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Impact of Divorce on Child's Emotional Development

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ABSTRACT

Marriage involves two individuals committing together and further raising their families. An important aspect of marriage is children. With the decision of having children comes a great responsibility of providing them with safe and secure space to grow and develop emotionally, physically, cognitively and behaviorally. Divorce rates have increased in the modern period. Divorce not only brings challenges to the couple being separated but is accompanied by major changes in the life of the child as well. Divorce of parents affects the child in various spheres of life be it emotional, behavioral, cognitive, or physical. The extent to which divorce will impact a child depends upon various factors. The purpose of the review is to understand the impact of divorce on emotional development of a child. Research have indicated that divorce has serious impact on development of a child. A child who has experience divorce have problem forming new relationships or maintaining current relationships with peers, family, and other close ones. Separation of parents may lead to faulty behavior in children. Children may withdraw themselves, can be inattentive in classrooms and may behave aggressively. Studies have shown that divorce can lead to psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. Moreover, divorce can further deteriorate the self-esteem of a child. Some researchers believe that the negative impact of divorce can be reduced by introducing some protective factors. Healthy relationship with both the parents, financial support can help the child to deal with the situation positively. Resilience of a child is also an important factor in determining to what extent divorce can impact a child.

Keywords: Divorce, Emotional Development, Child

Introduction

“You can’t underestimate how traumatic divorce is for the children”- Isla Fisher

Marriage is an aspect which involves not only two individuals but two families. Similarly, divorce does not only impact the two partners but the family as well especially the children of the couple. In a study conducted by Hughes (2008), two factors were highlighted to the increasing rate of divorce. The study indicated that working women are more likely to end a marriage because of being financially independent and they don’t have to rely on their husbands for medical and other expenses. Another reason attributed was that it is comparatively easy for couples with no child to make up decision for divorce as they don’t have the burden and responsibility of a child. Whatever may be the reason of divorce, children cannot avoid its serious implications which not only effect their present but their future as well.

The developmental period is very crucial for emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological development of a child. The early experiences a child has in his/her life impacts overall development of a child. Any kind of negative experience in this stage can impact a child’s overall life. Children learn from what they observe in their surroundings. Exposure to parental conflict on regular basis may lead to serious implications in child’s life. Divorce impacts child development in each aspect. The child may stop eating or may indulge in emotional eating and as a result consumes more to deal with the sadness of the situation. This can deteriorate a child’s physical health. Emotionally, children may feel lonely, anxious, and sad. In the long run, divorce of parents can impact child’s future relationships with others. Behaviorally, the children may become aggressive or might isolate themselves from peers and near ones. Children may enter a stage of denial where it is very difficult for them to accept that their parents will not live together, and they no longer will be able to live with both of their parents.

American Psychological Association (1979) defines Emotional development as “gradual increase in the capacity to experience, express, and interpret the full range of emotions and in the ability to cope with them appropriately”. Emotional development of children starts with the beginning of their life. Emotional Development of a child refers to the rising ability of the child to understand one’s own and other’s emotions, to be able to show emotions appropriately and deal with the emotions. A healthy pattern of emotional development will encourage the child to make healthy positive relationships with others, to share their emotions freely and to comprehend another person’s emotions appropriately. Circumstances such as divorce may lead to faulty emotional development in a child. Children who have experience divorce of their parents face emotional challenges not only at the time of divorce but throughout their life even in the subsequent relationships.

A study indicated that divorce has severe impact on psychological well-being of children. Divorce increases the chance of various disorders such as depression, bipolar, dysthymia in children. The children of divorced parents suffer from various behavioural problems. They may exhibit impulsivity, hyperactivity, isolation from peers and in classroom and disruptive behavior (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

In a study conducted by Moum et al. (2005), it was observed that separation of parents is related with relative shift in issues in school, subjective well-being, self-esteem, and anxiety and depression. When focusing just on boys, separation of parents was only linked to academic issues. Divorce was linked to every factor among the girls. The absence of the father acted as a partial mediating factor between divorce and relative change.

Emotional Development

According to Spitz (1949) "Emotions are not present ready -made from birth. Like any other sector of the human personality, they have to develop." Emotional development occurs because of maturation and learning and not to either one alone.

According to Erikson (1959), "everyone's development follows the same path, but each individual experiences varying (positive or negative) outcomes during each phase, and a child suffering negative setbacks will have to deal with unresolved crises in later life".

A study conducted by Brody (1985) on gender differences in emotional development indicated that females gradually suppress the expression and recognition of socially inappropriate emotions, such as anger, while boys suppress the expression and attribution of the majority of emotions as they mature. These disparities may be a result of the distinct socialisation processes that apply to males and females, which may be adaptations to the temperamental variations between the sexes that are inborn, or adjustments to the societal forces that are already in place.

According to study done by Kochanska (2003), the paths of emotional development varied between the attachment groups (avoidant, secure, resistant, and disorganized/unclassifiable), with differences being obvious at 14 months of life. Children that showed resistance were the most fearful, the least happy, and the most fearful. More than secure children, they reacted negatively to even happy-making situations. Over the course of the second and third years, secure children showed much less anger when studied longitudinally. Positive emotions decreased among insecure children, whereas avoidant, resistive, and disorganized/unclassifiable youngsters had an increase in their negative counterparts. At 33 months, children with higher attachment security showed less fear and rage in situations meant to arouse those emotions, and less suffering in situations meant to arouse those emotions.

Review Of Literature

According to Kleinsorge & Covitz (2012) a child who experiences a lot of parental fights face challenges in emotional adjustment irrespective of whether the parents are married or divorced. Though divorce can affect emotional development of a child negatively, some protective factors might help in healthy emotional adjustment.

Children whose parents are separated may inhibit their expression of emotions. They may conceal their feelings of anxiety and sadness. This eventually leads to problems in their relationships with family, friends and near ones as it is difficult for them to share and express their feelings (Smith, 1999).

According to Jurma (2015), children of divorced parents face more emotional problems as compared to children of married parents. Single mothers have poor psychological well-being due to which they display more hostility in parenting which leads to emotional and behavioral problems in children.

Siblings who experience divorce of their parents exhibit more closeness as they express their feelings to each other and have more shareability of emotions. The results of the study also revealed that young women going through divorce of parents tend to approach other young women for emotional availability as parents are not available emotionally during the divorce (Abbey & Dallos, 2004).

According to Hess & Camara (1979) the dynamics between the family members is an important factor as compared to parents being married or divorced in determining child behaviour. The unpleasant effects of divorce on emotional development of child can be worked upon by maintaining healthy relationship with both the parents.

Results of a study revealed that there are a lot of factors that influence impact of divorce on children. The extent to which divorce will impact a child depends upon factors such as psychological well-being of parents, economical resources available to child and fights between the parents. Children who have great economical support even after the divorce, have healthy positive relationship with nonresident parent and resident parent with good psychological well-being are less affected (Lamb et al, 1997).

The style of family contact changes in about two years after the divorce. After divorce, mother plays more important role as compared to father in social and cognitive development of child. Fathers who maintain regular interaction with their child after the divorce have more impact on their child's development as compared to fathers who have less frequent contact with their child (Hetherington, 1978).

A study was done to understand the perspective of teachers on younger and older children of divorced parents. The findings of the study indicated that teachers believe smaller children of divorced parents have more emotional and behavioral struggles as compared to smaller children of both parents living together. On the contrary, teachers have the view that older children of both parents living together face more struggles emotionally and behaviorally as compared to older children of divorced parents (Molepo et al, 2012).

According to Wallerstein (1991) after divorce children undergo several social and psychological issues. They face challenges in forming new relationships. Children of divorced parents feel anxious in forming new relationships in the coming years including their early adulthood.

According to Kalter & Plunkett (1984) study most children believe that divorce occurs because of conflicts between partners but some share the view that children can be the cause of divorce. Most children express that divorce has serious implications on behavioral and emotional aspects in children.

A study revealed that divorce impact children severely. Divorce leads to serious problems in children. Children suffer from inattentiveness in school, financial issues, sleep problems and they tend to be rigid (Gharaibeh, 2015).

A study concluded that there are various factors that determine the extent to which divorce will impact development of a child. They talk about five factors: ability of the child to fight back, quality of parenting, attachment style, connection between parents and child and traits of parents (Thiessen, 1993).

Findings of a study indicates that children from separated families truly do best when visits from the non-custodial parent are frequent, unsurprising, and happen in a healthy environment. The nature of the relationship is more significant than the quantity of relationship. Assuming successive contact happen in bothersome conditions, the child is liable to have emotional issues. A child's development can be influenced positively if the resident parent is caring, supportive, concerned, and exhibits great nurturing abilities (Jamison, 2001).

It is seen that separation might inconveniently affect the degrees of conduct and adjustment level of child, the nurturing styles they see and the connection styles they create, and that these impacts might fluctuate relying upon the child's sex, age, and the social help they seek from their current circumstance. Results also revealed that adverse consequences of separation on kids might be lightened given that ideal circumstances are proposed to them in the post-separate from period (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005).

In a study done by Nazri et. Al (2019), it was demonstrated that children are affected by parent divorce. In addition, the correspondent's experience and viewpoint of the difficulties of divorce were different. However, the majority of the correspondents reported feeling anxious and unhappy shortly after their parents' divorce. Not only so, but the correspondent also concurred that the main difficulties following their parent's divorce were financial. Additionally, divorced children overcome their obstacles by asking for and accepting aid, caring for their physical health, and concentrating on solving issues rather than feeling helpless about them.

According to a study done by Strohschein (2005), it was indicated that children whose parents later divorce show higher levels of anxiety/depression and antisocial behavior than children whose parents remain married, even before the marriage has ended. However, there is no correlation between parental divorce itself and an increase in antisocial conduct or anxiety/depression in children. Although the poorer child mental health at the time of the initial interview among children whose parents later divorce is fully explained by controlling for predivorce parental socioeconomic and psychosocial resources, this does not explain the divorce-specific increase in anxiety/depression. Finally, a strong relationship between parental divorce and predivorce levels of family dysfunction implies that when marriages in highly dysfunctional homes are dissolved.

In a study conducted by Golden & Henderson (2007), it was seen that children face severe consequences of divorce if they do not understand what all is happening around them in their family. The coping skills to deal with the situation also play very important role in determining the extent to which divorce can impact children.

Suggestions

Understanding the impact of divorce on emotional development of a child, it is necessary to find some measures that can help the child to deal with the situation effectively. As divorce not only involves breaking up of partners but it comes along with dismantling of the entire family, it is a major challenge for the child even to accept such situation. Parents should ensure that they have open communication with the child about everything happening around. They should patiently make the child understand about divorce and create a safe space for them so that they can express their emotions freely and should not feel anxious. Regular contact with the non-resident parent can help the child to feel connected with both the parents. The child with enough financial resources tends to be less affected by the divorce. The characteristics of the resident parent, the bond shared between the child and parent, time spend together all plays crucial role in determining the extent to which divorce can impact a child. Resident parent with warm, understanding, caring attitude towards child will provide a healthy environment for overall development of the child. The quality of time spend together is more important than the amount of time spend together by child and parent. The extent of shareability of emotions between the resident parent and child can also influence emotional development of the child. All the early child care programs must include strategies for healthy emotional development of child.

Conclusion

Though divorce has significant impact on the development of a child but with some healthy alternative measures the serious implications of divorce can be worked upon. There can be various reasons for divorce but irrespective of that, it affects the overall development of a child. If the resident parent is warm, tender, concerned towards the child, it enables the child to develop emotional strength even during separation of parents. Children should be provided with emotional support and care so that they don't feel isolated during or after the divorce and can freely express their feelings and emotions to their parents and close ones. Divorce is something that cannot be avoided but can be dealt with in an effective way.

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