

# The Impact of Divorce on Children: **More Than Just a Split**

BY AARON PERKEL / 16 June 2024



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**D**ivorce is a significant disruption in a child's life. The effects of divorce are not only felt during childhood but can have cascading impacts throughout their whole lives. While many people perceive divorce to be just a separation of parents, it involves a wide array of experiences and adjustments for children that go far beyond the immediate aftermath.

The summer before I started 7th grade, my parents told me that they were going to get a divorce. This did not come as a surprise to me as they had been quite

unhappy with each other for a good amount of time. I felt as if I had mentally prepared for this moment, and the news had almost come as a relief to me. In the moment, my 12-year-old brain did not think that this would affect me that much. My Dad is a urologist and would work long hours every day. If he moved out, I would see him less, but probably not much less. Maybe we would move to a smaller house, but my siblings would still live with me, and my mom would still live with us and see us most of the time. I would see my Dad every Wednesday night, and every other weekend. It did not feel like much change to me. However, problems started to develop when my Dad met my, now, stepmom.

Blending families is rough. Having a complete stranger come into your day-to-day life and expecting that to work with no issues is a big ask. My stepmom is very kind and did not push or overstep any boundaries when she moved in. Still, I remember having trouble with how fast I felt things were moving. With a good support system and some counseling, everything has worked out as well as it could have, in my opinion. I do suffer from pretty bad anxiety now in my early twenties, and I do wonder if that has something to do with my parents divorcing at such a pivotal moment in my childhood development.



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# Pre-Divorce

Divorce does not start at the date of separation. The period leading up to the separation, known as the pre-divorce, contains a multitude of conflicts that extend into the post-divorce period. This pre-divorce period can include the most intense conflicts that can be, in ways, more distressing for children than the actual divorce itself. Research indicates that "many problems and concerns previously attributed to divorce have their roots in the period of family interaction before the divorce and in the ongoing conflicts in many families after the divorce itself" (Bryner, 2001).

Children often carry the load of pre-divorce conflicts. A child might feel trapped, or stuck, in a home environment riddled with conflicts. This period brings on physical violence, financial hardship, and much emotional turmoil. All of these can be extremely hard to process for a young child. In one study, half of the children cited the pre-divorce period as the most challenging time, describing it as a "strife-ridden home to which they felt victim" (Luepnitz, 1979). The relief that many children feel post-divorce, including myself, is often a result of the cessation of many of these conflicts.

# Post-Divorce

While the pre-divorce period has many obvious effects on a child, the post-divorce period brings on some lesser-known effects. This is the time when most children have to learn to navigate new family dynamics. This can be either a new blended family or just reduced contact with one of their parents. About a quarter of children in one study identified this time as the most difficult part of their parents' divorce, primarily due to these reasons. This transition can lead a child to feelings of loss. This is because they may be seeing one parent much more infrequently or even not at all, and there is not the closure there that losing a loved one brings. It can also bring feelings of instability as they may feel as if they have to choose sides or pick one parent. These feelings can persist into adulthood.

# The Age Factor

Something that is not often considered when thinking about divorce is the age of the child at the time of divorce. Children are constantly undergoing pivotal changes as they grow up, and the timing of a traumatic event can derail those advancements. Young children (aged 0-4) tend to be more vulnerable to long-term adverse effects, such as depression in adulthood. At first glance, this does not make intuitive sense, as a younger child would be more likely to not remember a divorce. However, the younger the child, the more different their childhood will be than if their parents were married.



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Thinking about a child who is in their late teens, they had as much childhood as they could have had with their parents married. A study in Norway revealed that children in their younger teens were 12% more likely to purchase antidepressants compared to those in their late teens (Kravdal & Grundy, 2019). This is because they may have a better emotional understanding and coping mechanisms, which can counteract some of the negative outcomes of divorce.

# A Complex Tapestry of Effects

Divorce casts a long shadow over a child's future. This influences their perspectives on relationships and commitment. Some studies have found that children of divorce are more likely to experience divorce in their own marriages. This is possibly due to a lower commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage (Lyngstad & Engelhardt, 2009). This cycle of divorce can perpetuate instability across generations.

By recognizing the diverse experiences of children of divorce, we can better address their needs and help mitigate the long-term effects of this life-altering event. In my life, I felt that my parents' intervention with family counseling, and having a family that knew a strong support group was important, we managed to resolve many of the problems that divorce brought to the table. I am thankful for this and believe that with these tools, even the most painful of divorces can be blocked from affecting a child for the rest of their life.

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