

After Divorce, Stable Families Help Minimize Long-Term Harm To Children

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For children of divorce, what happens after their parents split up may be just as important to their long-term well-being as the divorce itself.

A new study found that children who lived in unstable family situations after their parents divorced fared much worse as adults on a variety of measures compared to children who had stable post-divorce family situations.

“For many children with divorced parents, particularly young ones, the divorce does not mark the end of family structure changes – it marks the beginning,” said Yongmin Sun, co-author of the study and associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University’s Mansfield campus.

“A stable family situation after divorce does not erase the negative effects of a divorce, but children in this situation fare much better than do those who experience chronic instability”

The study appears in a recent issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Sun conducted the study with Yuanzhang Li of the Allied Technology Group.

Data for this study came from the National Education Longitudinal Study, which surveyed thousands of students across the country beginning in 8th grade in 1988, when they were about 14 years old. They were surveyed again in 1990, 1992 and then again in 2000 when they were about 26 years old.

The study compared children who grew up in three different situations:

- Children who grew up in always-married households (5,303 children).
- Children whose parents divorced before the study began, but who lived in a stable family structure between ages 14 and 18(954 children).
- Children whose parents divorced prior to the beginning of the study, and whose family situation changed once or twice between ages 14 and 18(697 children).

In the two divorced family groups, children may have lived in single-parent families or ones with a stepparent. The key for this research was whether that arrangement – whichever it was -- changed between ages 14 and 18).

The researchers compared how children in these groups fared on measures of education, income and poverty in 2000 when they were 26.

Results showed that young adults who grew up in stable post-divorce families had similar chances of attending college and living in poverty compared to those from always married families. But they fared less well on measures of the highest degree obtained, occupational prestige and income.

However, the young adults who lived in unstable family situations after their parents divorced did worse on all measures. In fact, they fared more than twice as poorly on most measures compared to their peers who had stable family situations.

For example, adults from stable post-divorce families earned about \$1,800 a year less than similar adults from always-married families. But those adults whose family situations changed one or more times between ages 14 and 18 earned about \$4,600 less.

Sun noted that some of the children in the unstable family group also underwent a custody change between ages 14 and 18. An analysis showed that they did not fare significantly differently from those who were in unstable families, but did not experience a custody change.

There were also no significant differences between how boys and girls responded to family stability after a divorce, Sun said.

Why do children of divorce fare less well than those who grew up with parents who stayed married?

This study found that for those in stable post-divorce families, the difference in adult well-being was mostly due to a shortage of economic and social resources. Compared to always-married parents, divorced parents had a lower level of income, didn't talk to their children as much about school-related matters, had fewer interactions with other parents, and moved their children to new schools more often.

“As many previous divorce studies point out, divorce reduces social resources within families because children have fewer interactions with the non-custodial parent, and in many cases, don't get the quantity and quality of parenting from the custodial parent,” Sun said.

“In addition, after a family disruption, parents may not invest as much time with teachers and other parents in the community, all of which lead to a lower level of child well-being.”

For children in unstable families, the decline in social and economic resources was only part of the reason for the shortfalls they experienced in adulthood.

“These children probably experience a lot of stress and disruption from sources that we didn't measure in this study,” he said.

These findings provide a clear message about how parents who are divorcing can best help their children, Sun said.

“A stabilized post-divorce family environment is clearly helpful for children, particularly for adolescents, such as those we studied, because stability allows children to focus on their own developmental needs rather than on continual family crises,” he said.

Source: Ohio State University

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