Divorce and Its Effects on Children

Literature Survey B

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Alejandra Chavez

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Abstract

Divorce is a heart breaking experience that transforms the lives of parents and children. This devastating event affects parents’ emotional, psychological, and economical stability. It also impacts parents’ relationship with their offspring. Divorce modifies the family structure and the concept children had about their family and the world around them. These multiple changes attached to the family separation generate conflicting emotions in children that deeply affect their well-being. For some children of divorce, parental separation would become a destructive experience that would harm their life without end. For others, divorce would represent an avenue for growth, peace of mind, and an opportunity for more prosperous life conditions. At the end, what would make the difference is the approach that each individual takes after the parental separation. Although it would not be easy, with the commitment and understanding from parents and children the post divorce experience can be more manageable and productive. Post-divorce education, family support, and the assistance of professional support services can be valuable tools in helping parents and children in their adjustment process after divorce.
SECTION I: The problem

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In the last decades, the incidence of divorce has been increasing in the United States. More and more marriages are being dissolved, and in multiple cases, children are involved. These children are being confronted with emotions such as anger, fear, and confusion. These feelings impact their self esteem, social interactions, behavior, and academic performance. Divorce represents a drastic change in the life of children and adults. Constantly, parents are not aware of the multiple aspects that this new life style will bring for them and for their children. Being educated in these matters could help parents be better prepared to confront and adjust to this stressful experience. This understanding could also assist parents, family members, teachers, and professional support services in making the coping-assimilation process of divorce easier for the children involved.

Purpose of the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature survey is to investigate the impact that divorce could have on the well-being and development of children. It will study the influence of parents’ emotional and economic stability- before, during, and after separation- in children’s adjustment to divorce. In addition, the survey will explore the effects that divorce could have in adulthood in those
individuals who experienced it at an early age. Finally, this literature review is dedicated to find strategies that could support parents and children who are living under the stressful experience of divorce.

Importance of the Literature Review

The process and life after divorce is not easy. Parents and children in these circumstances have to confront a series of changes that modify their lifestyle, behavior, emotional well-being, and their expectation and concept of life. During the process of divorce, interrelations among parents and children are affected. Children’s health, social-emotional, and cognitive development are also in jeopardy. In many instances, parents of divorce see their separation as a road to freedom, peace, and alleviation without thinking of the repercussion that this decision could have in their own and their children’s welfare. Other parents are concerned about the impact their divorce might have on their children, but they are limited in their knowledge on the magnitude of these effects. Further, parents in these conditions are unsure as to what approach they should take in their parent-child relationship. They feel deficient in their abilities to make their own and their children’s adjustment to divorce more manageable.

This literature review is important in highlighting current research findings on the impact of divorce in children. It is relevant in presenting information in regards to the role and responsibility parents have with their children during and after divorce. The survey is significant in providing strategies to help parents and children cope and adjust to the stressful experience of
divorce. This literature survey will provide information that can be useful for any individual (parent, caregiver, or teacher) who is affected or serving children from divorce.

Scope of the Literature Review

The topic of divorce is extensive and includes multiple interesting areas of study. However, this literature survey will focus only on the effects that divorce has on the socio-emotional development of children. The data gathered through the review of different books, empirical articles, and websites are concentrated on children in the U. S. In addition, the information makes reference to the impact that the experience of parental divorce at an early age could have in the life of an individual in his/her early adolescence and adulthood.

SECTION II: Literature Review

Introduction

Parental divorce affects every single aspect of a children’s life. Parents’ awareness of the factors that may impact their children’s adaptation after divorce is crucial in making this process less painful. Establishing a sense of trust and understanding with their offspring can help parents rebuild the secure parent-child relationships essential for children’s adjustment to divorce. This literature survey would discuss how parental conflict, parents’ emotional stability, and parental remarriage influence the coping and adaptation process of children of divorce. Besides, this review would mention the impact that divorce has on children’s life in their adulthood. It would also present strategies that have been effective in enhancing the positive adjustment of children of divorce. This paper is valuable in expanding the knowledge on the subject and in applying the information from the research findings to support children and their families in making their post divorce experience less painful and more flourishing.
Divorce and Its Effects on Children

Literature Review

The Family Prior to Divorce

Making the decision to divorce is complicated. It involves giving up on plans and dreams that as a couple, both parents had before and during the first years of their marriage: creating a nurturing family surrounded by eternal love, care, mutual respect, and responsibility. Unfortunately, with time, in some families different factors deteriorate the marital relationship and eventually the family dreams get destroyed. These home environments become hostile and the family emotional stability and relationships get adversely affected. Nonetheless, in a number of cases, even when the marital relations are destructive, there are parents who prefer to remain idle, victims of abuse and maltreatment because they feel terrified by the multiple adverse situations that are attached to a divorce. They panic with the idea of raising their children in a unilateral family. Parents remain silent, suffering in these harmful marriages because they believe that this decision is “what is best for them and for their children”; disregarding that in most cases, this resolution could be even more harmful for their offspring than it could be beneficial (Gadoua, 2008).

Davila & Bradbury (2001) engaged in a longitudinal study of 172 newly married couples (majority Caucasian) to study the relationship among the attachment insecurity of couples and their capacity to abandon their harsh marital relationship. The investigation was done through over the phone and in person-laboratory interviews and questionnaires, where the participants’ levels of attachment insecurity, depression, self esteem, and marital satisfaction were assessed. In this research, the authors found that married adults who had higher levels of insecurity tended to remain in unhealthy relationships. These adults were depressed and were not confident of ending
their relation, even when they felt unsatisfied. Further, these researchers found that this marital distress leads to negative consequences in children. Children living in homes where there was lack of parental communication, support, and understanding were negatively impacted in their post divorce social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.

Certainly, most parents would prefer to raise their children in a bilateral family. They would avoid to the most extent possible exposing their children to the harmful experience of divorce. Nonetheless, parents must also realize that staying in an unhealthy marital relationship, “for the children”, can also be disastrous. Growing up in an unhealthy home environment can also cause serious damage to the family interrelations and to children’s social interactions, security, and comfort. Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale (2000) studied the effects of marital behaviors on the development of secure attachments of preschoolers using a group of 53 families and their children. Their investigation was done through different methods, such as the completion of an attachment Q-Set (E. Waters, 1987), and two direct observations of parents’ positive and negative interactions with their children. These observations were done during parental conflict and family play at two different times (when children were 6 months and when they were 3 years old). In their study, the researchers found that even when experienced at an early age, aggressive relations among parents were associated with less secure parent-child relationships. They also encountered a strong connection among parental relationships and children’s socio-emotional development.

Lindsey, Caldera, & Tankersley (2009) found similar results in regards to the adverse consequences that witnessing parental discord could have on children social-emotional well-being. These researchers worked in a longitudinal investigation done with 80 married families to
study the relationship among parental conflict and the peer play behavior of young children (observed from birth until they were 3 years of age). Their data were collected through home observations of parent-child interactions, questionnaires completed by parents, videotaped laboratory observations of the parent-child play relations, and observations of the child-peer interactions. The results in this examination showed that marital conflict was interrelated with the development of attachment between parents and children. The type of attachment that children developed with their parents was projected in their respective peer interactions. The researchers found that secure children had more positive peer relationships when compared with insecure children who had experienced more parental conflict. However, these authors concluded that it was not parental conflict alone what affected children’s interactions with peers. What was found to have a higher impact on this area was the emotional responsiveness demonstrated by parents to their offspring after divorce.

Amato & Both (1996) sustain that marital problems augment parents’ levels of preoccupation and distractibility. They believe that this state of being makes parents irritable and unable to effectively relate with their children. These authors further agree that parental pre-separation difficulties play an important role in the assimilation process of divorce. Children who witness antagonistic co-parental relationships, characterized by violent and poorly resolved parental conflict, tend to display several negative emotions such as pain, anger, fear, and confusion. They also have higher difficulty separating and adjusting to life after divorce. The negative experiences and memories of their parents’ discussions and behaviors have a long term effect on children’s self-esteem, social interaction, behavior, and academic performance.
Preserving “a bilateral family” is only healthy when both parents are committed to work collaboratively, demonstrating mutual respect, understanding, and responsibility. Parents having difficulty in their marital relationships should look for professional assistance that could help them alleviate their problems and encounter strategies that could help them provide the secure-healthy family that their children need. Lamentably, in more and more cases nowadays, parents’ decision to divorce is final, even after receiving specialized therapy and support. In these circumstances, parents would benefit from getting educated on the topic of divorce and its effects on children. Besides, they should continue searching and receiving professional advice that could assist them in resolving the most “common areas of disagreement [that may] include[:] spending time with children, where the children should live, parenting styles, who makes decisions about the children’s health, education and activities, and involvement of children with extended family and new partners” (Child and Family Services, 2010). With parental divorce, a new journey for the entire family begins: A distressing experience that would come to transform- for good or for bad- the life of the family for the years to come.

Definition of Divorce

Divorce is generally referred as “the legal separation of spouses, effected by the judgment or decree of a court, either totally dissolving the marriage relation or suspending its effects so far as concerns the cohabitation of the parties” (Solis & Gasteazoro, 1992, p. 112).

“‘Getting divorced,’ [ ], usually refers to the legal act of officially ending a marriage. Today more than half of first-time marriages in the Untied States end in divorce” (“Ethnic and Values,” 1999, p. 25).
These general definitions of divorce may be satisfactory and considered “common sense” for many people. However, for others, particularly for children who have experienced their parents’ separation, “parental divorce is not a single event but rather [it] represents a series of stressful experiences for the entire family that begins with marital conflict before the actual separation and includes many adjustments afterward” (Berns, 2007, p. 91).

With divorce, children suffer the pain of losing their parents and the stable family that they had since they were born. These children have to deal with multiple stressors due to the changes in their family structure, routine, schools, and friends. Their emotional and economical stability is also impacted by their parents’ level of adjustment, parental competence, and post-divorce parental difficulties. The combination of all these unexpected experiences put these children in a difficult situation where they have to overcome psychological and economical hardships, and a set of confusing feelings that may affect their emotional stability and their relations with others (Hughes, 2009). The following sections would provide a review of different studies and ideas shared by multiple experts in regards to the above mentioned factors that drastically affect parents and children’s before, during, and after divorce.

Genetics, the Environment, and Divorce

The environment has an important role in the adaptation and coping process of children of divorce. After their parents’ separation, children have to cope with the transitions and changes that accompany this devastating event. The process become harder when all what these children hear is negative information about divorce. These messages make them feel different than other children and they affect their self-concept and self-esteem (Ahrons, 2004).
Research has proven the transcendental impact of divorce in children. Nonetheless, over the years there has been controversy in regards to whether it is genetics or the multiple environmental factors that surround the child after divorce what really affects these children’s coping, behavior, and resilient attitude. O’Connor, Caspi, DeFries, & Plomin (2000) studied the possibility of a relationship among genetics and children adjustment to divorce. They used a group of 398 biological and adoptive families (majority Caucasian) from the Colorado Adoption Project. Their investigation was done through interviews, questionnaires, and tests. In this study, the researchers found similarities on the effects of divorce in both adoptive and biological families. They also found a low correlation among genetic factors and the adaptation abilities and the negative behavior of children of divorce in both types of families. Furthermore, the results showed that the environment has a more relevant impact on the behavior problems and level of self-esteem, social skills, and academic achievement of offspring after divorce.

Burt, Barnes, McGue, & Iacono, (2008) also investigated if it was genetics or the environment that had a higher impact on children’s behavior and delinquency problems after divorce. They tested their hypothesis on a group of 610 adoptive and genetically related families using two self-report index of adolescent delinquency, life time self-reports DSM-I symptom counts, and interviews. The results in this study also showed that “it is the actual experience of parental divorce (and remarriage), and not common genes, that drives the association between divorce and adolescent delinquency” (p. 1674). External comments and events will always influence children’s emotional stability during their daily existence after divorce. However, parents can still procure the creation of a safe home environment where children can re-establish
their sense of security and trust. Parents need to be effective role models who guide, and support their children in the coping and assimilation process of their new life style.

Parental Conflict and Children’s Adjustment to Divorce

Over the years, the number of divorce families has augmented drastically in the United States. In the twenty-first century, this country has been identified as having the highest divorce rates in its history (Wolfinger, 2005). “According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2003), the number of children living with one parent (divorce or never married) at some point in childhood is 1 out of 2” (Berns, 2007, p. 91). This number is alarming, not only because of the multiple repercussions that divorce may have on the stability and development of children, but also because of the impact that divorce may have in society.

On multiple occasions, parents of divorce disregard the impact that their marital conflicts could have in their children psychological well-being. They assume their problems only concern and affect the adult couple. However, studies have shown that parental conflict before, during, and after separation, not only impacts parents’ relationships but also the family’s functioning. Parental conflict generates stress and depression in parents. These emotions have been found to be reflected in parents’ coping and parenting abilities as well as on the parent-child interactions. In a study done in Pennsylvania, Amato & Booth (1996), analyzed the relation among parental discord, parent-child relations, divorce, and the after divorce parent-child affective relationship. They used a national group of 857 married individuals studied through a series of interviews. After their 12 year investigation, these authors concluded that there was a correlation among parent conflict and parent-child relationships. The examiners found that compared with the emotional relations mother-children, the relations father-children deteriorated to a higher degree.
after divorce. They also corroborated a positive correlation among the amount of time and the quality of the fathers-children relationships, and the behaviors displayed by children after divorce. Additionally, these researchers found that some of the deficient parental marriage characteristics and problems observed in the parent-child relationships after separation were already in existence prior to marital disruption.

Difficulties among adults may lead to children’s limited contact with parents, lack of parental involvement, and to economic problems. Madden-Derdich & Leonard (2002) studied the relationship among post divorce circumstances, parenting and custody issues, and parental conflict after divorce. Their study was done in Arizona with a group of 56 divorced couples (predominantly White). The data was collected through surveys, interviews, and comparisons made through different psychological scales.

In this study, the researchers found more frequent conflict among couples where mothers were not satisfied with fathers’ parenting abilities. Most of the time, the custodial parents were concerned about children’s safety and well-being while they were with the noncustodial parent. In their investigation, parental conflict was also associated with fathers’ disagreement on mothers’ lack of flexibility in making visitation arrangements. Fathers felt they were losing control over their children and that they were being pushed away from them. Custody satisfaction was also associated with conflict. Parents’ frustration and stress levels augment because their custody preferences and concerns were not being understood. These parental emotional stressors affected the co-parental relationship and consequently had a negative impact on children adjustment to divorce. These findings are relevant in promoting support groups and interventions that could enhance positive co-parental relationships, where fathers and mothers
agree on a positive parenting plan, validate each other's commitment to their children, and where both parents meet the established expectations of their respective parental roles after divorce.

Reaching an effective legal settlement that benefits children and that would be fair for both parents is challenging and hard to obtain. Nonetheless, parents should have an open attitude to negotiate and agree on a win-win situation that would make their life and their children’s existence after divorce easier and less painful. In a study done in Connecticut, Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little (2003), examined the relationship among family relations, attorney involvement, and the adjustment of children (ages 0-6) to divorce. These researchers used a group 102 fathers and 110 mothers (majority Caucasian) whom on average had approximately 8 years on their relationship before they divorced. After multiple questionnaires and interviews, the examiners found that families with higher parental conflict had less father involvement and more negative parent-child relationships. Besides, they observed that these adverse conditions were conducive to more behavior problems and higher adjustment difficulty in children. The results suggested an urge for parents to strive for the reduction of parental conflict and for the preservation of positive co-parenting connections after divorce. Portnoy (2008) suggests the need for lawyers to work with a holistic approach, where they can help parents in developing an effective legal settlement where the priority is children’s well-being. He recommends the creation of productive divorces where parents agree in sustaining a positive behavior and in meeting the established arrangements. For instance, a favorable solution where in the financial settlement one parent gets the reasonable economic support to provide quality living conditions for his children, and the other maintains a reasonable financial stability that allow him to continue visiting his children.
After divorce children may feel persistently angry, hurt, frightened, and confused due to the multiple changes surrounding their life. They do not feel safe and secure anymore (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2008; Hughes, 2009). In search of attention and as a response to their anxiety and frustration levels, these children begin to show more behavior problems, lower self-esteem, and higher difficulty in their social interactions. Erath & Bierman (2006) studied the influence of parental conflict on the aggressive behavior of children at home and at school. They investigated a group of 360 kindergarten children and their mothers from different regions in the United States. They used interviews and several developmental scales that were completed by children’s mothers and teachers. From this work, the authors concluded that children who were exposed to maternal harsh punishment and marital conflict were more aggressive and disruptive at home and at school. Besides, they observed that parents who were overwhelmed by their marital conflict had a higher propensity to react coercively to children’s misbehavior. Children in those situations had higher sensitiveness to conflict, low emotion regulation, and poor social competence. At home more than at school, these children were inclined to expressed their emotions and resolve their problems through aggressive behavior.

Parental conflict generates behavior problems in children. These adverse behaviors aggravate parents’ frustration and end up affecting the parent-child relationships. The quality of the family relations and the commitment of parents to mitigate the risks from divorce are essential in helping children cope and adapt to their new life. Avoiding children’s exposure to parental conflicts and maintaining an effective parental bond with their offspring ease children’s adjustment to divorce. Fabricius & Luecken (2007) engaged in a study of 266 young adults who had experienced their parents’ divorce before they were 16. The study was done through surveys
and questionnaires to investigate the impact that the father-child relationship and the distress experienced after parental separation had on parental conflict and the time spent with the noncustodial parent after divorce. The findings in this study show that the higher the frequency of father involvement after divorce the better the father-child relationship and the physical health that children displayed. However, they noticed that even when the time the father spent with the child was elevated, the higher the parental conflict the worse that the father-child relation became. This poor relationship adversely impacted the physical health of children. Poor father-child relationships and more distress in turn predicted poorer health status.

Preserving a positive parental role is essential in setting the foundation for future family and parenting styles (Ahrons, 2004). Parents are children’s first and most important role models. From them, children learn values, traditions, and behaviors. Children set their expectations about the world based on their parents’ performance and on the sense of security they feel in their environment. After divorce, children’s understanding of the world is damaged. Their favorable ideas about family and life are adversely impacted. They are shocked when they realize that their family model and all what is around them is not stable, secure and surrounded by love as they believed (Bowlby, 1988). A set of confused and combined emotions emerge and children begin to display behaviors that impact their growth and development. Parents need to promote the preservation of trust and positive feelings about family and love. Although after parental divorce maintaining these concepts is complicated, parents should dedicate time to save and develop these schemas on their offspring. “Good divorces are those in which the divorce does not destroy meaningful family relationships. Parents maintain a sufficiently cooperative and supportive
relationship that allows them to focus on the needs of their children” (Ahrons, 2004, p. 7). Children need to build a foundation of family values to which they can refer in adulthood.

Parents’ Stability and its Effects on Children of Divorce

Divorce can alter the life of parents and children in different ways. Along with their emotional adversity, parents of divorce have to suffer the burden of residential relocation, change of employment, and economic hardship. This transitional process drastically affects their life and their ability to ensure their children’s well-being. Being proactive and having the courage to overcome this difficult situation may help parents and children in building a resilient attitude essential in their adjustment process. Clarke-Steward, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth (2000) studied the effects of divorce in children younger than 3 years of age using data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. In their study, they investigated 340 mothers: never-married, separated-divorced, and a comparison of intact-married (the majority White) through observations, questionnaires, and interviews. They also used some professional assessment scales such as the Bayley Scale of Mental Development (Bayley, 1969); and the Expressive Behavior Scale of the Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory (ASBI; Hogan, Scott, & Bauer, 1992). In their investigation, these researchers found that “children's psychological development was not affected by parental separation per se; it was related to mothers' income, education, ethnicity, childrearing beliefs, depressive symptoms, and behavior” (p. 304).

Parental instability may diminish the quality of the parenting skills. After divorce, parents’ ability to discipline, control, nurture, be emotional responsive, and provide a predictable routine are negatively affected (Teyber, 2001; Emery, 1999). Pett, Wampold, Turner, &
Vaughan-Cole (1999) studied 198 married and divorce-low to middle income families (mostly White) to examine the influence that maternal tension, mother-child interactions, and family socioeconomic stability after divorce have in the psychosocial adjustment of preschool children. In their study, the results showed that mothers who were overwhelmed by their family’s economic condition, and by their own depression, anxiety, and fear had the propensity to disengage from reality. They disconnect from their maternal and caretaker role disregarding the effects that their behavior and decisions could have in their children’s well-being. This inattention led to ineffective mother-child interactions and negative behavior patterns in children. Teyber (2001); and Emery (1999) recommend parents to be strong and sustain a resilient attitude in order to be able to support and guide their children through life after divorce. They also suggest the authoritative parenting style for those families trying to rebuild their sense of togetherness, respect, and security. They sustain that these children need love and care but that they also need boundaries and responsibilities. Childrearing practices are essential in setting the basis for children’s adjustment to divorce. When they are not in place, children feel lost and their post divorce experience is miserable and unsuccessful.

After divorce, some parents may fall into a preoccupation trap that impedes their critical thinking and resilient attitude. These parents may get overwhelmed by their negative family conditions and expose their children to their emotional and economic concerns. This experience makes children feel stressed and anxious about solving their family problems. Some children even blame themselves as being the cause of their parents’ divorce. The lack of parental competence may generate overburdened children specifically when parents make their own offspring be their therapists and confidants. In such cases, children begin to take care of their
parents. They take the parental and caregiver role and they disengaged from reality living aside their right to live their childhood (James, Friedman, & Landon, 2001; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

Extended family and professional support can assist parents and children in overcoming the emotional problems after divorce. This assistance can help parents re-establish their well-being and be able to become a positive source of support for their children. This intervention can also help children cope, understand, and assimilate the changes that come with divorce. Parents do not have all the answers, neither the power to eliminate all the negative experiences their children would have after their divorce. However, they have the control to reduce the sources of harm in behalf of their children’s development and well-being. “With care and attention, however, a family’s strengths can be mobilized during a divorce, and children can be helped to deal constructively with the resolution of parental conflict” (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2008). Children need a friendly hand to guide them through the confusing path of their life after divorce.

Support of Extended Family Members

Educators and other family members should be part of the parents and children’s support group after divorce. Positive extended family relationships can provide the social support and relationships role models that are indispensable in this transitional process. Parents, family members, teachers, and professional support services should work cooperatively in making the coping-assimilation process of divorce easier for the children. Portes, Brown, Saylor, & Sekhon (2005) used the Divorce adjustment Inventory-Revised (DAI-R) scale to study the adjustment of 162 children (age 6-17) to divorce. Besides finding this scale to be very effective for the
divorce have a notable difficulty problem solving the different issues that emerge from their separation and that this matter affects child adjustment and self esteem. They suggest the need of parent to look for professional support to help them and their children with the post-divorce stress. They also found that parents who have support from their family members, friends, neighbors, and professionals have less stress and better family functioning. Parents tended to maintain their parental roles necessary to establish the family foundation necessary for the healthy adjustment and future success of children of divorce.

McDole & Limke (2008) engaged in a study of 99 young adult students who had experienced their parents’ divorce. Through questionnaires and the completion of the Perceived Social Support Family Scale, they examined whether extended family support was related to the attachment and level of stress demonstrated in this age group. Their research showed that although extended family support is adversely affected after divorce, this type of assistance is beneficial in reducing the negative effects that divorce generates in parents and children. The support provided by relatives who care and love the individuals involved helps reduce the anxiety levels of the individuals involved and helps in the development of more secure attachment patterns.

Sometimes grandparents are the only consistent family source with which children of divorce could count in this drastic transition in their life. Therefore, parents should avoid preventing this type of family connection from which children can benefit to a grand extent. Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies (2002) studied the influence that grandparents have in children of divorce. Their study was done with a group of 155 children (7 years and older)
through the analysis of questionnaires, interviews, and surveys completed by parents and children. In this investigation, the authors found that after divorce children’s relationship with grandparents was reduced due to parental conflict, and repartnering. However, they found that grandparents were a positive and effective support source for children of divorce. Grandparents provided the sense of stability, love, and care that children needed in these difficult times after divorce. When contact with grandparents was reduced, children were found to have more distant relationships with them. They also showed more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Children benefited from the continuity in caregiving and the support they received from their grandparents. In this study, closeness with maternal grandparents had a higher impact on children’s adjustment to divorce when compared with paternal grandparents. Still, the authors added that these results must be interpreted with caution because each family is different and the adjustment process along with the quality of grandparent-child relationships can be impacted by multiple factors.

Parental Remarriage and its Effects on Children

After parental separation, most children of divorce have to confront the possibility of getting a stepparent. Children have difficulty accepting the permanent characteristic of their parents’ divorce. They feel powerless over the disintegration of their family and create fantasies of reconstructing their home. Sadly, in most cases, this dream never comes true. In the contrary, parents find a new romantic partner and eventually remarry. In the United States “one-half to two-thirds of those who divorce remarry” (Portnoy, 2008, p. 126). This new reality brings even more stress, confusion, anger, and depression to children’s life.
As consequence of parental remarriage, some children regress in their developmental milestones. In their attempt to grieve to the loss, children become more vulnerable, they begin to have sleep disturbances, separation anxiety, and clinging behaviors. As young adults, these children are less educated and have higher suicidal thoughts (Samenow, 2002; Grubber, 2004). In other children, their behavior aggravate, they have higher difficulty in school, more behavior problems, more negative self-concept, and more problems with peers. These children are more withdrawn and uncooperative, and they have higher levels of depression. They also have been found to have more difficulty in their interactions, rapport, and respect to their parents.

Respect for authority in children of divorce is negatively affected after parental separation. This is due to the lost of trust that children experience towards their consistent role models- their parents. After divorce, children tend to judge their parents’ decisions and actions (Kenny, 2000; Grubber, 2004; Hughes, 2009). Further, when the parents’ separation is the consequence a new romantic relationship, children feel angry to see that their parent has a new partner. They feel that they were betrayed by their parent and are terrified by the idea of their parent getting a replacement for their original caregiver. Children begin to evaluate their parents as good or bad according to the time, the quality of their interactions, and the external comments they receive about each parent (James, Friedman, & Landon, 2001; Saposkek & Chip, 2004).

The post-divorce experience is difficult for any of the parties involved. Parents and children should work in collaboration to make this process easier and less stressful. Parents should be alert for any warning signs in their children. They should evaluate their own and their children’s distress. Further, they should be open and ready to look and receive any medical and
professional evaluation and treatment that could help them and their children in their adjustment to divorce (Portnoy, 2008; Kenny, 2000).

**Divorce and its Effects in Children’s Adulthood**

The effects of divorce are disturbing even when the event is experienced at an early age. These disastrous effects follow children through all their life. Offspring who have lived in home environments that lack love, respect, and effective parental communication have broken models of attachment. Besides, they have more severe problems on their social interactions and their romantic relationships in adulthood. Because of their anxiety and fear over their own future love and marital relationships, children of divorce are more likely to divorce and become single parents themselves (McDole & Limke, 2008; Amato, 2000).

Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius (2003) studied the long term outcomes of living arrangements after divorce. Their sample group was comprised by 602 young university students who experienced their parents’ divorce during their childhood. The research methods used were surveys and questionnaires. These researchers compared children from divorce whose parents moved far away from the child with the ones that has remained close to both divorced parents. Their findings show significant negative effects on children whose parents separated by a long distance. These children:

- received less financial support form their parents (even after correcting for differences in the current financial conditions of the groups), worried more about that support, felt more hostility in their interpersonal relations, suffered mote distress related to their parents’ divorce, perceived their parents less favorably as sources of emotional support an as role models, believed the quality of their parents’ relations with each other to be the worse,
and rated themselves less favorably on their general physical health, their general life satisfaction, and their personal and emotional adjustment (p=.06). (Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2003, p. 214)

Wallerstein & Lewis (2004) found similar results in regards to the impact of divorce on the socio-emotional development of children from early childhood through adulthood. These researchers participated in a longitudinal study of 131 children, who experienced their parents’ divorce when they were between the ages of 3 to 18. The study was done in California, through extensive clinical interviews and questionnaires. After 25 years of monitoring, the authors found that the experience of divorce had drastic effects on children’s life in their adulthood. Children who grew under the conditions of divorce have a broken image of their parents as a couple. The experience of losing their family affected the participants’ confidence in their ability to create lasting adult relationships where they could have mutual affection and intimacy. As adults they were also hesitant of their capacity to resolve family conflicts.

Crowel, Treboux, & Brockmeyer (2009) explored the effects of divorce in the attachment and propensity of children of divorce to end their marriage in adulthood. Their study was done in New York with a group of 157 White couples through a series of interviews, questionnaires, and videotaped observations. The assessment was done before the couples got married and 6 years after their weddings. The results showed no tendency to early divorce in children of divorced parents. However, they found an association among of divorce and the development of insecure attachment in these individuals. They also discovered a relationship among insecure attachment and divorce. Women were found to be more sensitive to the effects of divorce and had higher difficulty building the bond of attachment with their partners.
Children’s sense of relationships is impacted with their parents’ separation. They feel betrayed by their parents and they unconsciously believe that love can not be trusted. These damaged relationships persist until adulthood. As young adults, these children are so vulnerable that they look for intimate relationships in search of support, acceptance, and understanding. The high teenage marriage rates observed in children of divorce may be due to the stressful, hostile, and unsupportive home environments in which most of these children have to live after their parents’ divorce (Wolfinger, 2005). Children of divorce need relations that are warm and supportive. They need responsive parents that demonstrate love and understanding. Parents need to get involve and find ways to connect with their offspring to ensure they are receiving the assistance necessary to meet their needs according to their individual characteristics and level of development.

Supporting Children in their Adjustment to Divorce

Nowadays, more and more children have to confront a divorce in their family. Parents who are educated on the subject of divorce and on the effect that it may have on children are better prepared to cope and overcome this stressful experience. Their understanding of this matter helps them improve their well-being and be able to assist their children in their adjustment to their new life style. Children, like adults, worry about their current living conditions and about their future. After divorce, children are trying to make sense of all what is new around them. They are re-building their concept of a family and they are trying to understand where they fit in the world. These children are slowly planning what they are going to do with their life. Consequently, parents must search for strategies that could help them make this transition more manageable and successful.
Certainly, after parental separation, the family’s economic hardship cannot be hidden. However, parents in this condition need to prevent the exposure of children to their economic and emotional concerns. When this cannot be avoided, then parents need to explain their situation to their offspring according to children’s level of understanding. Giving children a sense of security in these areas will ease their anxiety levels and will help them in their coping process (Samenow, 2002).

Informing children of the parental decision to divorce is hard. Nonetheless, this step is unavoidable and should be done as soon as the parents have an established date for their separation. Before notifying children, it is imperative for parents to plan how and when they are going to introduce the news of their separation to their offspring. They must agree to do it together in a relaxed, simple, and sincere conversation atmosphere. This distinct family meeting should be an opportunity for parents to assure their children that their divorce is not their children’s fault. This time should be used to explain to their children that this experience would be sad and hard for everyone. Parents need to reassure their offspring that they would always love them, and that they would never stop being their parents. Furthermore, they should guarantee them that as their parents, they would do all what is necessary to make the process of divorce less hurtful (Levins, 2006; Kenny, 2000).

Parents must ensure that the information about their separation is presented according to children’s age and maturity level. Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003), consider that gender and age determine children’s capacity to comprehend and assimilate the implications of divorce. This alertness may help them in judging what and how to answer and comfort their children in their concerns about the multiple issues related to divorce. Lansford, Malone, Castellino, Dodge,
Pettit, & Bates (2006) engaged in a study to examine the relationship among the age of children at the time of divorce and their academic and behavioral performance after the event. Their study was done with a sample of 194 students 6 to 11 years of age. Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, checklists, and the analysis of academic school records. In this study, the researchers found differences on how divorce impacts the offspring at different ages. The results showed that early parental divorce was related to more negative behavior problems in children, and that later parental separation was correlated to more adverse academic performance.

Parents have a vital role and responsibility with their children before, during, and after divorce. “The quality of parenting that children receive after the divorce is probably the single most important aid to their adjustment” (Clarke-Steward & Bentrano, 2006, p. 159). Wolchik, Clorinda, Schenck, & Sandler (2009) sustain that positive parenting practices can reduce children’s exposure to stressful situations and can be helpful in promoting a sense of control that can help children build a resilient attitude vital in their adaptation to divorce. These researchers believe that the development of positive mother-child relationships helps children build a sense of security and coping abilities. These relationships augment children self-esteem and help them gain confidence in their abilities to overcome the difficult situations that will emerge after their parents divorce. Teyber (2001) considers that consistency and effective disciple are crucial elements in helping children of divorce build a sense of predictability and control over the new environment that surrounds them. Children need warm but firm discipline. They need to know that they are loved and protected. They need reassurance that in their new families, their parents are in charge. Children need to be aware that they are being raised in a safe environment where
they are respected but also where they would have to meet realistic rules and expectations. Children of divorce need structure and organization in their life. They need predictable daily routines, effective communication, and the continuous demonstration of affection and attention. These are crucial in giving structure and organization to children’s life after divorce.

Parents of divorce should strive to remain as positive role models for their children. They should avoid parental conflict (after their separation), respect the official court settlement they were established, even when they are not in agreement with this decision. Having children as priority in these setting cases would make the living of families of divorce easier and more productive. Parents should assent to never disagree or criticize each other in front of their children. They should have a set time and place away from children where they can discuss their disagreements or concerns. They should find ways to maintain positive co-parenting relationships to benefit their children social, emotional, physical, and cognitive well-being. These factors are important in helping children assimilate their transfer from home to home, and the sudden distance that separate them from one of their parents.

In regards to the living and visitation arrangements, parents should also communicate and agree in arranging a consistent transfer from home to home. They should establish similar rules and routines. They should try to have stable standards that are specific, reasonable, and consistent. These strategies would help children in their assimilation process, it would ease the transition for parent to parents and it would assist in creating predictable and secure environments where children can begin to rebuild their sense of trust and belonging (Kenny, 2000). Parents should be willing to work in an agreement that will benefit their children’s needs. This plan should be based in the in-depth analysis of their parental relationship and their wiliness
to work in collaboration. They should build trust among each other and create a parenting plan where they put aside their own emotions and adult issues and they concentrate in promoting an environment that helps their children in their positive adjustment to divorce (Lyster, 2007).

An additional aspect in which children of divorce need significant amount of support to adjust is on parental remarriage. The idea of having a stranger joining the “family” is overwhelming for children. When their parents remarry, children feel that they have to share their parent and they begin to compete for attention. Although sometime after divorce most parents feel that they are ready for a new relationship, it is ideal to wait at least 2-3 years before engaging in a new romantic relation. This time period is necessary for children to assimilate and adjust to their new life style.

Parents should be sensitive to their children’s insecurity. Besides, before engaging in a new relation, parents need to consider the damage they will cause if their new relationship ends in a future breakup. They also need to think on the possibility of acquiring an abusive stepparent. If a new romance is in plan, parent must be discrete and should avoid cohabiting. They must introduce their new romantic partner cautiously. They should not force their children to like the person and they should assure the children that the dating person will not replace the other parent. To ease this transition parents should spend increasing quality time with their children and constantly evaluate and improve their parent-child relationship (Samenow, 2002).

Children’s adjustment to divorce is possible. However, it is a long process that involves suffering and that demands an open attitude and dedication. “How quickly and completely children recover depends on how well the custodial parent adjusts, whether the noncustodial parent remains involved in their lives, whether the two parents get along, and whether there are
other resources the child can draw upon” (Clarke-Steward & Bentran, 2006, p. 157). During this adaptation process, schools can become a source of comfort where children can find a consistent, safe, familiar, and welcoming environment surrounded by support, understanding, and guidance. Kenny (2000); Wallerstein & Blakeslee (2003); and McGibney (2010) believe that parents should maintain a close connection with their children’s teachers to monitor their children’s behavior, friendships, and academic performance. Besides, these authors consider that schools could be a center where divorce parents and their children can still come together to enjoy those special moments that are meaningful and unforgettable for children.

Besides having the support from relatives and the school system, children and parents of divorce need professional assistance to ease their adjustment to their new life situation after divorce. Psychotherapy can help children cope with their emotions of “loss, grief, abandonment, separation, trust, anger, and betrayal” (Kenny, 2000, p. 228). They need treatment that would help them reduce their depression, calm their anxiety and rebuild their self-concept and self-esteem. DeLucia-Waack & Gellman (2007) examine the impact of music as an educational alternative to support children of divorce. They studied a group of 134 elementary school children (mean age 8 years old) by assigning children to two groups—one with music support and the other utilizing general psycho educational techniques. After 3 moths of treatment the children were assessed using specific scales and inventory tools to evaluate their level of anxiety, depression, and illogical beliefs about divorce.

The researchers in this study found a correlation among children’s beliefs about divorce and their levels of depression. However, they also noticed that there was no significant difference in the levels of anxiety, depression and beliefs shown by children receiving music intervention
when compared to the control group. Both support groups were not significantly effective in helping children reduce their depression levels. Nonetheless, children’s participation in these groups was effective in decreasing their irrational beliefs about divorce.

Lowenstein (2009) proposes play therapy as a strategy to help children adjust to their life after parental divorce. These professional-creative activities (presented through play) can help children express their thoughts and feelings at their individual developmental level. Through these activities children of divorce can develop coping skills, express their emotions, clarify their misconceptions, disengage from their parents conflicting situations, eliminate self blame and rebuild their self-concept and self-esteem. These age appropriate activities can help children understand their current living experiences, and think in alternative solutions to their concerns about their parents’ divorce. Blackstone-Ford et al., (2006), support that the engagement of children in multiple active-positive-fulfilling activities can lead to an increase in the self-worth of children. They believe that parents should acknowledge their offspring achievements and they must set time aside to join their children in their special events.

Hope after Divorce

Adjustment to divorce is different for every child and family. For some, divorce could be a life devastating experience. Many of these individuals are against its practice and they implore parents to rethink their decision before considering divorce. Marquardt (2005) speaks for these children stating:

“Those of us who are children of divorce are not all falling apart, but neither are we willing to be held up as proof—convenient proof—that kids don’t really need both
parents. We needed our mothers and fathers, living together, married to each other, preferably getting along well.

If our parents could not stay together, we needed and deserved to grow up in a society that faced up squarely to our loss, that refused to engage in happy talk, that resisted the temptation to call children resilient in order to defend adult decisions.

We now know what divorce does to children. Let’s give the children what they need.” (p. 190)

In the other hand there are offspring like the Ford siblings (1997) who have been able to successfully adjust to the traumatic event of divorce and who consider –that in their case- this decision has been the best alternative to ease their suffering and bring light into their lives. These young adults shared their experience and sustained that although the occurrence of their parents’ divorce was devastating at the beginning, the good thing about divorce is that they do not have to witness to their parents fights anymore. They feel their parents get along better after their divorce. Besides, they consider their parents are happier in their new families than how they were before.

Parents need to analyze their marital relationship and decide what is best for their children and for their family. There is no right or wrong answer that could fit all parents and children of divorce. At the end, what would make the difference is the parents’ commitment to make from their bilateral or divorce family a secure place where their offspring can grow and develop as happy, healthy and happy successful human beings.
The Stern family (2008), sustains that with time children of divorce can “turn[ ] out to be strong, brave, resilient, and compassionate human beings, in part because of what they have endured” (p.3). Divorce is a traumatic event that alters the life of a family. This life experience demands courage, commitment, dedication, and understanding from parents and children in order to effectively cope and adjust. With time, patience, consistency, and the commitment of parents to ensure the well-being of their offspring these families can overcome this difficult experience. Post-divorce education, family support, and the assistance of professional support services are valuable tools in helping parents and children establish optimal relationships. These services can help parents and children of divorce find alternative solutions to their post-divorce feelings and concerns. With persistence and a resilient attitude these individuals can learn to become stronger, flexible, and loving individuals that are successful in life.

Summary

Divorce is an unsettling experience that can switch the life of parents and children in different ways. Although at the beginning, life after divorce seems unstable and frightening, with time, the individuals involved can regain their balance and learn to adjust. “The initial separation, parental adjustment and resources, parental conflict and cooperation, repartnering of one or both parents, stability of economic resources, and children’s own individual resources are central to how these stressors affect children’s short-and longer-term reactions and outcomes” (Kelly & Emery, 2003, pp. 352).

Parents can reduce the conflicting emotions of pain, confusion, anger, and anxiety of their children after divorce by putting into practice the following strategies summarized by Foulkes-Jamison, L. (2001) and supported by the different sources reviewed in this literature survey:
Some things that [parents] can do to enhance a child’s adjustment [to divorce] are the following:

1. Prior to the separation, it may be helpful for both parents to discuss the impending divorce at a level appropriate for the child;
2. Be available to answer questions;
3. Read age appropriate books on divorce with your child;
4. Reassure the child divorce is not his or her fault;
5. Let the child know that you will both continue to love him;
6. Put child’s needs first;
7. Do not argue with other parent in front of child;
8. Do not expect your child to meet your emotional needs;
9. Be consistent in your parenting;
10. Make visitations regular and predictable;
11. Let the child know that you will tell other impart people in case he or she would like to seek support from these people;
12. Do not be openly critical of other parent;
13. Do not interrogate child about visits with other parent, and most importantly be sensitive to your child’s emotional needs.

Children can adjust to divorce. The process would be hard and painful. Nonetheless, with the support from parents, family members, school and professional support services, these children
can discover that their existence is surrounded by love and by opportunities to be happy and successful.

SECTION III: Conclusion

In the last decades, the number of children growing up in divorced families has increased significantly in the United States. The reasons behind the parental separation vary. However, what are consistent are the effects that this traumatic experience may have in the life of children. Being aware not only of the opportunities, but also about the responsibility and the numerous challenges that come along with divorce, is vital for parents to ensure that they are prepared to provide the support and guidance that their children would need after their parental divorce. Learning about other individuals who have experienced their parental separation can assist the ones struggling in the adjustment process in comparing and contrasting their conditions. At the end, these individuals would be better apt to make the best decision to which path they would take in their life after divorce. Being educated and aware of the support services and programs available to help families overcome the difficulties of divorce, could help parents, offspring, and their new family members make of their adjustment process a more successful experience.

Position of the Author

The completion of this literature survey helped me increase my knowledge about the effects of divorce in children. It also augmented my understanding over the different factors that affect the adjustment process of children of divorce. The new information I learned will help me improve my performance as a child development instructor and as a human being. As an early childhood educator, I believe that the awareness acquired on these matters will help me be more alert for signs of distress in these children. It would also assist me in providing the adequate
support, activities, and accommodations to better serve these families. Furthermore, this information would be useful when making the decision to refer children and parents for further therapy and professional services.

Understanding the impact that parental conflict, parents’ emotional stability, and parental remarriage have in the coping and adaptation process of children of divorce has increased my desire to provide education on these topics to help these parents cope and alleviate the challenges of divorce. This training could help caregivers regain their emotional stability and their positive parenting skills. After this extensive literature examination I feel strongly encouraged to create welcoming, safe, and predictable environments where children can feel loved and secured. I am motivated to provide an educational setting where children can develop secure attachments, and where they can rebuild their trust and sense of control.

One of the aspects that impacted me the most from this review was the testimonies shared by different individuals who had experienced their parents’ separation at different ages in their lives. Through their comments, I corroborated that the exposure to parental divorce can impact children’s life in different ways. Studies such as the ones done by Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius (2003); Wallerstein & Lewis (2004); Marquardt (2005); and Wolfier, (2005) showed the deep harm that divorce can generate in some individuals. They discuss how the cycle of divorce would continue if children lack the adequate support, guidance, love and understanding of their parents. In the other hand, we have the motivational ideas shared by the Ford and the Stern’s families. These individuals saw their parents’ divorce as a path for happiness and better living conditions. These last informational sources helped me regain confidence and reassurance on the fact that adjustment to divorce is possible when there is disposition and adequate support.
There are multiple strategies that parents can implement to ease their children’s adjustment to divorce. Nonetheless, in many cases caregivers are not aware of these alternatives or they are so overwhelmed by their new living situation that they forget about their options. We as educators, family, or community members can provide these parents with this information.

For people who are not going through divorce, the information about this topic may be obvious or redundant. However, for parents and children who are going through divorce, the review of these facts and the external reminders of this information may be their only source of hope and relief. Although all children and families are different in their acceptance and attitude toward divorce, recognizing the fundamental influence that parents, family, school, friends, and professional support may have in their coping and adaptation process is imperative. The journey after divorce would not be simple. However, parents and children must learn to make the best of their existence looking forward towards their future—taking as role models those individuals that have been able to adjust to their life after divorce.

This literature review augmented my desire to continue learning on the current research in regards to the effects of divorce in children and on the strategies that can be implemented to make this experience more successful. Even though the studies in this paper should be taken with caution due to the methodology used and the possibility of having biased results, the findings have motivated me to look forward myself and to help others living the experience of parental divorce. This work has encouraged me to further investigate the intervention programs and support groups available for parents and children of divorce. I understand that being a child or a parent of divorce is not easy, but I am positive that being educated in this matter can make the adjustment process easier, less painful, and more successful.
Life does not stop with divorce! It only takes a different route in which each individual could take control and make the final decision on how this stressful event would transform his or her existence.


Fabricius, W. V., & Luecken L. J. (2007). Postdivorce living arrangements, parents conflict, and


