

# The Effect of Parental Divorce on Child Depression

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**Abstract.** Parental divorce has become increasingly common in the contemporary environment of changing family dynamics, reshaping traditional family structures and raising concerns about its impact on children's mental health, particularly their vulnerability to depression. This research paper delves into the complex relationship between parental divorce and childhood depression, revealing the underlying mechanisms and implications of this phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to critically review and synthesize existing research on the relationship between parental divorce and childhood depression, providing a comprehensive overview of the various causal factors. Second, the paper highlights the importance of addressing child depression resulting from parental divorce, emphasizing the long-term consequences and the need for targeted interventions.

**Keywords:** Parental divorce, emotions, mental health, psychotherapeutic Interventions.

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of family dynamics, the prevalence of parental divorce has reshaped traditional family structures, sparking widespread interest and concern about its potential impact on children's mental health [1-3]. Marriage dissolution, once considered a rare phenomenon, is becoming more common in modern society as times change. Questions have arisen about how children's mental health is affected when they grow up under the emotional impact of their parent's divorce, especially whether they are prone to depression. This research paper aims to delve into the multifaceted relationship between parental divorce and childhood depression, reveal the mechanisms behind it, and provide insights into this phenomenon's significance.

From the evolutionary psychology perspective, a traditional nuclear family model characterized by married parents and their biological children has evolved into various family structures, including stepfamilies, single-parent families, and remarriages. As a result, children are confronted with various family arrangements, some of which may involve a transition to parental separation. Such transitions bring a range of changes that pose potential challenges to children's social adaptation and well-being. As researchers and society grapple with the consequences of these changes, it has become increasingly important to understand the impact of parental separation on children's mental health, particularly on their susceptibility to depression [4].

A growing body of empirical research has found a link between parental divorce and the development of depressive symptoms in children and adolescents [5, 6]. The mood swings, stress, and instability associated with parental divorce can undermine children's sense of security, which may lead to depression. While not all children will develop depression due to parental divorce, understanding the factors contributing to this vulnerability is critical to providing targeted interventions and support.

The purpose of this review is twofold: first, to critically review and summarize existing research on the relationship between parental divorce and child depression. By analyzing different studies, methodologies, and results, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing the likelihood and severity of depression in children affected by parental divorce. Secondly, by emphasizing the potential long-term consequences of untreated childhood depression or parental inattention, this paper highlights the importance of addressing this issue. By exploring the intersection between family dynamics and mental health outcomes, this research paper endeavors to provide a deeper understanding of the impact of parental divorce on childhood depression, ultimately

contributing to informed strategies for intervention, prevention, and support for children going through the challenging experience of family dissolution.

## **2. Method**

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the academic databases Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. The following search terms (and their derivatives) related to the effects of parental divorce on children were entered: “divorce,” “remarriage,” “depression,” “mental health,” and “children.” Studies were selected for this review based on the following inclusion criteria. Studies are required to 1) be published after 2018; 2) include empirical data (covering everything from case studies to surveys), and 3) provide analyses about the effects of parental separation on children’s mental health. Due to the specific outcome of children being psychologically impacted, studies that mentioned parental emotional deficits but did not specify whether they were divorced were also included in the review because it was assumed that this was the case for at least some families.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Theoretical Frameworks**

Three theoretical frameworks can be incorporated from the existing research on the effects of parental divorce on children: social learning theory, attachment theory, and family systems theory. These conceptual frameworks offer insightful understandings of the psychological processes and social-emotional dynamics of parental divorce on children’s mental health.

#### **3.1.1 Social Learning Theory**

Bandura proposed the social learning theory, which holds that children learn by watching how their parents deal with stress, emotional outbursts, and coping strategies [7]. Children are more likely to handle divorce problems with resilience. They may be less likely to have depressive symptoms if they observe their parents using efficient coping mechanisms, adaptive emotion regulation, and healthy problem-solving techniques.

#### **3.1.2 Attachment Theory**

Bowlby created the attachment theory, which contends that when parents divorce, children’s attachment patterns may be disrupted, potentially resulting in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and sadness [8]. When parents separate or divorce, a child’s primary source of stability and emotional support may be jeopardized, which can cause mental anguish. Using attachment theory, researchers can better understand how children’s emotional well-being can be impacted by divorce. Disrupted attachment bonds may also result in depressed tendencies.

#### **3.1.3 Family Systems Theory**

According to family systems theory, a change in one family member’s behavior or environment impacts the entire family system. This idea highlights that, in the instance of parental divorce, the family dynamic as a whole is affected by divorce rather than a singular event solely affecting the parents. Divorce can cause a family’s communication styles, roles, and boundaries to alter, which may cause children to experience emotional discomfort and depressive symptoms. This paper will further investigate and analyze these three theories to develop appropriate solutions and actions for each circumstance.

### **3.2. Effects of Parental Divorce from Empirical Evidences**

#### **3.2.1 Children’s Pressure after Parental Divorce**

Many primary and secondary school students generally feel stressed after the divorce of their parents, and this is accompanied by a certain sense of inferiority because they are afraid that other

students will know that they are single parents. They are also traumatized because some of the reasons for the divorce can be difficult for the child to accept, such as one parent cheating on his or her spouse. When parents divorce, the child is often taken away by one of the parents, which is a big test for the child because no matter which parent he or she chooses, he or she will be leaving the person who has been with him or her for years to raise him or her. In *Mental Health Status of Primary School Students from Divorced Families Research on Educational Countermeasure*, Zhang conducted a detailed survey of Chinese children from divorced families of different grades through questionnaire method [9]. It was found that they generally had higher levels of academic anxiety compared to the lower and upper grades. Among them, the anxiety indexes of boys are higher than that of girls after their parents' divorce, and the author mentions that it is mostly because of the boys' personality. Besides, the survey also shows that children of divorced families have some common characteristics such as autism, aloofness, inattentiveness, and even precociousness [10].

### **3.2.2 Embarrassment in Some Situations after Parental Divorce**

After parents divorced, some children would not be affected a lot, but in some specific situations, they would feel embarrassed and awkward (Word Psychiatry). For example, when there are parent-teacher conferences or other school events that require parents to come, the child wonders if his parents will come along or if one of them might not come, and if that is the case, what his classmates will think of him and whether they will talk about him behind his back. Another scenario is whether his parents will mind this when he gets married in the future. Not only that, when people get married in the future, should their parents sit together will not be awkward, but also think if people do not invite one of the parties to attend their own wedding is not very reasonable, if only the father or mother present, then the other guests to attend the wedding will be how to think about it, will not be behind the back of the discussion.

### **3.2.3 Differences between Divorce and Non-Divorce**

Children who have gone through a parental divorce tend to experience more than children in happy families and will mature more early [11]. When parents divorce, and children are faced with choosing which parent to live with, this is the first major event they experience. Regardless, they understand that their parents' relationship is in trouble and that the family is breaking up as a result. Therefore, they are emotionally damaged to a certain extent and develop negative feelings such as low self-esteem or anxiety. Children of divorced parents do not experience anything that children of happy families do, so they are unlikely to experience negative emotions.

Children from divorced families tend to have a higher sensitivity to rejection. They fear rejection more than children from normal families, presumably because of their low self-esteem. Essentially, children from divorced families will have the mentality that they have been abandoned by their parents and feel that their parents have abandoned them and feel that their parents do not love them anymore because they are divorced, so they will be more sensitive or more careful in socializing than children from normal families [12].

### **3.2.4 Children's Neglected Emotions after Parental Separation**

Some parents will be too busy dealing with life and work after a divorce to consider their children's feelings, not taking into account whether they have been badly shaken inside and how they feel about their parent's separation [5]. Some children may develop extreme behaviors, such as self-harm, to gain attention from their parents. This is because they will hold some simple ideas when they are still young and do not have a clear understanding of divorce, thinking that their parents will get back together again. So they will go to the extreme and use some means to make their parents notice and care about them, so that they can feel the love their parents gave them before they divorced.

### **3.2.5 Long-Term Negative Effects on Children**

In fact, not only the psychological changes, the children will slowly develop some destructive behaviors after their parents' divorce. Some children develop low self-esteem and anxiety in the early stages of their parents' divorce and then slowly develop depression as a result of their parents' neglect

or excessive concern for what others think. At a later stage, they may be misled by some bystanders and go astray, hoping to paralyze themselves through alcohol or smoke to relieve stress, and in severe cases, they may use drugs to make themselves happy. Besides that, some kids cannot stand both the pressures from parental divorce and learning. All of these behaviors are destructive to a child and do not address the root causes of depression [13, 14].

The child's later development will also be altered by the reasons for the parents' divorce. Some parents divorce because they are not in a relationship anymore, which is not too much of a problem for the child as most parents who divorce as a result become friends. However, some parents divorce because there is a change in the marriage, such as infidelity, and this can be psychologically damaging to the child, causing them to fear their future marriage and to fear and avoid it. In addition to this, there are some extreme cases, such as domestic violence, which is not only psychological damage but also psychological and physical damage. Children who grow up in such an environment will not only be afraid of marriage but may even have problems getting along with others.

### **3.2.6 Adjustment of Children with Different Personalities**

Studies have shown that children with different personalities adapt differently in the face of parental divorce [15, 16]. Children who are outgoing, social, and less dependent on their families are better able to adapt to parental divorce because they are more positive and receive more positive energy. On the other hand, those who are more dependent on their parents and are introverted and less communicative will have a harder time adapting because they may already have low self-esteem, and their parents' divorce will undoubtedly deal a bigger blow to them, making them even more reticent, thus making it difficult for them to unravel the knots in their hearts and fall into a deadly cycle [15].

## **4. Implications**

This review reveals several important implications for future research in the area of parental divorce and its impact on children's mental health, as well as providing new perspectives for understanding this complex relationship. The insights presented in this review can pave the way for further exploration and research in the following areas: (1) Cultural and contextual differences in the impact of divorce on children's mental health. Different cultural norms, social support systems, and legal frameworks surrounding divorce may influence children's perceptions of and responses to parental separation, and the issue can be better analyzed not just in one particular region or country but in the context of multiple regions or countries. (2) Develop and evaluate effective intervention and prevention strategies. These strategies may include improved coping mechanisms, as well as effective ways to reduce the risk of depression in children after divorce, such as immunizing children before their parents divorce so that children slowly begin to understand the reasons for divorce and slowly begin to accept them. (3) A more comprehensive exploration of different family structures, such as stepfamilies and single-parent families. This inclusive approach to research will provide a broader perspective on how different family dynamics are shaped and how the psyches of children growing up in these particular families may develop differently. (4) Psychotherapeutic interventions after parental divorce can also be taken into account [17]. At the same time, some parents notice the psychological changes in their children and may get them treatment from a psychologist to enlighten them. We can further investigate whether these children have become psychologically healthy after psychotherapy or whether their negative emotions have improved.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper explores the intricate relationship between parental separation and childhood depression, revealing the underlying influences and underlying mechanisms that contribute to this phenomenon. As traditional family structures evolve into a variety of different arrangements, children

are faced with new challenges, especially when confronted with the emotional turmoil associated with parental divorce.

The empirical evidence provided in this paper emphasizes the increased stress, feelings of embarrassment, and neglect that children may experience following parental divorce. The review also delves into theoretical frameworks such as social learning theory, attachment theory, and family systems theory, which provide insightful perspectives for understanding the psychological processes and emotional dynamics involved.

The significance of this study is significant and demonstrates the need for further research, interventions, and prevention strategies. Recognizing the cultural and contextual nuances of the impact of divorce, as well as facilitating a more inclusive exploration of different family structures, can enrich our understanding and provide tailored support for affected children. The potential for psychotherapeutic interventions to guide children towards mental health is also worth exploring.

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