

FAMILY DYNAMICS, FAMILY BREAKUPS, AND THEIR IMPACTS ON CHILDREN

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The number of family breakups has been increasing in the last few decades, particularly in the developed, industrial world. By far the highest divorce rate in the industrial countries is that of the United States. According to current rates, about half of all American marriages are dissolved. In Europe, two out of every five marriages in Britain, Denmark and Sweden will end in divorce, and in Japan one marriage in five (The Economist, 26 December 1992, p. 46). Yet, this phenomenon does not only belong to the developed world, since it has begun to be found in the developing world such as Indonesia.

According to Singarimbun and Parmore (1992), divorce and remarriage rates in Indonesia are higher than elsewhere in Asia. It is also noticed that there is a transformation on the structure of the family as the number of divorce is increasing. The growing tendency of marital dissolution leads to a greater number of single-headed family (Effendi & Sukamdi, 1994).

As societies become vulnerable to divorce, and thus the numbers of children involved in divorce are growing, many say that divorce is awfully harmful to children. It has been generally accepted that many disturbed and delinquent children are the products of broken homes and that family breakup must inevitably lead to disastrous results. Accordingly, many experts, particularly in the field of psychology and education, give more attention to divorce and its impacts on the members of the family, especially children, because the well-being of children is often considered as the proper measure of the health of civilization.

The results of several studies indeed show that children from single parents have more psychosocial problems than those from intact families. For instances, separate studies by Judith Wallerstein and Sara McLanahan in the United States, and Kiernan in Britain, found that children of divorce and of the lone parent are more likely to be involved in violence, drug abuse, and youth suicide, and they are more likely to drop out of school, be jobless, marry during their teens, have a child before marrying and experience a breakdown of their own marriages. They are also more unhappy and lonely, and more likely to have emotional instability. Children of divorce are also found to be less well-adjusted to new social environment, have lower self-esteem, and are more emotionally disturbed than children who live in intact families (Fortune, 10 August 1992, p. 58).

Yet, many people fail to understand the condition of children of divorce from a more integral perspective. They merely focus on the psychological aspects of the divorce and do not see other determining aspects which can also harm the children. When people make the statement that divorce jeopardizes children, then the implication of this statement is: "Well, all you have to do is forget the divorce." So if we avoid divorce, then the kids would grow very well. In fact, avoiding the divorce does not necessarily make the kids get better. It means that divorce itself does not really cause the psychosocial problems of the children.

There is a variety of factors that may lead to divorce, which may harm children whether divorce occurs or not. Family dynamics, which has to do with conflict, plays an essential role in this matter. Open conflict at home, particularly in the context of the children being involved directly or indirectly, seems to have the most harmful impact for children (Stevenson, 1993). If Mom and Dad are constantly fighting, throwing things at each other, using the kids in fighting against each other, or at the worst an abusive father is blatantly beating a mother, the children are certainly going to have difficulties, whether the parents eventually divorce or not.

Accordingly, Stevenson says that a longitudinal study showed that children of divorce who have problems were already having problems long before their parents broke up. Therefore, it is not the divorce per se that is causing the problem, although that is the way it appears to the clinicians, to the press, to the aunts, uncles and relatives who say, "Children will be fine if you both salvage the marriage". Home with a lot of open conflict will be awfully harmful to children. Therefore, in some respect, if the divorce were to decrease the conflict, then divorce can be perceived as a solution rather than a problem

Besides the family dynamics before the divorce, there is another troubling issue, i.e. the socioeconomic issues that surface after the divorce. The differences in economic and social impacts of divorce upon men, women, and children will be examined hereby, since it significantly influences the well-being of children, the future generation.

An economic analysis on lone parenthood found that by the late 1980s, half of all single parents in the United States lived below the poverty line, and 70 percent of these poor families were headed by divorced or separated women. The feminization of poverty has proceeded at such a pace that Susan Moller Okin speculates that if present trends continue, almost all of those below the poverty line in the year 2000 will be women and children (Okin, 1991). Part of this has got to do with the sexual discrimination that is still dreadfully going on in the world. Women in most cultures have a far more difficult time in making a reasonable wage, and this is compounded in the situation of single mothers who are not just responsible for kids but also have to work outside the home in a poorly-paid job. They play the roles of single parent and single earner all at once. Their condition is worsened by the lack of father's participation in the financial support of their children.

The Economist (22 December 1992) reported that compared with children from two-parent families, about 73 percent of the children in single parent families are poor for some time before they reach ten, whereas only about 20 percent of the children in two-parent families experience poverty. The difference of economic figures between women and men after

divorce is also awful. According to Harvard sociologist Lenore Weitzman, in the U.S. men experience an average 42 percent rise in their standard of living within the first year, whereas women and children experience a more than 70 percent decline. This is because of the fact that in 90 percent of divorces, children live with their mothers, so for most women and children, divorce means precipitous downward mobility -- both economically and socially.

Unlike women who generally do not abandon their children after the separation or divorce, more than one-third of absent fathers ignore their legal obligation to continue to support their children. Quoting the words of Michael Novak, our society has fostered not only the feminization of poverty, but also the "masculinization of irresponsibility" (Criner, 1991). Besides the payment inequalities in the work force, the selfish behavior of divorced men leads to serious economic hardship for divorced women and their children.

Poverty among women-headed families makes single mothers hardly provide sufficient resources for their kids to improve their education and standard of living. This may explain why children of divorce are pulled out of school earlier and have poor education which in turn will lead them to difficulties in finding a good job. The no-end exhausting household chores and in the workplace outside the home can also make single mothers easily frustrated, angry, or experience other emotional instability. This in turn can influence their role as parents. For instance, the quality of emotional bonds and communication between mother and children will be worsened, so the children will feel uncomfortable being at home and therefore will seek the feeling of being accepted from other sources such as from peers. The bad thing in this case is if they unfortunately meet bad-behaved peers, because they will be easily tempted to take part in delinquent behavior such as drugs addict, violent or criminal behavior of the peers.

Concerning post-divorce issues which affect children, another noticeable aspect besides socioeconomic issues is the multiple connection between children and healthy caring adults besides their mother, whoever they are: father, baby-sitter, grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors, or other people who are at their side in times of need for a long period of time. The continuing involvement with a children's extended family, particularly their grandparents from both sides, will benefit children a great deal. Grandparents may not be as likely to be divorced as the parents, and in that stability children can glimpse "how it could be." They might even see love in action as Grandma and Grandpa accommodate each other and work out differences of opinion successfully (Marshner, 1990).

Last but not least, a good relationship between mother and absent father after the divorce plays an important role as it makes children feel loved by both, and it ensures children that the divorce is not because of their faults. This effort might be difficult, since there is an assumption that parents who are divorced have difficulty in working together. According to Stevenson, that is why in the United States training for divorced parents has become more common. The aim of the training is to help parents learning to continue good parenting despite the fact that they may not like each other very much and that they may not be willing

to maintain the marriage. It helps divorcees to deal with their own feelings and to continue to parent well.

The experience of counseling services has also indicated that when parents help children absorb and understand the conflict they feel in such a situation, the children can sometimes -- not happily, certainly, but surely -- grow through it. Several suggestions commonly given by psychologists are: (1) children should be told the truth about a pending divorce in amounts determined by their age and ability to understand, (2) children should be ensured that the divorce is not caused by their own faults, (3) the parent-in-custody should let the out-of-the-home parent maintain a good relationship with children, and (4) the parent-in-custody should not try to be perfect in being both father and mother (often in order to compensate for their guilty feelings about the divorce), because this unrealistic effort will make the children's situation worse and more complicated.

To sum up, the divorce itself does not directly "harm" the children. Instead, various factors such as family dynamics before the divorce, the post-divorce socioeconomic conditions, and the quality of the relationship between children with their divorced parents and other healthy caring adults, play determining factors in the well-being of children. If these factors can be dealt with well, the children of divorce in the long run will be the ones who win over the difficulties brought indirectly by the divorce, because they will have an easier time coping with the various changes in their lives.

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