

Study: Children of divorce lag behind peers in math and social skills

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Children whose parents get divorced generally don't experience detrimental setbacks in the pre-divorce period, but often fall behind their peers—and don't catch up—when it comes to math and interpersonal social skills after their parents begin the divorce process, according to a new study.

In addition, the study, which appears in the June issue of the *American Sociological Review*, finds that [children](#) of [divorce](#) are more likely to struggle with anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness. This increase in "internalizing problem behaviors" also begins during the divorce process and does not dissipate.

"People tend to think that couples go through intense marital conflict before they decide to divorce," said study author Hyun Sik Kim, a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "My original prediction was that children of divorce would experience negative impacts even before formal divorce processes began. But, my study finds that this is not the case."

Instead, Kim finds that children begin experiencing developmental problems after their parents commence the divorce process, and these issues continue to plague them even after the divorce is finalized. Interestingly, these problems neither worsen nor improve following the divorce.

"This study reveals that these negative impacts do not worsen in the post-

divorce stage, although there is no sign that children of divorce catch up with their counterparts either," Kim said.

Relying on nationally representative data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class 1998 to 1999, the study traces the development of 3,585 kids from the time they entered kindergarten in the fall of 1998 through fifth grade, and compares children of divorce with kids from intact families. A unique feature of the study is that it focuses on divorces that occur when children are between first and third grade, which enables Kim to examine the effects of divorce during three separate stages: pre-divorce (kindergarten to first grade), during-divorce (first to third grade), and post-divorce (third to fifth grade).

According to Kim, there are many reasons why children whose parents are divorced or in the process of getting divorced would experience developmental setbacks.

These factors may include stress that children experience as result of seeing their parents blaming each other for the divorce or arguing about custody; an unstable living situation in which children are shuttled between parents or forced to move to another region with a parent who receives primary or sole custody, thus disrupting the children's social network; economic hardship due to a sudden drop in family income; and residual effects of a parent's divorce related depression, Kim said.

"Having one's [parents](#) go through a divorce can be very unsettling for a child," Kim said.

While the study finds that divorce has adverse effects on children's math test scores, interpersonal [social skills](#), and internalizing problem behaviors, in general, children of divorce don't experience negative impacts on their reading scores or "externalizing [problem behaviors](#)," which indicates how often they do such things as argue, fight, or get

angry.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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