

The impact of divorce on middle & high schools students

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of divorce on middle and high school students' education. Considering the recent rise in the proportion of divorce and the students drop-out of school in UK, and Turkey,^{1,2} it is crucial to write about this topic to raise awareness of parents, teachers, counselors, social workers about it, and to contribute to the ongoing discussions about the impact of divorce on different age group of people. The main aim of this paper is to explain the concept of divorce, its impact on middle and high school students and also to provide school and parents based prevention strategies as well as school counselor and intervention techniques. By doing so, the paper anticipates to draw the attention of parents, schools, school counselors, and researchers considering this significant problem. The paper starts with a brief definition of divorce, followed by divorce impacts on middle and high school students, prevention strategies, and some intervention techniques that could be applied by teachers, school counselors, and parents to minimize the psychological effect of divorce on students from divorced parents.

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Literature review

According to Barthel and Marshall,³ divorce is the formal legal dissolution of legally constituted marriage. Diedrick,⁴ defined divorce as the as a profoundly devastating life experience. In my perspective, these definitions ignore cultural differences between people. A better definition of divorce could be a termination of a marriage through different processes including religion, cultural or judicial process. According to statistics on children of divorce (as cited in Jason, 2022), 21% of American children live without their fathers. Divorce has also affected children in Turkey. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (2020), meanwhile, the number of married couples were 542 thousand 314 in 2019, decreased by 10.1% to 487 thousand 270 in 2020. The crude marriage rate expressed as the number of marriages for every thousand inhabitants was 5.84 per thousand in 2020, and there were 165,937 children in the custody of their mother or father after their parents divorced. A study conducted in the UK by researchers from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2019), highlights that children with divorced parents in late childhood and early adolescence showed an average 16 percent increase in emotional difficulties and an 8 percent rise in behavioral troubles in the short term. Pong and Ju,⁵ have shown that high school withdrawal rates for students who reside with both parents were considerably less than for teens with single parents. They have argued that the dropout ratio is approximately twice as high for any student teen in a family type different from a two-parent intact family. The conventional wisdom is that children of middle and high school ages from divorce parents face many difficulties, ranging from difficulties such as aggressive behavior, delinquency, school failure, etc. The main role played by psychologists and sociologists in the construction of this point of view is central at the beginning of the twentieth century in particular by trying to establish a causality between domestic instability and delinquency.⁶ A study conducted in the UK by researchers from the UCL,¹ showed that kids with divorced parents in late childhood and early adolescence, from 7 to 14 years of age, showed an average 16 percent increase in emotional difficulties and an 8 percent rise in behavioral troubles in the short term. Jeynes,⁷ argued that on average, middle school students from divorced parents are slightly poorer in term cognitive ability compared with students who live in intact families. Divorce of parents mostly impacts students of middle or high school in many ways including academic performance, psychological

well-being, personality, behavior, and negative perspective on the people and their future lives.

Introduction

The issue of divorce and its effects on children has been raised repeatedly since the Age of Enlightenment. While it is generally accepted that divorce is a painful ordeal for children, it is harder to reach firm conclusions on the exact causal relationship between children's experience and long-term psychological, social, academic, or behavioral difficulties. The instability of couples today concerns all social backgrounds, different generations, different social spheres. Its impact varies considerably according to the values and norms in force. From the early twentieth century to the present, the psychological and social consequences of divorce on children have generally been assessed in negative terms.⁸ The conventional wisdom is that children of divorce face many difficulties, ranging from difficulties such as aggressive behavior, delinquency, school failure, etc. According to Heuyer, the principle role played by psychologists and sociologists in the construction of this point of view is central at the beginning of the 20th century, in particular by trying to establish a causality between domestic instability and delinquency. Moreover, the conceptual framework of systems theory suggests that prior to the onset of a divorce, each family had achieved an internal balance that allowed it to function. In some cases this balance is effective, harmonious and healthy, while in others it is unhealthy and dysfunctional. The balance that each family establishes in this way includes a functional component that allows it to meet the instructive needs of each member (food, clothing, social activities), and an affective component that allows each member to receive and give in terms of the need for warmth, attention, and emotional exchange. The physical and often emotional departure of one of the parents breaks the balance that has been built up. The resulting imbalance affects all members of the family unit, both those who "stay" as well as the parents. We can therefore say that one of the first consequences of a separation is an instability of the family structure. This destructuring will affect the roles, responsibilities, divisions of labor, and relationships that were previously built up. Furthermore, students of middle schools may face internal disorganization of familiar patterns. For a long time this may be a complex headache in which forms, as well as colors, may be distorted and discolored by the intensity of the prevailing emotions.

In addition, the lack of information about parental decision-making may leave a middle school student even more confused and unsure. To minimize the student's pain, some parents prefer to remain silent, but this does not achieve the desired outcome, because it is more appropriate to encourage and allow questions, comments and reactions to the separation than to allow doubts and fantasies to persist. Divorce of parents mostly impacts children in many ways, including academic performance, psychological well-being, personality, behavior, and negative perspective on the people and their future lives. A study conducted in the UK by researchers from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2019), highlights that kids with divorced parents in late childhood and early adolescence showed an average 16 percent increase in emotional difficulties and an 8 percent rise in behavioral troubles in the short term. Pong and Ju,⁵ have shown that high school withdrawal rates for students who reside with both parents were considerably less than for teens with single parents. They have argued that the dropout ratio is approximately twice as high for any student teen in a family type different from a two-parent intact family.

The impact of divorce on children's education

The impact of divorce on the education of children in middle and high school ages (as cited in Archambault⁹), another subject on which an impressive body of research has been mobilized over the last few decades, is no doubt commensurate with the concern about children's educational success today. The results vary, but it is remarkable that certain of these studies show that there is a high level of concern about children's academic success. One of the examples of this is the research findings of a demography thesis on the consequences of divorce on children's education conducted by Archambault in 2001.⁹ Based on the quantitative analysis of two surveys of young children age of 14 years old, the research compares the school-leaving age and the last degree obtained by young people according to their family situation at the age of 18, by controlling family background, measured by the father's socio-professional category, and educational, cultural heritage, and the mother's level of education. The diagnosis seems clear that regardless of social background, the breakup of the parental couple is associated with lower academic success in the child; the separation of the parents before the child reaches the age of maturity reduces the duration of the child's education from six months to more than a year on average; the educational advantage of growing up in a culturally and socially advantaged family appears to be significantly diminished.¹⁰ The author also points out that young people facing separation and divorce leave the parental home earlier, one to two years earlier, and form couples earlier, which may explain the potential fragility of these premature marriages. On the other hand, they do not experience significantly greater difficulties in finding employment than other members of their age group. Clearly, intergenerational conflicts play a very important role in these earlier exits from the parental household. Based on these young people's assessment of their trajectory, Archambault also shows that the desire for early independence is essential in the decision to stop studying. Wanting to earn a living is the reason for leaving school for 66% of the population with the low-graduation population. Another survey by Piketty published in 2003 qualifies these results. Through the method used, the author tests the effects of separation. He thus compares the school performance of children a few years before their parents' separation, and then the educational performance of middle school students living in a single-parent household post-separation. The result suggested that parent conflict seems to have negative effects on children's education and that the distribution of conflict intensity of conflict within couples did not vary much over time.¹¹

Furthermore, the most commonly identified changes in behavior at middle and high school s as a result of the parents' divorce

include decline in academic performance, symptoms of anxiety, higher levels of physical behavior such as being out-of-seat, difficulty concentrating, increased daydreaming, signs of sadness and depression, seeking the teacher's attention, a desire for more physical interaction. The appearance of these characteristics cannot be foreseen. It seems that each child reacts according to his or her own personal style. For example, a child of middle school ages may display regression behaviors, enuresis, increased need for physical contact and dependence on others. Feelings of shame and intense anger directed at the parent perceived to be responsible for the divorce, significant decline in academic performance, deterioration in peer relationships may be visible in a child of middle school age.¹² Research conducted by Ham,¹³ explored the influence of family structure on high school teens' grade point average and class attendance. The study revealed that students from intact family units do better than those from alternate family units, even if they are not in the same family structure; pupils from non-divorced parents achieved a higher GPA of almost 11%, when compared to students from divorced families. Some of the problems with the decline in student achievement is related to student attendance. Based on the findings of the same author, students from divorce parents missed approximately 60 percent as many classes compared to those from unbroken families. In addition, Levent,¹⁴ argues that in certain instances, children from divorced families in Turkey encounter similar challenges as suggested by researchers in western countries. Such difficulties may range from issues in developing peer relationships with other gender, behavioral issues, problems in the classroom, difficulties in following classroom rules, and decrease in academic performance. In short, in the midst of parents divorce conflicts, students may find it difficult to concentrate in school, and end up losing interest in their classes; working at home and doing homework can also be complicated when parents are fighting. Stress, anxiety, depression, lack of self-confidence; all these direct consequences of divorce, in the more or less long term, can then lead to the child's failure at school.

Parents & school based prevention strategies

Many parents are probably worried about how their divorce will affect their children. This can be difficult for every child. Children may go through many phases and reversals of emotion. They may feel sad, confused, guilty or worried about what will happen to them. How parents handle the changes will have a big impact on their well-being. In addition, in order to decrease the pain and the significant impact of divorce on children, the following suggestion should be taken into consideration. Parents should plan how to break the news to their children. If possible, parents should consider doing it together (mother and father). Parents should choose a time and place to talk about their divorce with the child. They should be honest, but consider the child's age when deciding what to tell him/her. Younger children need less detailed information, older children may want to know more, therefore the explanation should be made according to the age of the child. Parents should reassure the child that they still love him/her and that they will both continue to care for him/her. They should tell the child that he or she will have many opportunities to spend time with both parents. Young children, in particular, fear being responsible for the separation or divorce of their parents. As a result, parents should explain to the child that this is an adult problem and that there is nothing they could have done to prevent it. He or she may also need to know that neither he or she nor anyone else can change the parents' decision. Help them understand that the divorce is permanent and might be good for the family. Parents should encourage their child to talk openly about his or her feelings. When the child talks, they should listen carefully and try not to interrupt. It's normal for a child to have difficulty expressing his or her feelings, so parents should be patient.

Parents should answer questions regarding the problem as honestly as possible. In case if the child feels embarrassed to confide in them, parents should help him or her find someone he or she trusts, such as another family member, a teacher or a counselor. Parents should not discuss adult decisions or argue in front of the child. Children should not be involved in meetings with lawyers or others involved in the divorce process.

The Children of Divorce Intervention Program consists of a twelve-session school-based workshop that is specifically intended to empower school-aged youth with the skills to identify and appropriately communicate their emotions, clarify divorce-related misunderstandings, enhance adjustment, and foster positive self- and family perceptions by Rachel. The program has been successfully customized for K-8 children from diverse socio-cultural environments. Using a variety of assessments, Pedro-Carroll and colleagues,¹⁵ found short-term decreases in both internalizing and externalizing patterns of behavior, and increases in skills and enhancements in adaptive and problem-solving skills, relative to untreated population controls. In one quasi-experimental test, intervention benefits were sustained at the 2-year continuum for both internalizing and externalizing problems.¹⁶ Findings indicate that experimental and quasi-experimental programs and interventions for children's adjustment and parenting skills are highly successful in reducing the occurrence of psychological health issues in the children as a result of divorce. There are important implications for human health based on these findings. Meaningful improvements in depression and anxiety could be realized for a significant subpopulation of children today if these programs became broadly accessible.

Intervention

The role of a teacher and school

Throughout the child's development, schools hold a unique position, along with the family and the community as a whole. Children spend a large part of their lives in the school system, and school is the place where they learn, the most important task in this phase of their lives. Any interruption in this learning process, however temporary, may become a serious problem for the child if he or she is unable to resume the progression that will keep him or her in the peer group. As we have just seen, the crisis caused by a divorce might be a dangerous period for children by compromising their desire to learn, their concentration, their energy to face the new and in particular their whole attitude towards school. During this period, school and teachers often represent the only point of balance and continuation in a life where all else seems to be collapsing and vanishing. Some schools are very strict when it comes to the violence of school's rules by students. School may play an important role in assisting a child to pursue his/her education during a period of parental conflict or divorce by tolerating some of the negative behavior that the student might demonstrate in the school environment. The goal of the interventions with these children is to gradually bring them to an acceptance of reality, as painful as it may be. During this adaptation process, it is a matter of helping them to put a psychological distance between themselves and the problems that belong to their parents. These interventions may take place at any time and by both school counselor and the teacher (during class, at recess, after class, by phone). They can be spontaneous or planned.¹⁷⁻²⁰

Teacher and counselor become the stable person in the child's life, a parent replacement during a parental divorce of a student. The teacher and the counselor may support the child in maintaining and building self-esteem, which may be undermined during this time. This

support can be done by encouraging the child to express him/herself verbally or by using non-verbal techniques such as drawing, and by remaining sensitive to the child's loss. Through words, attitudes and openness, the teacher may encourage the child not to feel isolated, negatively different from his or her peers or ashamed of his or her situation. Both the school counselor and teacher should be particularly sensitive during parent meetings. They should be available to listen to the parent and be able to refer them to the school or other professional psychologists when they realize their limitations. In this case, the interventions are with people who have contact with the child, in this case parents and school personnel. The issue of divorce can be openly and directly addressed with the parent during parental meetings. Workshops can be organized around this topic. If the teacher and the counselor feel overwhelmed, they should call upon other school resources such as psychologists, social workers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would say that the situation of divorce involves a high risk of stress and imbalance for the child and his family. The school has a responsibility and an obligation to intervene to prevent the development of more unfortunate consequences. Continuing education programs should be organized to increase teachers' awareness and knowledge of the subject and to familiarize them with intervention strategies. It would also be highly desirable to have teachers and school counselors question their own personal values and positions on divorce so that they can better assist children in need without having this communication colored or distorted by individual biases. Beyond the effects on the child's academic success, divorce may lead to significant difficulties in the organization of the child's daily life. Faced with the changes that occur during divorce, a child may feel emotionally insecure, abandoned, and lose his or her bearings or self-esteem, which may lead to a rejection of the rules of school life, opposition to teachers, and disinvestment on the contrary. It is therefore necessary to be very attentive to the child's rhythms and to organize his/her daily life around the essential principle of respect for the interests of the child.

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Conflict of interest

Author declared there is no conflict of interest.

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