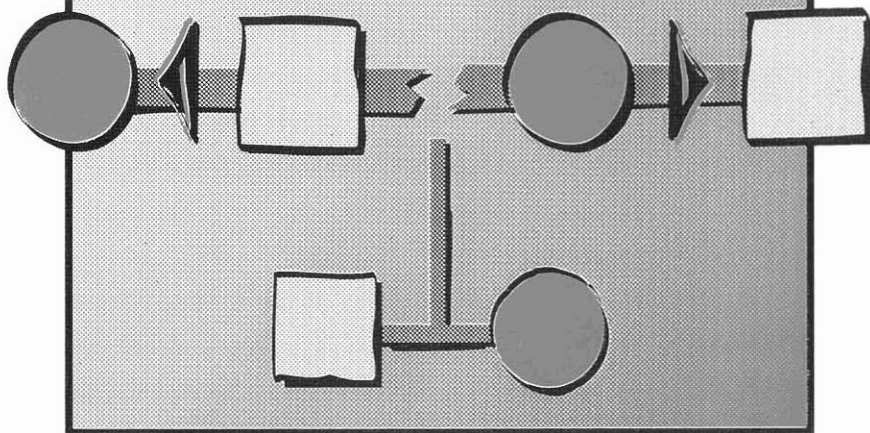


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## The Effects of Parental Divorce During Childhood on College Students

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**ABSTRACT.** This study compared 87 college students who experienced parental divorce between the ages of 8 and 18 with 67 who experienced parental death at the same ages, and 87 whose parents have been continuously married. All participants were currently ages 18 to 28. Adult offspring of divorced parents reported significantly more current life stress, family conflict, and avoidant coping, and less supportive parenting (before divorce), family cohesion, and friend support than the other two comparison groups. Further, these variables were significantly related to children of divorced parents' greater reports of current antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression than their peers. The results suggest that these variables are useful targets for preventive interventions for college students. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Parental divorce, college students, parental death

Most studies show that children of divorced parents are at increased risk for a number of academic, behavioral, emotional, and social problems than their peers during childhood (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hether-

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ington, 1989). Some longitudinal studies have shown improvements in these children's psychological adjustment over time (Edwards, 1987; Emery, 1988). However, children of divorce continue to report poorer adjustment than their peers during adulthood (Amato, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991b). The variability in adult offspring's adjustment after divorce suggests it is important to identify risk and protective factors that one might modify in mental health interventions with them.

To determine whether the absence or loss of a parent helps explain some of the offspring's increases in psychological symptoms, some studies have compared children of divorced parents with children of deceased parents. One meta-analysis of 23 studies indicated that children of a deceased parent scored lower on measures of well-being than did children of intact two-parent families, but were better off than children of divorced parents (Amato & Keith, 1991a). This indicates that there are additional mechanisms operating in divorced families that lower children's well-being other than parent loss during childhood. However, there is less research comparing offspring of divorced and deceased parents in adulthood. A recent prospective study of a British national cohort indicated that adult offspring of divorced parents showed poorer adjustment than offspring of a deceased parent (Rodgers, Power, & Hope, 1997). Conversely, a national survey of American families indicated that adult offspring of divorced parents reported higher levels of self-confidence and lower levels of depression than adult offspring of a deceased parent (Yagla Mack, 2001). It may prove useful to investigate differences between these two groups and intact families on possible risk and protective factors and examine their relationships to psychological symptoms in adulthood. Also, some research suggests that factors before, and after, divorce help explain variability in offspring's adjustment (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). Thus it may also prove useful to have offspring report about the quality of parenting prior to parental divorce or parental death.

A number of studies indicate that divorced custodial parents, compared with married parents, are less supportive, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children (e.g., Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986). However, some research indicates that in high-conflict families, children have higher levels of well-being if their parents divorced than if they stayed together, and in low-conflict families, children have higher levels of well-being if their parents stayed together than if they divorced (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). Children of divorce may benefit from observing models that resolve conflict and help them

maintain the social support they have relied on. Another risk factor, negative life events, is a consistent predictor of children's divorce, and events such as moving and changing schools appear especially stressful (Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, & Fogas, 1991). These types of negative life events are central to the experience of college students and with a number of other life events may exacerbate their risk toward poor adult adjustment.

Some types of coping and social support may serve a risk or protective function and are often related to psychological symptoms. For a sample of mother-custody divorced families, Kurdek and Sinclair (1988) found that children's externalizing coping, which included ventilation of emotions and passive problem solving, was related to more school problems. Support from peers and adults was related to fewer school problems. There is also some evidence that children of divorce engage in less productive, more rigid, and more passive coping than their peers according to teachers' reports (Kurtz, 1994). Although researchers have accumulated a great deal of evidence about these types of risk and protective factors during childhood, less is known about their effects on adult offspring of divorced parents.

The following study was conducted to compare ethnically diverse college student offspring of divorced parents with offspring of deceased fathers and offspring of continuously married parents for their reports of stress, coping, social support, and psychological symptoms. It was hypothesized that offspring of divorced parents would report more life stress, family conflict, avoidant coping, and psychological symptoms, and less supportive parenting by mothers before the divorce and less current family cohesion and friend support than offspring of a deceased parent, and offspring of married parents. Further, it was hypothesized that life stress, family conflict, and avoidant coping would be positively related, and past supportive parenting and current family cohesion and friend support negatively related, to psychological symptoms for offspring of divorced parents.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants were 87 students who experienced parental divorce between the ages of 8 and 18, 67 students who experienced parental death during the same ages, and 87 students whose parents have been

continuously married. All participants were currently ages 18 to 28 and enrolled at a public university in a southeastern city.

The children of divorce group experienced parental divorce between the ages of 8 and 18 and at least two years ago. Also, they lived primarily with their mothers throughout childhood. These criteria were used to make them comparable to the children of deceased parents group in that they were raised by their mothers and experienced the absence of their fathers. The median time since their parents' divorce was 8.1 years. The majority of the divorce group was female (58%), and they indicated that 55% of their fathers and 41% of their mothers were college graduates. The ethnicity of the divorce group was 64% European American, 10% African American, 10% Hispanic, 10% Asian American, and 6% other.

The children of deceased parents group experienced the death of their fathers at least two years ago, when the offspring were between the ages of 8 and 18. The two-year time frame was consistent with research by Saler and Skolnick (1992) so that none of them was in the acute phases of grief. The median time since their fathers' deaths was 7.7 years. The majority of the bereaved group was female (59%), and they indicated that 50% of their fathers and 41% of their mothers were college graduates. The ethnicity of the bereaved group was 66% European American, 16% African American, 5% Hispanic, 4% Asian American, and 9% other.

The children of married parents group had parents who were still living and had never experienced divorce or separation. The majority of the intact family group was female (53%), and they indicated that 65% of their fathers and 44% of their mothers were college graduates. The ethnicity of the intact family group was 62% European American, 10% African American, 14% Hispanic, 8% Asian American, and 6% other.

## Measures

*Parenting.* Supportive parenting was assessed with 13 items from the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). The students rated their mothers during childhood and prior to parental divorce or parental death on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (very unlike) to 4 (very like). An example was "My mother was affectionate to me." In this study, the internal consistency coefficient was .92 for this scale.

*Life Stress.* Life stress was assessed with negative events from the College Chronic Life Stress Survey (Towbes & Cohen, 1995). The students indicated "no" or "yes" as to whether each of 54 negative events

happened in the past three months. A "no" was scored 0 and a "yes" was scored 1. The student's score was a sum of the number of negative events that had happened. An example was "Ongoing conflict or problems getting along with a roommate." Towbes and Cohen (1995) reported test-retest reliability of .88 over two weeks. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient was .86 for this scale.

*Family Environment.* The current levels of family cohesion and family conflict were assessed with items from the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1981). Bloom's (1985) factor analysis of the FES yielded reliable scales of 5 items each for these dimensions, and they were rated on a four-point scale from 1 (very untrue for my family) to 4 (very true for my family). In this study, the internal consistency coefficients were .90 for cohesion and .88 for conflict.

*Coping.* Avoidant coping was assessed with 11 items from the Coping Strategy Indicator (Amirkhan, 1990). This measure consisted of items about how one acted when presented with a problem such as "avoided being with people in general." The students rated how much they did each strategy on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (most of the time) for the previous three months. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient was .78 for this scale.

*Friend Support.* Perceived social support from friends was assessed with 7 items from the Social Support Appraisals scale (Vaux et al., 1986). The students rated the items on a four-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). An example was "My friends look out for me." In this study, the internal consistency coefficient was .87 for this scale.

*Psychological Symptoms.* Anxiety was assessed with 11 items and depression was assessed with 12 items from the Symptom Checklist-90-R (DeRogatis, 1977). Each item was scored on a five-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Antisocial behavior was assessed with 22 items from the Antisocial Practices subscale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2; Butcher, Graham, Williams, and Ben-Porath, 1990). Each item was rated on a three-point scale from 1 (not true) to 3 (usually true). In this study, the internal consistency coefficients were .90 for anxiety, .91 for depression, and .82 for antisocial behavior.

## RESULTS

In preliminary analyses, analysis of variance was used to test whether students' reports of psychosocial factors and psychological symptoms

differed by the demographic variables of gender, ethnicity, and parents' educational levels. For the whole sample, males reported more antisocial behavior ( $F(1,257) = 25.58, p < .001$ ), and less anxiety ( $F(1,257) = 5.35, p < .05$ ) and depression ( $F(1,257) = 5.87, p < .05$ ) than females did. There were no differences by ethnicity and by parents' educational levels. These analyses were also conducted with the children of divorce group, and the only difference was that males reported more antisocial behavior ( $F(1,85) = 8.35, p < .01$ ) than females did.

### Comparisons of Children of Divorce and Their Peers

To examine whether the psychosocial predictor and outcome variables differed among children of divorced parents, children of deceased parents, and children of married parents, F-test comparisons of the means were calculated and are presented in Table 1. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that children of divorced parents reported significantly more life stress, family conflict, avoidant coping, antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression, and less supportive parenting in childhood and less current family cohesion and friend support than children of married parents and children of a deceased parent did. The latter two groups did not differ on these variables.

### Psychosocial Predictors of Psychological Symptoms for Children of Divorce

To examine the psychosocial predictors of psychological symptoms for children of divorce only, zero-order correlations were calculated between these variables and are presented in Table 2. Students' reports of the risk factors of life stress, family conflict, and avoidant coping were all significantly positively related to their reports of antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression. Their reports of the protective factors of parental support during childhood and current family cohesion and friend support were significantly negatively related to their reports of antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression. In addition, antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression were all moderately intercorrelated.

The total variation in measures of antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression as accounted for by parenting, life stress, family cohesion and conflict, avoidant coping, and friend support was calculated with three separate simultaneous multiple regressions. These regression results are presented in Table 3. Approximately half the variance was accounted for in the regressions for anxiety (47%) and depression (51%),

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and F-Test Comparisons for Adult Offspring of Married Parents, a Deceased Parent, and Divorced Parents

Variables	Married Parents (N = 87)		Deceased Parent (N = 67)		Divorced Parents (N = 87)		F
	Mean	SD (Range)	Mean	SD (Range)	Mean	SD (Range)	
Parenting	3.23 <sup>a</sup>	0.71 (1.7-4.0)	3.19 <sup>a</sup>	0.71 (1.5-4.0)	2.91 <sup>b</sup>	0.73 (1.0-4.0)	4.12*
Life Stress	19.49 <sup>a</sup>	8.40 (3.0-30.0)	18.85 <sup>a</sup>	7.74 (4.0-35.0)	22.84 <sup>a</sup>	8.64 (5.0-36.0)	7.68***
Family Conflict	2.76 <sup>a</sup>	0.97 (1.0-4.0)	2.72 <sup>a</sup>	0.97 (1.0-4.0)	3.09 <sup>b</sup>	1.09 (1.0-4.0)	3.19*
Family Cohesion	3.10 <sup>a</sup>	0.54 (1.6-4.0)	3.09 <sup>a</sup>	0.57 (1.5-4.0)	2.69 <sup>b</sup>	0.55 (1.0-4.0)	9.88***
Avoidant Coping	2.47 <sup>a</sup>	0.74 (1.0-4.0)	2.52 <sup>a</sup>	0.92 (1.0-4.0)	2.74 <sup>b</sup>	0.78 (1.0-4.0)	3.98*
Friend Support	3.43 <sup>a</sup>	0.45 (2.4-4.0)	3.41 <sup>a</sup>	0.58 (1.7-4.0)	3.27 <sup>b</sup>	0.57 (1.4-4.0)	4.18*
Antisocial Behavior	2.17 <sup>a</sup>	0.43 (1.0-2.6)	2.16 <sup>a</sup>	0.44 (1.0-3.0)	2.29 <sup>b</sup>	0.42 (1.0-3.0)	4.31*
Anxiety	1.70 <sup>a</sup>	0.80 (0.0-3.1)	1.72 <sup>a</sup>	0.77 (0.0-3.7)	1.91 <sup>b</sup>	0.80 (0.0-3.8)	4.03*
Depression	1.79 <sup>a</sup>	0.75 (0.0-3.2)	1.80 <sup>a</sup>	0.77 (0.0-3.7)	2.09 <sup>b</sup>	0.82 (0.0-3.9)	4.12*

Note. Means with different superscripts are significantly different at  $p < .01$  in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison.  
\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

and avoidant coping and life stress were significant unique predictors. Less variance (28%) was accounted for in antisocial behavior and avoidant coping was the only significant predictor. Interactions between stress and coping variables were also tested and were non-significant.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to evaluate whether college student offspring of divorced parents differed from offspring of a deceased parent and offspring of married parents in reports of psychological symptoms and to examine whether these differences were accounted for by several

TABLE 2. Intercorrelations Between Life Stress, Parenting, Coping, and Social Support and Psychological Symptoms for Adult Offspring of Divorced Parents (N = 87)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Parenting	—							
2. Life Stress	-.30 <sup>b</sup>	—						
3. Family Conflict	-.31 <sup>b</sup>	.06	—					
4. Family Cohesion	.35 <sup>c</sup>	-.28 <sup>a</sup>	-.02	—				
5. Avoidant Coping	-.21 <sup>a</sup>	.38 <sup>c</sup>	.11	-.20	—			
6. Friend Support	.23 <sup>a</sup>	-.14	.02	.18	-.11	—		
7. Antisocial Behavior	-.21 <sup>a</sup>	.23 <sup>a</sup>	.22 <sup>a</sup>	-.24 <sup>a</sup>	.31 <sup>b</sup>	.21 <sup>a</sup>	—	
8. Anxiety	-.33 <sup>b</sup>	.53 <sup>c</sup>	.24 <sup>a</sup>	-.25 <sup>a</sup>	.50 <sup>c</sup>	-.23 <sup>a</sup>	.21 <sup>a</sup>	—
9. Depression	-.33 <sup>b</sup>	.55 <sup>c</sup>	.22 <sup>a</sup>	-.29 <sup>b</sup>	.51 <sup>c</sup>	-.22 <sup>a</sup>	.37 <sup>c</sup>	.65 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>p < .05 <sup>b</sup>p < .01 <sup>c</sup>p < .001

TABLE 3. Multiple Regression Analyses with Psychological Symptoms as the Criterion Variables for Adult Offspring of Divorced Parents (N = 87)

Predictor	Antisocial Behavior	Anxiety	Depression
	Beta	Beta	Beta
Parenting	-.054	-.117	-.107
Life Stress	.097	.406***	-.391***
Family Conflict	.095	.132	.061
Family Cohesion	-.071	-.047	-.054
Avoidant Coping	.261***	.318***	.364***
Friend Support	-.012	-.092	-.080

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001

and middle school students (Neher & Short, 1998) and suggest some developmental continuity in adjustment status. The differences in psychological symptoms were similar in magnitude to the differences typically found for antisocial behavior and emotional distress between adult offspring of divorced parents and their peers (Amato & Keith, 1991b). The reports of more depression by children of divorced parents than by children of deceased parents is the opposite of the results reported in a national study (Yagla Mack, 2001). However, the participants of this study were on average 10 to 15 years younger and thus the specific risk and protective factors measured in this study may help explain age differences in symptoms.

The differences in psychological symptoms were partially accounted for by more life stress and family conflict reported by children of divorce than their peers. The relationship of stress to psychological symptoms is similar to previous research for children of divorce (Sandler et al., 1991; Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994) and suggests that divorce may act as a chronic strain for some offspring into the adult years. The stressful events chosen were general events, so the effects of stress may be even greater with the inclusion of divorce-specific stressful events. Previous research indicated that family conflict can be relatively low and still have a negative effect on well-being (Amato et al., 1995). College student offspring of divorced parents often have concerns about adequate financial resources and typically receive less assistance from their parents than their peers do (Amato, 1999). This may contribute to ongoing family conflict.

Students' avoidant coping appeared to be a risk factor as it was correlated positively with symptoms. This is consistent with previous research that children's negative appraisals about divorce events were related to fewer coping efforts and more depression (Mazur, Wolchik, & Sandler, 1992). Also, divorced parents may model ineffective coping for their children. For example, Holloway and Machida (1991) found that divorced parents who used the most avoidant coping also used the least effective parenting techniques with their children.

Adult offspring of divorced parents reported less supportive parenting prior to divorce, and less current family cohesion and friend support than their peers, and this was similar to previous research (Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988). The lower levels of these protective factors are plausible causes for offspring's symptoms in divorced families since some research has found that children of divorce tend to have less parental supervision and more internalizing problems than their peers (Amato & Keith, 1991a). The lack of supportive parenting prior to divorce may in-

psychosocial risk and protective factors. The first notable finding is that adult offspring of divorced parents reported more antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression than offspring of married parents and offspring of deceased parents. These findings are similar to previous research on these types of variables with elementary school students (Short, 1998b)

dicating parent pathology that perhaps worsens through marital conflict. Wallerstein (1983) has suggested that children perceive parental divorce as a form of parental rejection. Perhaps when children fail to get, or to perceive, adequate parental support, they spend more time with peers who also have less parental monitoring and more antisocial behavior. Further, Steinberg (1987) has found that children of divorce report more susceptibility to pressure from friends to engage in deviant behavior than their peers do. Some actions by friends and parents that are intended as supportive can be perceived as esteem threatening if they convey a message of dependence or incompetence (Short, Sandler, & Roosa, 1996). Thus it may be useful for the children of divorced parents to communicate their perceptions of the help or support that is offered to them.

The significant relationship between the college students' risk and protective factors and their symptoms has implications for preventive interventions with children of divorce. The results of this study suggest the importance of focusing on family relationships for adult offspring of parental divorce in preventive interventions, and this has generally not occurred in previous interventions (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Amato (1999) has found that adult offspring of divorce reported less affection and exchange less assistance with their parents than the offspring of married parents, and these variables were related to lower life satisfaction and happiness. Also, the findings from this study suggest that adult adjustment might improve through reducing life stress, family conflict, and avoidant coping. Interventions with children have found reductions in these variables are related to reductions in psychological symptoms (Short, 1998a). A combination of individual focused interventions and family interventions may prove most helpful to college students.

It is important to develop more sophisticated models to explain the adjustment of children to divorce. For example, Lengua, Wolchik, and Braver (1995) examined divorce adjustment from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective. They found that factors at the microsystem level (e.g., parenting behaviors, family relationships, social support) and the exosystem level (e.g., financial resources, parents' adjustment) accounted for significant variance in adjustment, and factors at the ontogenic level (e.g., children's age, gender, misconceptions about divorce) did not. In this study, avoidant coping, an ontogenic variable, did account for significant variance in symptoms. The microsystem and exosystem levels were also partially examined in this study with measures of parents' educational levels, students' life stress, and friend support. There still was a large portion of the variance unexplained in

psychological symptoms, and this suggests that it is useful to measure other possible influences in children's adjustment. Other parenting variables to consider in a larger conceptual model include non-custodial parenting, parental monitoring, and parental pathology (Thomas & Forehand, 1993). Some other offspring variables to focus on include social skills, locus of control, self-esteem, and divorce-related cognitions that are related to psychological adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1992).

Further research can help one better understand how stress, social relationships, and coping affect child and adult adjustment after parental divorce. Since this study is correlational in nature, one cannot determine the directions of causation, and it is likely there is bidirectionality between psychosocial stressors or resources and psychological adjustment. Experimental studies in the context of planned interventions with family members could provide greater evidence of causation. Also, the present findings are subject to possible bias and distortion associated with the use of self-report measures and retrospective reports. The use of multiple informants about family relationships and controlled observation of family exchanges could add to the validity of adult offspring's self-reports and assist in developing mental health interventions for them.

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