

Divorce and its effect on family life essay sample

[Family](#), [Divorce](#)



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Ironically not too long ago, “divorce” was forbidden, unaccepted, and considered as an act of sin among married couples. This situation has reversed in our contemporary world whereby the stigma once associated with divorce has eroded, while its massive effects on women and subsequently family life continues to grow at overwhelming proportions.

Divorce is one of the most painful and unwelcome public topics one can address in our modern world. When a marriage is not working and there is a break down in communication, common goals or trust, many times this will result in a divorce which can be a painful process, even more so if children are involved.

Since the turn of the century, the Western World has supposedly undergone not only an Industrial Revolution but also a Sexual Revolution which irreversibly altered the way in which the relations between men and women were perceived. In the early 1900's, the Industrial Revolution transformed societies from agrarian to urban, resulting in exclusive sex roles for men and women. Fathers had more power in the working world, while mothers had more power in the child-rearing arena. As a result of these rigid roles, people today still believe that children belong with their mothers; that mothers are the real parent and the fathers are given a supporting role and visitation with their own children. Over the course of the twentieth century, the rate of divorce increased dramatically kicking off in the late 1960's, facilitated by federal legislations. It is now argued that the true nuclear family is literally becoming extinct. The idealistic image of the household being divided into public and private spheres has become a mythical belief.

The once so-called “ traditional roles” for men and women during the industrialization and urbanization of the 20th century changed greatly. Women entered the work force in order to replace men during World War II; later in the 1960’s, they gained control over fertility with birth control. These events led to a shift in roles with women having more decision-making ability in family matters (Teyber, 1992).

In the Victorian era, patriarchy was the most prevalent form of family life. There was a double standard of sexual morality where fidelity was demanded of the wife while the husband pursued adulterous encounters; cheap and expensive, depending on his own social class. People did not marry for love so much as for the convenience of the families concerned. All marriages in this sense were “ arranged”. Divorce which rarely occurred, took place at the pleasure of the husband with the wife having no say in the face of her husband’s infidelity, brutality or indifference. This Victorian marriage is a stark contrast to the modern day family. Nowadays, ‘ love’ is what forms families while functioning as an affectional basis vesting equal financial and moral powers to both partners. The growing trend of divorce must therefore reflect in one way or another, this new equality of the sexes. According to a study on divorced women, it was found that the majority of marriages ended because of the negative gender dynamics in them (Kurz 1995). The study proved that one fifth of middle-class American women had divorced for reasons involving conventional male behaviour– their failure to share housework, childcare, emotional care and their constant urge to be in control.

Among the poor and working class women, one fifth ended their marriages due to their partner's violence and abuse. Simply, the main reasons for divorce revolved around men's problematic behaviour (Fox, pp. 166).

It was not the image of women as equals that inspired the reform of the divorce laws but on the contrary, it was their image as helpless victims that was the true inspiration.

Divorce is a very agonizing experience; not only among parents themselves but among their children as well. It can pressure feelings of depression, anger, despair, anticipation of newly-inflicted responsibilities and economic hardships.

The effects are immense. As research has proven, divorce permanently weakens the relationship between a child and his/her parents, it leads to destructive ways of handling conflict, a poorer self-image and long-lasting psychological damages. Children of divorce demonstrate an earlier loss of virginity, more cohabitation, higher expectations of divorce, higher divorce rates later in life, and less desire to have children. These effects perpetuate the downward spiral of family life and increase the loss of family and social values, beliefs and contacts. The effects of divorce on children can range from mild to severe and from short-term to long-term. Though none of the effects necessarily applies to every child of divorced parents, millions of children who see their parents divorce are nonetheless affected in serious ways by feelings of rejection. There is no way to predict how each individual child will be affected or to what extent, but it is possible to demonstrate the numerous and serious effects that divorce can have on society.

Most people experience three stages of adjustment after a divorce. The initial stage of the marital disruption is the most painful stage, because everything is changing and the future is uncertain. The second transitional stage occurs right after the break-up, also called “the settle down” stage. Parents try out new lifestyles, reorganize their lives and try to accustom and adapt to the new potentials. Many changes for parents and children take place during this stage. During the third stage, parents and children feel a renewed sense of stability. Parents have formed new relationships and accepted stable patterns of visitation and custody. In this stage, children feel more secure because they are living in a stable environment (Teyber 1992).

In reality, children are not usually informed of their parents impending separation until shortly before it occurs, this certainly causes open conflict and children’s reactions may vary according to their ages. Pre-school children aged 3-5 have a limited ability in understanding; they are usually frightened, angry, sad and confused when they find out that one of their parents has moved out of the house. They experience self blame, anxiety and guilt as they assume that the whole separation was their fault—that they must have done something terribly wrong to make their parent leave (Fox, pp. 493). They tend to grow isolated and regress and act younger than their age. School aged children of ages 6-8 generally have the hardest time coping with their parents divorce especially the boys. Most psychologists believe this is due to the fact that when fathers move out, boys lose a constant male role model. Girls of this age still maintain their identity with the role model, their mother.

Both boys and girls experience sadness and will cry openly at the marital break-up. It is quite common for them to have low self esteem and feel unlovable and rejected. Older children can comprehend the situation better and understand the reasons for divorce as opposed to blaming it on themselves. Adolescents can react in many ways towards their parents divorce; they usually deal with the divorce better than younger children because they are so involved in their peer group and are becoming independent from their families. Both boys and girls cope with their parents divorce by distancing themselves from the parental relationship. They tend to become more involved in their own plans.

Of the many long and short termed negative effects divorce can palm off on children; studies show that ten years after their parents' divorce, 30% of children cope successfully in life, while 40% have mixed successes with relationships, and personal problems. The remaining 30% continue to struggle with significant relationship and personal problems. (Wallerstein, 1989)

Divorce can have lasting effects on children, but that these effects spill over into every aspect of their lives. Research on the topic suggests that:

*Children whose parents have divorced are increasingly the victims of abuse and neglect. They exhibit more health problems, as well as behavioural and emotional problems, are involved more frequently in crime and drug abuse, and have higher rates of suicide.

*Children of divorced parents more frequently demonstrate a diminished learning capacity, performing more poorly than their peers from intact two-parent families in reading, spelling, and math. They also are more likely to repeat a grade and to have higher drop-out rates and lower rates of college graduation.

*Divorce generally reduces the income of the child's primary household and seriously diminishes the potential of every member of the household to accumulate wealth.

*Religious worship, which has been linked to health and happiness as well as longer marriages and better family life, is less prevalent in divorced families.

Divorce breaks down and disrupts the “family”, being the fundamental unit of society which undoubtedly will have sounding overall impacts. There is a strong relationship between family backgrounds and such problems as crime, abuse, neglect and addictions. To understand the significant relationship between the rate of crime in a community and family background, I will represent the example of research conducted by Robert Sampson, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He found that the divorce rate predicted the rate of robbery in any given area, regardless of economic and racial composition. Children who use drugs and abuse alcohol are more likely to come from family backgrounds characterized by parental conflict and parental rejection.

Further research on the relationship between family background and crime indicates that rejection by peers can lead hostile children to join delinquent

gangs. (Backgrounder, No. 1026). Child abuse has also been proved to be closely related to family structure. After a divorce, mothers may marry again or acquire new boyfriends. This presence of a stepfather or a boyfriend increases the risk of abuse.

When parents divorce, most children suffer. For some, this suffering turns into long-lasting psychological damage. Neglect of children, which can be psychologically more damaging than physical abuse, is twice as high among separated and divorced parents. (The American Psychologist, pp. 321-328)

In addition to its psychological damages, divorce can also affect a child's educational experience as it has an impact on his/her learning achievement. Divorce impedes learning by disrupting productive study patterns as children are forced to move between homes, and by increasing anxiety and depression in both parents and children. Because of its impact on stable home life, divorce can diminish the capacity to learn—a principle demonstrated by the fact that children whose parents divorce have lower rates of graduation from high school and college and also complete fewer college courses.

Divorce can have inevitable and significant negative economic consequences for families. Most women experience drastic drops in income after a separation. The break-up of families' leaves one parent trying to do the work of two people. Because of this, divorce has been shown to lead to decreased household income and a higher risk of poverty. It is also a factor in a child's diminished level of academic achievement, which translates into lower

earnings as an adult. Divorce also causes both parents to lose the economies of scale that would be available in the larger pre-divorced household.

Using longitudinal data to trace the impact of divorce on a representative sample of Canadians, it was found that between the years 1982 and 1986 as a result of divorce, women experienced a steep decline in economic well-being while men enjoyed moderate increases. It was also found that women who were not poor before their divorce became poor in the year following it. (Fox, pp. 166)

Divorce affects all the major institutions of society, but none more than the family itself and the child's capacity to sustain family life as an adult. The severing of the relationship between mother and father breaks the hearts of most children, making their own capacity to have deep and trusting relationships more slender. Because of the negative impacts that divorce has on educational attainment, health, community life, and (as will be shown below) religious worship, it is particularly troubling that divorce seems to perpetuate itself across successive generations. The negative impact of divorce on home life is so strong that children of divorced parents struggle as adults to create a positive, healthy family environment for their own children. Based on information from several national surveys of adults, Sara McLanahan found that persons who reported living as a child in a single-parent family were more likely to have dropped out of high school, marry during teenage years and have a child before marrying. The study showed that the probability of whites dropping out of high school could be as

high as 22 percent for those who lived with single parents, compared with about 11 percent for those who lived with both parents.(Fox pp. 495)

Finally, when a family breaks apart, the rhythm of family life is deeply affected. This disrupts religious practice which simultaneously has profound negative consequences. Following a divorce, children are more likely to stop practicing their faith. This drop-off in worship has serious undesirable consequences because religious practice has been found to have beneficial effects on such factors as physical and mental health, education level, income, virginity, marital stability, crime, addiction, and general happiness. Regular religious worship, more than religious attitudes or affiliation, is associated with lower crime rates and lower rates of use and abuse of alcohol and drugs, which are both factors propelling divorce cases nowadays.

In conclusion, as the available evidence shows, divorce has pervasive effects on children and the five major institutions of society—the family, the church, the school, the marketplace, and the government itself. If the family is the building block of society, then marriage is the foundation. However, this foundation is growing weaker, with fewer adults entering into marriage, more adults leaving it in divorce, and more and more adults abstaining from it altogether for single parenthood or cohabitation. Given the prevalence of divorce, children today are becoming weaker educationally, emotionally, and physically. The increases in the rates of child abuse and neglect, crime, behavioural and emotional problems, health problems, cohabitation, future divorce, and out-of-wedlock births as well as the decrease in religious worship, educational attainment, and income potential should alarm every

policymaker and community leader. The effects of divorce transcend generations and contribute to the all-too-evident cycle of social decay.