

Effects of Divorce on Children's Health

1. Physical Health

Parental divorce affects children's physical health and longevity. Those who experience parental divorce or separation are more likely to have health problems¹⁾ (often in spite of maternal remarriage²⁾) such as a significant increase in injury rates, an increased risk of asthma,³⁾ and increased risk of asthma-related emergencies.⁴⁾ Children whose parents divorce are also more likely to contract cancer of the upper aerodigestive tract, the esophagus, anus, pancreas, lungs, and cervix. Researchers Kari Hemminki and Bowang Chen state, "The results show that offspring of divorced parents have increased cancer risks at tobacco-related, alcohol-related and sex-related sites."⁵⁾ A Swedish study showed that young men with divorced parents had a slightly heightened risk of hospitalization and significantly increased risk of [mortality](#).⁶⁾

2. Longevity

The child of divorced parents has a higher risk of premature death.⁷⁾ According to one study, parental divorce before the age of 21 is associated with a mortality risk increase of 44 percent⁸⁾ and a lifespan shortened by an average of 4.5 years.⁹⁾ A child's mortality risk increases when his parents' divorce occurs before reaching age four.¹⁰⁾ An eight-decade study started by Dr. Lewis Terman in 1921 concluded,

The long-term health effects of parental divorce were often devastating—it was a risky circumstance that changed the pathways of many of the young Terman participants. Children from divorced families died almost five years earlier on average than children from intact families. Parental divorce, not parental death, was the risk. In fact, parental divorce during childhood was the single strongest social predictor of early death, many years into the future.¹¹⁾

3. Mental Health

Divorce wreaks havoc on the psychological stability of many children.¹²⁾ Furthermore, the psychological effects of divorce are persistent: Children from divorced families have more [emotional](#) and [behavioral](#) problems,¹³⁾ negative feelings,¹⁴⁾ and less psychological well-being¹⁵⁾ than adults from [intact families](#).

Upon the divorce of their parents, children experience a wide range of emotional reactions, including sadness,¹⁶⁾ anger,¹⁷⁾ loneliness,¹⁸⁾ depression (which frequently lasts into later phases of life¹⁹⁾), heightened anxiety,²⁰⁾ worry, lower life satisfaction,²¹⁾ lower self-esteem²²⁾ and self-confidence,²³⁾ fear, yearning, rejection, conflicting loyalties, and a sense of fault for their parents' problems.²⁴⁾ An analysis by David Popenoe of the National Survey of Children found that divorce was associated with a higher incidence of several mental health problems in children: depression; withdrawal from friends and family; aggressive, impulsive, or hyperactive behavior; and either behaving disruptively or withdrawing from [participation in the classroom](#).²⁵⁾ Parental divorce may also contribute to the development of mood disorders, bipolar I disorder, dysthymia (mild chronic depression), depression,

and post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁶⁾

When children experience parental divorce before age five, they are particularly vulnerable to emotional conflicts at the time of their parents' separation.²⁷⁾ They will frequently cling to their parents and "regress" to bedwetting and [other behaviors](#) more characteristic of younger children. Older children, rather than clinging, frequently withdraw from home life and [seek intimacy](#) elsewhere.²⁸⁾ If divorce occurs while the children are teenagers (12 to 15 years old), they tend to react in one of two very different ways: by attempting to avoid growing up or by attempting to "speed through" adolescence.²⁹⁾ Early [sexual activity](#), [substance abuse or dependence](#), [hostile behavior](#), and depression are all more likely to occur following divorce. These reactions are most likely if the parents divorced prior to age five, slightly less so if they divorce after age 10, and seemingly least of all during the five- to 10-year-old phase.³⁰⁾

Divorce is related to increased depression and anxiety for both boys and girls of all ages.³¹⁾ However, boys find parental divorce more emotionally disturbing than girls do,³²⁾ and "boys with divorced parents tended to be more depressed than those from two-parent families regardless of the psychological adjustment, level of conflict, or [quality of parenting](#) manifested by their parents."³³⁾

Psychological problems are less severe for those whose pre-divorce families were high-conflict families.³⁴⁾ According to Paul Amato of the Department of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University, child and adult well-being may actually improve after the end of an extremely conflicted marriage.³⁵⁾

4. Intergenerational Effects

(See [Long Term Effects of Divorce](#))

The British National Longitudinal study of children born in 1958 found that those who experienced parental divorce between ages seven through 16 experienced significant increases in their risk of psychopathology.³⁶⁾ A large Finnish study found that 22-year-old children of divorced parents experienced more job loss, that sons experienced more conflict with supervisors and teachers, and that daughters experienced more interpersonal conflict.³⁷⁾ A large sample from Sweden (over 14,000 participants) confirms the negative effects of parental divorce on mental health, no matter the socioeconomic status of the family.³⁸⁾ German research yields similar findings,³⁹⁾ as does an Australian parliamentary report.⁴⁰⁾

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