

Divorce and Children Part I: An Interview with Robert Hughes, Jr., Ph.D.

Peggy Patten

Robert Hughes (RH) is an Associate Professor and Extension Specialist in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Ohio State University. For the past 20 years, he has conducted educational programs in family relations for family life professionals, and for family members themselves, with a primary emphasis on families at risk, family stress, and single parenting. Parent News (PN) asked him to discuss his work in the area of divorce and its impact on children.

The following article is the first of two interviews on divorce and children. It discusses the impact of divorce on children's behavior and academic achievement. The second article, scheduled for the November/December issue of Parent News, will look at what parents, teachers, and caregivers can do to help children adjust to divorce and will include a list of resources.

PN: What is the current divorce rate? Has the divorce rate changed much over the past 5 to 10 years?

RH: The divorce rate in the United States has generally been going up throughout the 20th century until its peak in the late 1970s. The rate of divorce has been slowly declining since that peak. In the most recent data, there were about 20 divorces for every 1,000 women over the age of 15. This number is down from about 23 divorces per 1,000 women in 1978, but it is still significantly greater than the rate of divorce during the 1950s. At that time, the rate of divorce was about 5 per 1,000 women.

The divorce rate has been climbing in every industrialized country in the world. There are two significant factors affecting the rising divorce rate in the United States and elsewhere: (1) men and women are less

in need of each other for economic survival, and (2) gains made in birth control allow men and women to separate sexual activity from having children.

A variety of factors are producing the current leveling off of the divorce rate. We may be at the end of the effects produced by the emergence of reliable birth control in the 1960s, but there are also other factors. Our population is aging, and in general longer marriages are more likely to remain intact. Also, more young people are cohabiting rather than getting married. The breakup of this kind of relationship does not get recorded as a divorce.

PN: What are some of the outcomes for children who experience divorce?

RH: It is important to note that while divorce increases children's risk for a variety of problems, not all children who experience divorce have problems. Children of divorce are twice as likely as children living in nondivorced families to experience difficulties. Roughly 20% to 25% of these children will have problems. Another way of saying this is that 75% to 80% will not experience these difficulties. In other words, while children of divorce are at greater risk, most will not have major problems.

PN: What are some of the problems children frequently have?

RH: Children from divorced families are more likely to have academic problems. They are more likely to be aggressive and get in trouble with school authorities or the police. These children are more likely to have low self-esteem and feel depressed. Children who grow up in divorced families often have more difficulties getting along with siblings, peers, and their parents. Also, in adolescence, they are more likely to engage in delinquent activities, to get involved in

early sexual activity, and to experiment with illegal drugs. In adolescence and young adulthood, they are more likely to have some difficulty forming intimate relationships and establishing independence from their families.

PN: Can you elaborate on the effects of divorce on children's academic achievement?

RH: Whether you use children's grades, standardized test scores, or dropout rates, children whose parents divorce generally have poorer scores. These results have been found quite consistently throughout a variety of research studies over the past three decades. Importantly, children's actual performance on tests consistently shows this difference, but results based on teacher or parent reports are less likely to show this difference. We believe that both parents and teachers often underestimate the difficulties a child may be having in school or may not recognize the problems.

In some cases, it appears that children's difficulties with school may be caused more by their behavior than their intellectual abilities. The pattern may be somewhat different for boys and girls. Boys are more likely to be aggressive and have problems getting along with their peers and teachers. These problems may lead them to spend less time in school or on their school work. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to experience depression, which may interfere with their ability to concentrate on schoolwork or to put as much effort into their work. School success has long-term implications for children's success in life, and so it is important to find ways to support children from divorced families.

PN: Are there other ways that boys and girls differ in their response to divorce?

RH: Early research seemed to indicate that boys might experience more difficulties than girls. Today, there are few consistent findings. These changes may be due to more children being reared in joint custody arrangements and more involvement of fathers in general in the lives of their children after divorce. In the school-age years, boys are more likely to be

aggressive and get into fights, while girls are more likely to experience depression, as I mentioned earlier. But by adolescence, both boys and girls are more likely to engage in negative conduct and experience bouts of sadness. Adolescent girls are likely to be involved in early sexual behavior, leading to a greater risk of teenage pregnancy and parenting. This set of events can also have dramatic effects on their completion of school and their ability to enter the workforce and earn a good living. Adolescent boys are likely to spend more time with deviant peers and engage in delinquent behavior, including substance abuse. Like the young women, adolescent boys are likely to engage in early sexual behavior and become teen parents.

On the positive side, there are some girls who emerge out of the divorced, mother-headed households as exceptionally resilient young women. It seems that some young women thrive on the increased responsibilities and challenges that they face in these families, and they develop warm and deeply affectionate ties with their mothers. Similar findings do not occur for boys.

PN: What kinds of behavior changes can parents, teachers, and caregivers expect to see during the time around a separation or divorce?

RH: Parents need to remember that divorce is stressful for their children, just as it is for the parents. In the short-term—perhaps for several months or even a couple of years—children may act in ways that are irritating and sometimes disruptive. This behavior is understandable in view of the changes taking place.

PN: How do behavior changes vary with the age of the child?

RH: Each child will react somewhat differently to divorce or separation. Let me tell you about some of the more common behavior responses.

Very little is known about the effects of divorce on children younger than 2 years of age. When the bonds between parent and child are severely

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disrupted, there may be a problem. However, very young children do not necessarily suffer just because a divorce has occurred. Both parents can stay actively involved in child rearing, or one parent can maintain a strong, healthy relationship with the child.

Children from 3 to 5 years of age who go through divorce tend to be fearful and resort to immature or aggressive behavior. They might return to security blankets or old toys. Some may have lapses in toilet training. These types of behavior rarely last for more than a few weeks. Most children are confused about what is happening or about why mom or dad has left. Children often deny that anything has changed.

Preschoolers may also become less imaginative and cooperative in their play. Children may spend more time playing by themselves than with friends. They also may show more anxiety, depression, anger, and apathy in their play and in their interactions with both children and adults. Socially, preschoolers tend to spend more time seeking attention and the nearness of adults. At the same time, they may resist adult suggestions and commands. Some children become much more aggressive.

On the positive side, preschool children also try to understand the situation. They attempt to bring some order to their world by trying to explain to themselves what is happening and by trying to be well behaved. Though it takes some time, most children gradually understand the situation and adjust to it. In the short term, there do not seem to be any effects on the academic achievement of children. They are likely to do just as well in school as they did before the divorce.

Children 6 to 8 years old have some understanding of what the divorce means. With their better sense of what is taking place, these children are able to deal with what is happening. Many young school-age children experience deep grief over the breakup of the family. Some children are fearful and yearn for the absent parent.

If the mother has custody, boys tend to behave aggressively toward her. Many children feel conflicts

in loyalty to one parent or the other, even if the parents made no effort to make the child take sides.

Older school-age children—ages 9 to 12—try to understand the divorce and keep their behavior and emotions under control. While they may have feelings of loss, embarrassment, and resentment, these children actively involve themselves in play and activities to help manage these feelings. They may make up games and act out make-believe dramas concerning their parents' divorce. These activities seem to help the child cope with the situation. Anger is perhaps the most intense emotion felt by this group of children. This anger may be aimed at one parent or at both parents. These children may also be more easily drawn into choosing one parent over the other. Children who become drawn into struggles between the parents tend to have more difficulties.

While adolescents understand the divorce situation better than younger children do, they too experience some difficulties adjusting. Many teens feel that they are being pushed into adulthood with little time for a transition from childhood. They may feel a loss of support in handling emerging sexual and aggressive feelings. In some cases, adolescents may even feel that they are in competition with their parents when they see them going on dates and becoming romantically involved. Sometimes, teens have grave doubts about their own ability to get married or stay married.

Many adolescents seem to mature more quickly following a divorce. They take on increased responsibilities in the home, show an increased appreciation of money, and gain insight into their own relationships with others. On the other hand, adolescents may be drawn into the role of taking care of the parent and fail to develop relationships with peers.

PN: Are there any particular signs that teachers or caregivers should be aware of that signal a child is having difficulty?

RH: The signs and symptoms in children when they are going through their parents' divorce are similar to

the reactions we see to other stressful events. The most important sign is any significant change in a child's usual pattern of behavior. Some children will react by being easily angered, and others will react by withdrawing from the usual peer activities.

Let me mention some of the common reactions teachers or caregivers may see in children experiencing divorce. Some of these are more likely to occur in younger children, and some are more likely in older children. Young children are more likely to show regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking, increased whining, difficulty making transitions, and increased need to be with a teacher or other caregiver. Older children are more likely to be disobedient, to talk back, and to be destructive. All children are likely to have some new fears about where their parents are or if they will see parents again. Many of these children will have trouble sleeping; be unusually quiet or withdrawn; complain about headaches, stomachaches, and other symptoms of illness; and be distractible and restless. There also may be significant declines in school performance, tardiness, absences, and difficulties getting along with peers. Few children will show all of these signs, but almost all children will show some of these symptoms, especially when there are significant events at home such as a parent moving out, an appearance in court, and general disruptions in the usual home routine.

PN: Can we predict which children will have problems?

RH: Not very well. We have some good ideas, but we are still unable to accurately predict which children are most vulnerable. Here are some things to consider. Children who are intelligent, socially mature, and responsible are more likely to adapt well to their parents' divorce. Children with a sense of humor and who get along easily with others are likely to get more support from other adults around them. Children who are difficult to manage and who engage in negative interactions with their parents and other caregivers are likely to have more difficulties adjusting at least in part because others are less likely to offer them support.

PN: In addition to age and gender, what other factors influence how well a child copes with divorce?

RH: There are many influencing factors. Two others include the amount of conflict between parents and the support available from friends and family.

PN: In the next article, we'll ask Robert Hughes what parents, teachers, and caregivers can do to reduce the negative effects of divorce on children.

For More Information

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