

**DIVORCE AND ITS IMPACT ON
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS**

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DIVORCE AND ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in Psychology

by
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March, 1983

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Debora Wright Evans entitled "Divorce and its Impact on Academic Achievement of Students." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to extend sincere appreciation to Dr. Linda Rudolph, Professor of Psychology, Austin Peay State University, for her patience, time, and guidance throughout this research project. She has made it possible to complete the project through her extension of time in order to meet my tight work schedule.

Gratefulness is also expressed to Dr. Cyril Sadowski, Dr. Garland Blair, and Dr. Charles Grah for their assistance with the project.

Special gratitude goes to my loving parents who have made all of this possible.

Final appreciation must be acknowledged to my husband, Carlton, whose knowledge, care, and faith have instilled me to complete this project. His encouragement and pride in me have been of invaluable support.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Present day schools have become burdened by the need to cope with an array of social problems not directly related to educating the young. Divorce is one of the more prevalent. The divorce rate has more than doubled in the past two years. Currently, almost four out of ten marriages end in divorce (Bureau of the Census, 1975), and more than sixty percent of these divorcing couples have children in the home. Because almost fifty percent of all divorces occur in the first seven years of marriage, the children involved in divorce are usually quite young (Norton and Glich, 1976). In 1979 approximately half of the nation's juvenile population was touched by divorce, and some nine million children were members of divorced families (Damon, 1979).

Despite the significant number of children who experience divorce of their parents, there is relatively little systematic research in this area. Furthermore, many studies have conceptual and methodological problems that have made the validity of their findings questionable and the accumulation of a coherent knowledge base problematic (Levitin, 1979).

Many early studies of divorce and children were conducted within the research tradition of studying single-parent families. The bulk of these studies, many of which were done in the 1960's, focused on demonstrating casual

relationships between a child's living in a single-parent household and the child becoming delinquent, failing in school, developing inappropriate sex role attitudes and behaviors, or exhibiting other types of pathology. It would be easy to fall back on the old stereotypes of the "broken" home. But to do so is to brand single parents and their children with the devastating label "disadvantaged," ignoring the many stable and nurturing families headed by one parent and the many children from such homes who do well in school and grow in independence and resiliency (Lazarus, 1980).

There is some evidence to indicate a one-parent household may be better for the children than a troubled, legally intact family (Lazarus, 1980; Rubin and Price, 1979). However, other classic and recent longitudinal studies indicate children of divorce are at risk, and that only some of them may need extra help at school or with other adjustment problems (Lazarus, 1980; Skeen & McKenry, 1980).

In one of the more recent and in-depth reviews of the literature concerning the effects of father absence on children's cognitive development, fifty-four studies were examined. Shinn (1978) reported that of the twenty-eight studies that met the requirements of methodological adequacy, sixteen showed detrimental effects on children when the father was absent from the home, nine found no significant effects, and three found positive or mixed positive and negative effects.

Cognitive differences between children from intact and fatherless families were reported in the studies reviewed by Shinn (1978). As compared to fatherless children, those from intact families were 1.6 years higher in achievement, .9 standard deviation units higher in I.Q. and aptitude, and a grade point higher in school grades. However, the effects were frequently not so large as those due to socioeconomic status (Broman, 1975; Ferri, 1976). The age or sex of a child was found to have a moderate negative effect on the relationship between father absence and children's intellectual growth (Shinn, 1978).

Levitin (1979) surveyed the most current findings on the effects of divorce on children and attempted to describe the complexity of problems with the research. Past research was criticized for lack of specificity and for biases towards single-parent homes. However, she reported that the more recent studies have been less confounded by these problems. Research in the area of divorce has just begun to probe the effects of mother absence in the family. The few studies of father custody that have been done have not combined a multi-method approach with direct observation and assessment of children, and no comparisons of children in father custody, mother custody, and intact family households have been made (Levitin, 1979).

Problems resulting from divorce may depend on when the children are observed and on their age at the time of the

divorce. Levitin (1979) concentrated on two classic projects involving children of divorce directed by Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1976, 1978, 1979) and Kelly and Wallerstein (1975, 1976, 1977). Hetherington, et al. found the first year after the divorce is the time in which children show the most intense disruptions. Also, adverse effects appeared to be more intense and longer lasting in boys than girls. In the Kelly and Wallerstein's benchmark study, it was found that children at different developmental levels have different reactions. Younger children seemed to be the most severely hindered by the divorce with the effects tapering off as the age of the children increased. Other papers presented by Levitin (1979) argued that the effects of divorce may be both positive and negative, sometimes mild and sometimes severe, and have short- and long-term consequences for different children and their families.

All factors point to the acute need for a systematic, current, longitudinal study of children of divorce. Such a project was undertaken by the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Kettering Foundation's Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A/). A consortium of twenty-six elementary and secondary schools in fourteen states representing a cross-section of inner city, suburban, small town, and rural areas was organized. Each school was surveyed twice and involved more than 18,000 students.

The significant findings of the first year report included the following:

1. Children from single-parent homes were consistently more likely than their two-parent peers to live in a low-income family;
2. Single-parent families tended to move more than two-parent families;
3. Single-parent children on the whole showed lower achievement in school than their two-parent classmates;
4. Single-parent children were absent from school more frequently and visited the school clinic more than two-parent children;
5. Single-parent children were more than twice as likely to skip school as were children from two-parent homes;
6. Single-parent children were more likely to be referred, but not much more often, than children from two-parent homes;
7. One-parent children were more than twice as likely to drop out of school than were students from two-parent households (Lazarus, 1980).

This current research supports the findings of Kelly and Wallerstein (1979) who found that a temporary interruption (divorce) in the learning process may turn into significant academic problems if the child is not able to resume his or

her attention to learning within a reasonable period of time. The researchers also pointed out that children in the earliest stages of mastering reading may be most vulnerable to the disorganization effects of family disruption.

Rubin, et al. (1979) also found evidence of academic problems as well as age effects. A sample of children were divided into four age periods: preschool, early latency (ages 5-7), later latency (ages 8-10), and adolescence. The results indicated that the early-latency age group experienced poor performance and withdrawal from school. The later-latency age child's school performance varied. Older children's school performance was less hindered.

Similarly, Smidchens and Thompson (1978) found students from two-parent families tend to score higher in achievement than do students from one-parent families. They cautioned against generalizing the results for too little is known regarding the effects of other family organization variables, i.e., siblings. They offered this data only as an attempt to indicate the need for classroom teachers to consider the possible needs of students who reside with one parent.

The finding of NAESP and I/D/E/A are supported by those of Shaw (1979). A correlation between dropping out of high school and living in a one-parent family was found. Various factors of life in a one-parent family have been identified as being related to the likelihood that girls may not complete high school. Among these factors were: the length of

time ever lived in a one-parent family, level of family income, educational level of the mother, and the girl's knowledge of the work world.

In contrast to these studies are the findings reported by Hammond (1979a). This study attempted to investigate differences in self-concept, school behavior, and attitudes. No significant differences in self-concept or reading achievement between children of intact and divorced families were found. In mathematics achievement boys from divorced families scored lower, although not to a significant level. There was little difference in mathematics achievement between girls from intact homes and single parent homes. Hammond's findings are in concurrence with several other past studies (Birnbaum, 1966; Wasserman, 1969; Nielson, 1971; Atkinson and Ogston, 1974).

In view of the current findings, the area of the effects of divorce on children leaves many unanswered questions for further research. Society is always changing. Divorce effects today may not be generalizable to children of the future whose parents will divorce because of the influence multiple variables and the effects of which are not yet understood (e.g., teacher expectancy, family lifestyles). Individual needs must be considered if schools are to reach their goal of helping children achieve their learning potential.

Inasmuch as the effect of divorce on children is controversial and complex, the present study was directed

toward further investigation of these effects on school achievement using a sample of white, rural, third and fourth grade students. Also, the present study sought to determine the influence of the factors sex and socioeconomic status and their interaction with divorce. To respond to these concerns the following null hypotheses were stated:

1. There will be no difference in the achievement of elementary age students as a result of divorce in the family household when compared to those living in intact homes.

2. There will be no difference in achievement between elementary age boys and girls as a result of divorce in the family household when compared to those living in intact homes.

3. There will be no differences in achievement between low socioeconomic status and middle-to-high socioeconomic status elementary students as a result of divorce in the family household when compared to those living in intact homes.

Chapter 2

METHOD

Subjects

The population for the present study consisted of 96 white, rural, elementary school children in grades 3-4. The students' ages ranged from 9 to 12, and the sample included 44 males and 52 females. The sample of 29 students (31.2%) came from a home in which divorce had occurred and 77 students (78.8%) came from a legally intact home. Excluded from the study were adopted students or students who had lost a parent due to death.

The socioeconomic status of the community is primarily lower-middle to middle class according to Title I qualifications (see Appendix A). Among the students from a divorced home, 17 students or 58.6 percent came from low-income homes based on qualifications for the free lunch programs. Qualifications for the free lunch program are determined by family size and income. Families of two qualify if their income is under \$6,900, families of three under \$8,580, families of four under \$10,250, families of five under \$11,930, families of six under \$13,600, families of seven under \$15,280, and families of eight under \$16,950.

Materials

Information relating to sex, age, and test scores was collected from the students' cumulative folders. Family

status information was collected from the students' enrollment cards. Low income information, which served as the basis for assigning socioeconomic status, was obtained from the free lunch program records. No other indicator of socioeconomic status was used.

The test scores were derived from the Stanford Achievement Test. Categories analyzed were: reading total, auditory total, mathematics total, and battery total. The test was administered as a part of the regularly scheduled program of the testing bureau of the school corporation. The test was given in the spring of 1981 by the children's regular classroom teacher.

Procedure

Written consent was given to the researcher for access to students' cumulative records by the school's principal. Information on age, sex, and test scores was recorded for all students in grades three and four. Family status information was gathered from the student enrollment cards. Family income level as classified by the school's free lunch program was also recorded. Each student was assigned a number to keep the information confidential.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

The data were analyzed by computer using the multiple regression technique. No significant difference in total achievement as a result of divorce or intact home was found ($F < .1$). No significant difference in total achievement between boys and girls in intact or divorce homes was found ($F < .1$). There was a significant difference in total achievement between the lower class and middle-to-upper class students regardless of the home situation--divorce or intact ($F=7.88$; $P < .006$). Students classified as middle-to-high socioeconomic status achieved higher on the total achievement battery ($\bar{X}=328.25$) than students classified as lower socioeconomic status ($\bar{X}=266.83$).

In addition, a significant interaction was found between sex and socioeconomic status regardless of the family's marital status ($F=3.883$; $P < .05$). Boys in the middle-to-high socioeconomic status achieved higher on the total battery ($\bar{X}=335.38$) than girls classified in the middle-to-high socioeconomic status ($\bar{X}=321.12$). However, girls classified as low socioeconomic status scored higher on the total battery ($\bar{X}=297.28$) than boys classified as low economic status ($\bar{X}=240.71$).

Although the original hypothesis did not state that differences in reading scores would be examined, since reading and total achievement have been found to be highly correlated,

the researcher chose to examine the relationship between reading, socioeconomic status and marital status. As would be expected from a review of the above data showing a relationship between achievement on the total battery and socioeconomic status, reading was also affected by socioeconomic status regardless of the family's marital status ($F=13.28$; $p < .00045$). An examination of the mean scores revealed that middle-to-above socioeconomic status students had higher mean scores ($\bar{X}=82.33$) than did low socioeconomic status students ($\bar{X}=65.95$). The reading scores for boys in the middle-to-high socioeconomic status were higher ($\bar{X}=65.52$) than those boys classified as low socioeconomic status ($\bar{X}=60.19$). The reading scores for girls in the middle-to-high socioeconomic status were higher ($\bar{X}=82.78$) than those of girls in the low socioeconomic status ($\bar{X}=72.67$). The reading mean for girls was higher than the mean for boys in both of the socioeconomic status categories regardless of the family's marital status.

The regression coefficient between math achievement and sex and socioeconomic status was computed also. The relationship between math achievement and sex was not significant, and the relationship between math achievement and socioeconomic status only approached significance ($F=2.955$; $P < .089$).

In summary, the hypothesis that divorce is not a significant factor in the achievement of students is supported by the above data. The only factor significantly related to achievement in the present study is socioeconomic status.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of divorce on the achievement of elementary age students as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test. Other independent variables measured were sex and socioeconomic status. The results of the study indicated that the factor of divorce was not a significant factor affecting student achievement for this sample. However, socioeconomic status was a significant factor, adversely affecting the achievement of students in both intact and divorced homes.

Although many studies have found divorce to be a contributing factor to poor student achievement, some have reported conflicting evidence concerning the positive effects of the nuclear family. In one study, Hammond (1979b) studied self-concept, academic achievement, and attitudes and found that there were no significant differences in the self-concept or reading ability between children of intact and divorced families; in mathematics boys from divorced homes scored lower, but not significantly lower, than boys from intact homes. Girls from divorced and intact homes showed no difference in mathematics achievement.

A study conducted by Smidchins and Thompson (1978) investigated the effects of family organization within socioeconomic strata on basic skill achievement. They found

that students from intact homes tended to obtain higher achievement scores than students from divorced homes. However, they also found that divorce had a greater impact on the achievement of students in the lower socioeconomic levels.

Herzog and Sudia (1970) concluded from their review of the literature that it was unlikely that divorce alone caused poor school achievement and that factors such as socioeconomic status and the quality of adult interactions are impacting factors.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1979) suggested that achievement may suffer temporarily during the divorce crisis, but that continued poor achievement usually will be due to other factors in the children's lives.

These studies and the present study suggest a new way of thinking about the effects of divorce on children. Many children can successfully cope with the crisis of divorce without their school achievement being affected. Low socioeconomic status, among other variables, may be one factor, among many, overriding divorce and interrupting the learning process. A significant number of professionals cautioned against expecting all children and parents to react to a divorce in similar ways. Each individual's behavior depends on his or her unique personality, experiences, and support systems available (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975; Damon, 1979).

The studies reviewed indicate the need for teachers, counselors, and all those who work with children from divorced

homes to be aware of personal biases and expectations that children from homes in which divorce has occurred will have problems with learning and social adjustments. A most noted study by Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) reported that pupils perform up to the expectations of the teacher, which may in itself be a contributing factor to poor school performance of students from divorced homes.

In concurrence with the present study's conclusions concerning the reading scores of the sample, Jantz (1975) found significant differences in reading performance for the factors of sex and socioeconomic status ($P < .01$). Females scored significantly higher than males, and high socioeconomic students scored significantly higher than low socioeconomic students.

Although the present study found no significant difference in the achievement of boys from divorced homes, studies have indicated that boys may be more severely affected than girls from divorced homes. Hetherington (1979) concluded that boys are the worst victims of divorce due to expectations for them to fit the stereotypic male role characterized by aggression and independence.

Our society is experiencing a seemingly rapid social evolution in terms of interpersonal relationships and family organization. In that new types of families are constantly evolving and the results of research are conflicting, the need for further research in this area seems essential.

Investigations of factors such as the following would assist counselors in working with families experiencing divorce:

- (a) the effect of divorce on children at varying ages;
- (b) the emotional stability and maturity of the parents in handling the crisis precipitating the divorce as well as the process;
- (c) the number and birth order of the siblings;
- (d) the amount of conflict in the home and the length of time the children have experienced this conflict;
- (e) the environmental factors that aid the child in coping with divorce and instill stability and resiliency in the children; and
- (f) the multiple of other variables affecting academic achievement and their possible relationship to the divorce process.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

FAMILY-SIZE AND INCOME SCALE FOR FREE AND
REDUCED-PRICE MEALS AND FREE MILK

This is the income scale used by Houston County Board of Education to determine eligibility for free meals and free milk in the 1980-81 school year.

SCHOOL YEAR 1980-1981

Family Size	Free Meals & Free Milk	Reduced Price Meals
1	\$ 5,230	\$ 8,150
2	6,900	10,760
3	8,580	13,380
4	10,250	15,990
5	11,930	18,600
6	13,600	21,220
7	15,280	23,830
8	16,950	26,440
Each additional family member	\$ 1,680	\$ 2,610

REGULATIONS REGARDING INCOME GUIDELINES

IN APPLYING GUIDELINES, SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITIES MAY CONSIDER BOTH THE INCOME OF THE FAMILY DURING THE PAST 12 MONTHS AND THE FAMILY'S CURRENT RATE OF INCOME TO DETERMINE WHICH IS THE BETTER INDICATOR OF THE NEED FOR FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEALS: PROVIDED, HOWEVER, THAT CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS OR GUARDIANS BECOME UNEMPLOYED SHALL BE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED PRICE MEALS AND/OR FREE MILK DURING THE PERIOD OF UNEMPLOYMENT, IF THE LOSS OF INCOME CAUSES THE FAMILY INCOME TO BE WITHIN THE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA OF THE SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITY (Tennessee State Department of Education, 1980-81).