

Quality of Parenting Affects Children's Adjustment to Divorce

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Children whose parents continued to use good parenting skills after they were divorced, did not show the adjustment problems often associated with other children who have experienced parental divorce, according to a recent study completed in Iowa.

This comprehensive long-term study of married and divorced families and their children, the Iowa State Transitions Project, followed approximately 534 families over 10 years. "What is essential for kids is that they are parented well," according to study researcher Ronald L. Simons. "If Mom and Dad continue to persevere in their parenting, are warm and supportive, monitor the kids and are consistent in discipline, the risk for conduct problems is no greater than in two-parent families. This is a more optimistic scenario than is often asserted."

Past research has shown that parental divorce can contribute to lower achievement in school, early entry into sexual activity, delinquency and substance abuse for both boys and girls.

Conduct problems that were examined in the Iowa study were aggressive or delinquent behavior, emotional distress and depression. Even when parents were doing a good job of parenting, divorce increased boys' chances of becoming depressed. Boys' likelihood of becoming depressed was also increased by pre-divorce conflict between their parents. Post-divorce conflict between parents increased girls' risk for conduct problems.

The most important factor that protected both boys and girls from adjustment problems was the quality of the custodial mother's parenting. Mothers who were able to maintain consistent discipline, be supportive of their children, and monitor their activities, lowered their children's risk for adjustment problems. Mothers who became depressed tended to have lower quality parenting. This, in turn, increased the child's risk for adjustment problems.

The divorced, non-residential fathers in the study often relinquished their parenting role, forming a more buddy-type relationship with their children. They were less likely than non-divorced fathers to:

- help their children problem solve,
- discuss standards of conduct with their children, or
- enforce discipline when needed.

This lack of appropriate parenting increased the likelihood that boys would display conduct problems.

“It is essential, especially for sons, that fathers continue to function as a parent,” Simons emphasizes. “Simply showing the kids a good time and being a pal doesn’t make any difference in terms of developmental outcomes for kids.”

The average age of the children in the study group of two-parent and divorced mother-headed families was 14 years. The study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

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