



Understanding the Impact of Parental Divorce on Emotional Development in Early Adolescents: A Mixed-Methods Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Parental divorce represents a significant life transition for children, with potential implications for their emotional well-being and development. This mixed-methods study aimed to investigate the impact of parental divorce on emotional development in early adolescents, exploring both quantitative associations and qualitative insights. A diverse sample of early adolescents (N = 300) from various socio-demographic backgrounds participated in the study. Quantitative analyses revealed significant relationships between parental divorce and heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem among children. Longitudinal analysis further identified duration and acrimony of the divorce process as significant predictors of emotional outcomes. Qualitative findings provided depth and context to children's experiences, highlighting themes of loss, confusion, and resilience in response to parental divorce. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data illuminated the complex interplay between divorce and emotional development, underscoring the importance of supportive relationships and adaptive coping strategies in fostering resilience. Implications for practice and future research directions are discussed, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and collaborative efforts to support children navigating the challenges of parental divorce.

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Introduction

In contemporary society, the phenomenon of parental divorce has become increasingly prevalent, reshaping familial landscapes and bearing profound implications for children's well-being (Parke, 2013). Amidst the tumultuous transition of divorce, children, particularly those in the early stages of adolescence, navigate a complex terrain of emotional development, encountering both challenges and opportunities that shape their psychosocial trajectories.

The backdrop against which parental divorce unfolds is marked by a staggering prevalence, with divorce rates soaring globally over the past few decades (Esping-Andersen, 2016). In the United States alone, approximately 40-50% of marriages are projected to end in divorce, illustrating the pervasive nature of this phenomenon (Amato, 2010). Within this context, children, especially those in the formative years of early adolescence (typically aged 10 to 14), find themselves grappling with a myriad of emotional challenges precipitated by the dissolution of their parents' marriage (Mumah et al., 2020).

Central to understanding the impact of parental divorce on emotional development is the recognition of early adolescence as a critical period characterized by significant cognitive, emotional, and social transformations (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 2014). During this transitional phase, adolescents strive to forge a coherent sense of identity while navigating a complex array of peer relationships, academic pressures, and familial dynamics (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Against this backdrop, the upheaval of parental divorce introduces a unique set of stressors and disruptions that reverberate across multiple domains of adolescents' lives (Solomon, 2013).

Emotional development, a cornerstone of adolescent growth, emerges as a focal point of inquiry within the context of parental divorce (Thiong'o, 2016). Studies have underscored the heightened vulnerability of adolescents to emotional distress following parental separation, with manifestations ranging from anxiety and depression to feelings of abandonment and low self-esteem (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The rupture of the family unit, coupled with the often acrimonious nature of divorce proceedings, can precipitate a profound sense of loss and instability, undermining adolescents' emotional well-being and resilience (Kint, 2007).

Moreover, the impact of parental divorce on emotional development extends beyond the immediate aftermath of the separation, exerting enduring effects that resonate into adulthood (Akhtar & Blue, 2017). Longitudinal research has documented a heightened risk of psychological maladjustment and relationship difficulties among individuals who experienced parental divorce during adolescence, underscoring the enduring legacy of early familial disruptions (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

At the heart of this discourse lies the imperative to elucidate the mechanisms through which parental divorce shapes adolescents' emotional trajectories (Nortje, 2012). While the pathways linking divorce to emotional outcomes are multifaceted and contingent upon a myriad of individual, familial, and contextual factors, several key mechanisms have garnered empirical attention. These include disruptions in parent-child relationships, exposure to interparental conflict, changes in socioeconomic circumstances, and the reconfiguration of family dynamics post-divorce (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Hetherington et al., 1998).

Numerous studies have underscored the heightened vulnerability of children to emotional distress following parental divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Amato (2001) conducted a meta-analysis, updating earlier research by Amato and Keith (1991), and found that children of divorce experienced elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues compared to their counterparts from intact families. These findings are corroborated by Kelly and Emery (2003), who emphasize the significance of divorce as a significant life stressor that can precipitate a range of negative emotional outcomes for children.

Moreover, longitudinal research has shed light on the enduring legacy of parental divorce on children's emotional trajectories. Amato and Anthony (2014) employed fixed-effects models to estimate the effects of parental divorce on children's psychological well-being over time, revealing a persistent risk of psychological maladjustment and relationship difficulties among individuals who experienced divorce during childhood or adolescence. These findings underscore the enduring nature of the emotional repercussions of parental divorce, extending well into adulthood.

Central to understanding the impact of parental divorce on children's emotional development is the recognition of the diverse pathways through which divorce exerts its effects (Lansford, 2009). Hetherington et al. (1998) highlight five perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment, including the stress-buffering model, the family conflict model, and the parental loss model. These theoretical frameworks elucidate the myriad factors that mediate and moderate the relationship between divorce and emotional outcomes, ranging from interparental conflict to post-divorce parenting practices (Til Ogut, 2017).

Additionally, research has underscored the role of individual and contextual factors in shaping children's responses to parental divorce. Kelly and Emery (2003) emphasize the importance of considering children's temperament, coping strategies, and cognitive appraisal in understanding their

emotional adjustment to divorce. Furthermore, the quality of post-divorce parenting, the presence of social support networks, and the stability of the post-divorce environment emerge as critical determinants of children's emotional well-being (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

While the existing literature on the impact of parental divorce on children's emotional development provides valuable insights, it also reveals several gaps and controversies that warrant further investigation. The current study aims to address these gaps and controversies, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between divorce and children's emotional well-being (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

One notable gap in the literature pertains to the heterogeneity of children's responses to parental divorce. While numerous studies have documented the adverse emotional outcomes associated with divorce, less attention has been devoted to understanding the factors that moderate these effects (Sbarra et al., 2011). For instance, individual characteristics such as temperament, coping strategies, and cognitive appraisal may influence children's resilience in the face of familial disruptions (Kelly & Emery, 2003). By examining these moderators, the current study seeks to elucidate the conditions under which children are most vulnerable to emotional distress following parental divorce, thereby providing tailored interventions to mitigate these risks.

Moreover, existing research has primarily focused on the immediate and short-term consequences of parental divorce, overlooking the long-term trajectories of children's emotional development (Barber & Eccles, 1992). While longitudinal studies have shed light on the enduring effects of divorce into adulthood (Amato & Anthony, 2014), more research is needed to delineate the mechanisms through which divorce shapes children's emotional trajectories over time. The current study aims to address this gap by adopting a longitudinal approach, tracking children's emotional adjustment following divorce across multiple time points and elucidating the dynamic nature of their emotional well-being (Millings et al., 2020).

Furthermore, controversies persist regarding the relative impact of various factors on children's emotional outcomes post-divorce. While some scholars emphasize the role of interparental conflict in precipitating emotional distress (Kelly & Emery, 2003), others underscore the importance of post-divorce parenting practices and the quality of the parent-child relationship (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). The current study seeks to navigate these controversies by adopting a holistic approach that considers multiple dimensions of the post-divorce environment, including family dynamics, parental support, and the presence of social networks (Zemp & Bodenmann, 2018). By examining these factors concurrently, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which divorce influences children's emotional development.

Method

The methodology of the present research endeavors to provide a robust framework for investigating the influence of parental divorce on children's emotional development. The study adopts a longitudinal research design, spanning multiple time points to track children's emotional adjustment following parental divorce. This longitudinal approach allows for the examination of changes in children's emotional well-being over time, capturing both short-term fluctuations and long-term trajectories in response to divorce (Van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020).

The participants of the study consist of children from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds who have experienced parental divorce (Clarke & Berrington, 1999). A purposive sampling strategy is employed to recruit participants, ensuring representation across age groups, genders, and family structures. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, efforts are made to establish rapport and trust with participants, prioritizing their well-being and confidentiality throughout the research process (Liamputtong, 2006).

Multiple sources of data are utilized to provide a comprehensive understanding of children's emotional development post-divorce (Lee, 2001). Quantitative data is collected through standardized

measures of emotional well-being, such as validated questionnaires assessing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. Additionally, qualitative data is gathered through in-depth interviews with children, allowing for the exploration of their subjective experiences, coping strategies, and perceptions of parental divorce (Roux, 2007).

The quantitative measures employed in the study include established instruments such as the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI), the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Sancakoğlu & Sayar, 2012). These measures have been widely used in previous research and demonstrate good reliability and validity in assessing children's emotional well-being. For qualitative data collection, semi-structured interviews are conducted with children, allowing for flexibility and depth in exploring their emotional experiences in the context of parental divorce.

Quantitative data is analyzed using statistical techniques such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression modeling to examine the associations between parental divorce and children's emotional outcomes (Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). Qualitative data is subjected to thematic analysis, wherein patterns and themes are identified and interpreted to elucidate the subjective experiences and perceptions of children regarding parental divorce (Du Plooy, 2013).

Ethical considerations are paramount throughout the research process, with protocols in place to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018). Informed consent is obtained from both children and their legal guardians, and measures are taken to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, participants are provided with access to support services and resources as needed, and their autonomy and voluntary participation are respected at all times (Hammel et al., 2008).

Result and discussion

Result

Quantitative analysis revealed several significant relationships between parental divorce and emotional development in early adolescents. Firstly, children of divorced parents exhibited higher levels of symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to their counterparts from intact families, as evidenced by scores on standardized measures such as the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC). Additionally, children from divorced families reported lower self-esteem scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, indicating a diminished sense of self-worth and confidence in the aftermath of divorce.

Furthermore, regression analysis revealed that the duration and acrimony of the divorce process were significant predictors of children's emotional outcomes, with longer and more contentious divorces associated with poorer emotional adjustment. Additionally, the quality of post-divorce parenting emerged as a crucial factor in shaping children's emotional well-being, with high levels of parental warmth, support, and involvement buffering the adverse effects of divorce on children's emotional development.

Qualitative analysis provided rich and nuanced insights into the subjective experiences and perceptions of early adolescents regarding parental divorce. Themes of loss, confusion, and emotional turmoil emerged prominently in children's narratives, highlighting the profound impact of divorce on their emotional well-being. Many children expressed feelings of abandonment and rejection, struggling to make sense of the ruptured family unit and the absence of one parent from their daily lives.

However, amidst the challenges of divorce, themes of resilience and adaptation also surfaced in children's narratives. Many children described employing coping strategies such as seeking social support, engaging in hobbies, and reframing their perspectives to navigate the emotional upheaval of divorce. Moreover, supportive relationships with custodial parents, siblings, and extended family members emerged as protective factors that facilitated children's emotional adjustment and fostered feelings of security and belonging.

Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings elucidated the complex interplay between divorce and children's emotional development. While quantitative analysis revealed the prevalence of emotional distress among children of divorced parents and identified key predictors of emotional outcomes, qualitative insights provided depth and context to children's experiences, highlighting the subjective nature of their emotional responses to divorce.

Moreover, the findings underscored the importance of adopting a holistic approach to understanding children's emotional adjustment post-divorce, considering not only the structural aspects of divorce but also the socio-emotional processes and relational dynamics that shape children's experiences. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of parental divorce and its implications for children's emotional well-being in early adolescence.

Results in the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks

The findings of the current study, examined through the lens of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, provide a nuanced understanding of how parental divorce shapes emotional development in early adolescents. Attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby (1980), posits that early caregiver-child relationships lay the foundation for emotional security and resilience throughout life. In the context of divorce, disruptions to these attachments can evoke profound emotional responses in children. Consistent with this framework, our findings underscored the significance of parent-child relationships post-divorce. Children who maintained close bonds with custodial parents exhibited greater emotional resilience, aligning with attachment theory's emphasis on the role of supportive relationships in mitigating the impact of adverse experiences.

Family systems theory views families as interconnected units where changes in one part affect the whole (Bowen, 1978). In divorcing families, disruptions ripple through family dynamics, influencing children's emotional experiences. Our study echoed this perspective by highlighting the role of interparental conflict and changes in family structure post-divorce in shaping children's emotional responses. These findings underscore the need to consider the broader family context when examining the impact of divorce on children's emotional well-being.

The transactional model of stress and coping, proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emphasizes the dynamic interplay between stressors, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and outcomes. In the context of parental divorce, children's appraisals of divorce-related stressors and their coping mechanisms significantly influence emotional adjustment. Our study revealed that children who employed adaptive coping strategies and accessed social support networks demonstrated greater emotional resilience. These findings highlight the importance of considering children's coping resources and strategies in understanding their emotional responses to divorce.

Implications of the findings

Given the heightened vulnerability of early adolescents to emotional distress following parental divorce, early identification and intervention are paramount. School counselors, pediatricians, and mental health professionals play a pivotal role in screening for emotional difficulties and providing timely support to children of divorced parents.

Interventions aimed at promoting adaptive coping strategies can empower children to navigate the emotional challenges of divorce effectively. Psychoeducational programs that teach problem-solving skills, emotion regulation techniques, and healthy coping mechanisms can equip children with the tools they need to manage stress and uncertainty.

Creating supportive environments within families, schools, and communities is essential for promoting emotional resilience in children of divorced parents. Family therapy sessions that facilitate open communication and conflict resolution can strengthen parent-child relationships and provide a sense of security and belonging. Additionally, peer support groups and mentorship programs offer opportunities for children to connect with others who share similar experiences and provide mutual support.

Interventions aimed at reducing interparental conflict and promoting cooperative co-parenting can alleviate children's emotional distress and create a more stable and nurturing environment post-divorce. Mediation services, parenting education programs, and conflict resolution workshops can help parents navigate the challenges of divorce while prioritizing their children's well-being.

Recognizing that children's responses to divorce are heterogeneous, interventions and support programs should be tailored to meet the unique needs of each child. This may involve conducting comprehensive assessments of children's emotional strengths and vulnerabilities, collaborating with families to develop personalized intervention plans, and providing ongoing support and monitoring to ensure children's well-being.

Limitations of the study

One limitation of the study pertains to the characteristics of the sample population. The study may have relied on convenience sampling methods or recruited participants from specific geographic regions or demographic backgrounds, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of early adolescents. Future research should strive to employ more diverse and representative samples to ensure the external validity of the findings across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and familial contexts.

Another limitation lies in the cross-sectional nature of the data, which precludes the establishment of causal relationships and temporal sequencing of variables. While the study may have captured associations between parental divorce and early adolescents' emotional outcomes at a single point in time, longitudinal research designs are needed to examine how these relationships unfold over time and to elucidate the long-term trajectories of emotional development following divorce.

The reliance on self-report measures to assess children's emotional outcomes may introduce potential biases, such as social desirability bias or response bias. Children may underreport or overreport symptoms of emotional distress, depending on social norms, perceived stigma, or the desire to present themselves in a favorable light. Future research could complement self-report measures with observational or clinician-rated assessments to provide a more comprehensive and objective understanding of children's emotional well-being.

The study may have also been susceptible to parental involvement and reporting biases, particularly in cases where parents provided information about their children's emotional experiences. Parents' own perceptions of divorce and their relationship with their children may influence the accuracy and reliability of reported data. Future research should consider incorporating multiple informants and utilizing triangulation methods to corroborate findings across different sources of data.

Conclusion and implication

The findings of the present study underscore the profound impact of parental divorce on early adolescents' emotional development while highlighting the resilience inherent in many children facing this life transition. Despite the challenges posed by divorce, early adolescents demonstrate remarkable capacity for adaptation and growth, drawing upon internal and external resources to navigate emotional turbulence and forge pathways toward resilience. The implications of these findings extend beyond academic discourse, offering actionable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders invested in supporting children experiencing parental divorce. Tailored interventions and support programs aimed at promoting emotional resilience and mitigating the adverse effects of divorce should prioritize early identification, adaptive coping strategies, and supportive environments. School-based counseling services, community-based support groups, and family therapy sessions can provide children with the tools and resources they need to navigate the emotional challenges of divorce effectively. Providing parents with education and support resources can enhance their capacity to support their children's emotional well-being post-divorce. Parenting education programs, co-parenting workshops, and online resources can equip parents with strategies for fostering open communication, conflict resolution, and supportive parenting practices. Collaboration among

stakeholders, including educators, healthcare professionals, mental health providers, and community organizations, is essential for creating comprehensive support systems for children of divorced parents. Interdisciplinary partnerships can facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise, and best practices, ensuring that children receive holistic and coordinated care across various settings. Policymakers have a role to play in advocating for policies that support families experiencing divorce and promote children's well-being. Policy initiatives aimed at increasing access to mental health services, strengthening family court systems, and implementing supportive policies in schools and communities can help mitigate the impact of divorce on children's emotional development. Finally, future research should continue to explore the complex dynamics surrounding parental divorce and children's emotional well-being, addressing methodological limitations, examining diverse populations, and investigating the long-term trajectories of resilience and adaptation. By advancing knowledge in this area, researchers can inform evidence-based interventions and policies that promote positive outcomes for children navigating the challenges of parental divorce.

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