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Parental Divorce: How Today's Mistakes will Affect Tomorrow

Approximately 1, 250,000 divorces occur every year in the United States; and more than a million children are affected by these (Matthews, 1998). Without very special attention, some of these children could be scarred for life. Different factors affect children when it comes to separation. These factors affect the child at individual, social and environmental points of view. Some are risk factors, which give the child a higher chance of being affected by divorce. On the other hand, protective factors are predispositions that make a child less vulnerable to the negative effects of divorce and its devastating results. The consequences of divorce on a child can be long-term effects or short-term effects – both of these being equally harmful – which greatly affect the child and who they will become. Also, many programmes exist to help children going through divorce and to avoid life-long repercussions. Some concentrate on prevention, others on intervention.

Risk Factors:

Individual:

Two categories apply to the individual factors: biological and behavioural. The biological factor refers to variables like age and gender. The behavioural factor is everything that relates to the characteristics or personality of the child. According to D.W Matthews, from the State University of North Carolina, boys are more at risk than girls to suffer greatly from divorce because fathers are more rarely given custody than mothers (1998). The lack of a male role

model is proven to make the adjustment to divorce harder for boys (Matthews, 1998). Also, younger children are more likely to suffer short-term effects due to the fact that they do not understand the divorce completely and are confused to as why one parent is no longer home. However, teenagers and young adults are more vulnerable to long-term effects since the short-term effects are, somewhat, repressed by their peers around them (Matthews, 1998). Therefore, the effects will last longer and affect the person during a great part of their life.

A behavioural factor putting a child at risk is if the child is sensitive or closed-up and doesn't have well-developed social skills (Hawkins and Fackrell, 2011). Still, according to the Matthews, a child's ability to cope with stress is a determining factor (1998). If the child is unable or has trouble dealing with stressful situations, he/she is more at risk to suffer these everlasting repercussions (Matthews, 1998).

Social:

Parents sharing with their children their marital problems or difficulties could have disastrous effects on the child and their perception of the divorce (Hawkins and Fackrell, 2011). Also if the relationship between the parent and child is bad or ineffective, the impacts of divorce on such a child could be worse than the impacts on one who is close to his/her parents (Hawkins and Fackrell, 2011). The child being often drawn into the marital conflict between his/her parents but also continuous open conflict increases a child's chances of suffering excessively from the parents' separation (Matthews, 1998). Dominating Parents and decrease in affection and care, followed by the reduced communication between parent and child (isolation) are also important factors to consider (Hopf, 2010).

Environmental:

The socioeconomic status of a family plays an important role in the way a divorce is experienced by a child. Children being born in less fortunate families are more at risk, says

Matthews (1998). A stressful environment is also a crucial factor to a child's perception of divorce (Hawkins and Fackrell, 2011).

Protective Factors

Individual:

Protective factors can also be divided into biological and behavioural factors. Studies have shown that older female children have more facility adapting to divorce. A child's ability to resist stress, conflict and be resilient can defiantly be a plus. A positive and nurturing relationship with both parents is also key to the well-being of the child through and after the divorce (Matthews, 1998). Also, an agreeable and humorous child that has thoroughly developed social skills and an in-depth understanding of his/her feelings and others' feelings has an advantage (Hawkins and Fackrell, 2011).

Social:

Children who have authoritative parents are less at risk of being devastated by the divorce says Sarah-Marie Hopf of Dartmouth University (2010). She also asserts that the involvement of the non-custodial parent and the involvement of the step-parents (if applicable) is important for the child (Hopf, 2010). Certain activities such as sports play a great role in keeping the child away from isolation or bottling up emotions. Also, positive relationships with non-parental adults and other peers play a major role (Hopf, 2010). In addition, Matthews states that giving custody to the parent of the same gender as the child is a protective factor (1998).

Environmental:

Still, according to Matthews, a stable economic situation can have a great effect on a child, since his/her quality of life could be less affected by the divorce (1998). Remarrying also positively affects a child going through divorce (Hopf, 2010).

Consequences

Divorce's consequences can be divided into six phases; emotional, legal, economic, co-parental, community and psychic, says Matthews (1998).

Individual:

According to Matthews, some phases can take years to go through, and some people never complete these phases (1998). The child goes through every phase with his/her parents. The first one is the emotional phase. It consists of the parents feeling anger, frustration, resentment, hatred and impotence towards the situation. The child also feels whatever his/her parents show. The reasons why the couple was together are now surpassed by what is tearing them apart (Matthews, 1998). Consequences include anger towards parents and themselves, loneliness, guilt, sleep problems, failure in school, feeling overwhelmed by parents' expectations, defying authority, drug/alcohol abuse, early sexual activity and suicidal or violent thoughts (Hawkins and Fackrell, 2011).

Results show that children who go through divorce are twice as likely to repeat a grade, and five times more likely to be expelled or suspended from school at some point during their education (Matthews, 1998). Divorce can also affect one's sexual identity. Boys often lack the presence of a male figure – since custody is more often given to the mother – and come to question their sexual identity (Matthews, 1998). Girls, craving for a masculine presence, could engage in early sexual relationships to make up for the absence of their father. Often, the child does not understand what is happening and the reasons why the divorce is happening, so he/she blames it on the parent who left, therefore encouraging the

separation between him/her and the non-custodial parent. The child could feel unwanted, which could lead to depression, resulting in bad marks, poor nutrition or excessive anger. In the case of teenagers or young adults, they are prompted to develop a fear of relationships and attachment because of the example that was given by their parents.

The Sleeper Effect is a syndrome where, at first, the child seems to cope well with the divorce, and not have any major problems (Matthews, 1998). That illusion is created by the subconscious which only denies these feelings, but does not delete them. However, many feelings are persistent, regardless of time: fear of abandonment and betrayal, resentment, anxiety and low psychological well-being are only some of these effects (Matthews, 1998).

Social:

As specified before, divorce can be divided in six phases (Matthews, 1998). The second, third, and sixth phases, – legal, economic, and psychic – are the social phases. In the second phase, the parents go to court and try to determine whose fault it is, more or less (Matthews, 1998). Most of the time there isn't really a specific person to blame; therefore a lot of tensions are created at home. This has a direct impact on the child (Matthews, 1998). The third phase, the “economic divorce”, is certainly the most explosive one (Matthews, 1998). The couples' belongings need to be separated equally and, if they can't do it, the court will take care of it. Many disputes and fights are bound to occur during this phase (Matthews, 1998). The sixth phase, psychic, is where the parent has to regain individual autonomy (Matthews, 1998). He/she needs to create a new identity, to grow apart from the one that was created with the other parent. All activities become individual, instead of couple's activities (Matthews, 1998). This can be very hard on a parent, and the child could very well feel the loneliness felt by his/her parents. (Matthews, 1998)

Environmental:

Studies have shown that the post-divorce home has a greater influence on a child than the divorce itself. This means that although divorce can be harsh on a child, if he/she is well taken care of, the repercussions of the separation can be attenuated (Arreola, Hartounian, Kurges, Maultasch, Retana, 2005).

The fourth and fifth phases of divorce, the co-parental and community phases, are environmental. The co-parental phase consists of giving custody to one parent, and determining how often the child will see the non-custodial parent. This is a very emotional part of the divorce, since parents often have to go to court and let a judge make the best decision for their children. The fifth phase is the community divorce. This is where the divorced couple finds new friends, since used to have other couples as companions. A consequence that can be felt from this lack of other adult peers is the child having to take in his/her parents' confessions. Another con of separation is a lower socioeconomic status; one parent (most often the father) has to move out of the house to a less expensive part of town or an apartment. This could result in the child's needs not being met (Matthews, 1998).

Programs in place:

Prevention:

In 2009, The University of Missouri conducted a research where they asked children what they wanted their parents to do to make them feel reassured about the divorce. The children said they wanted both parents involved in their life, no more fighting and support from both parents. They also specified their need to spend time with each parent, and to not hear one parent talking bad about the other once since they feel they have to take a side. They are counting on both parents to raise them, and most of all; they want to know the truth. (Kemp, Smith, Segal, 2013) Hawkins and Fackrell say that the State of Utah requires each divorced couple with children to participate in a class of "parenting after divorce" (2011).

Intervention:

Therapists, counsellors, psychologists, mediators, psychologists, commissioners, parenting coordinators, financial planners and social workers are all people who can help you and your child go through divorce. Parenting and divorce coordination can also be an option to make the transition for everyone easier (AFCC, 2013). Group counselling exists for children to come together, express their feelings and exchange with others that are living the same situation. This can create a feeling of comfort and reassurance since the child feels he/she is not alone. Individual counselling is also an option; if the child feels he/she cannot handle his/her emotions and cannot cope with the situation.

Conclusion:

75 to 80 percent of children develop into well-adjusted adults, and suffer no lasting behavioural or psychological problems (Hopf, 2010). Unfortunately, some of them will keep lifelong consequences of their parents' divorce. These consequences have direct impact on the person's life for many years affecting many facets of their quotidian. Some may even suffer lifelong consequences, never really healing from this familial wound (Matthews, 1998).

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