am more protective over them, and that they are my responsibility. I try my best to be there for them and provide them with the affection, care, and support they need. My relationship with my brother now is like we are friends, I am a bit overprotective, but I don’t show it. My little sister is like my daughter. I give her all my love and spoil her a lot, since she was a toddler when my parents separated.”

Participants	Age	Gender	Nationality
1	21	Male	Saudi
2	19	Male	Saudi
3	23	Female	Saudi

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