

The Impact of Divorce on Children's Emotional and Neurological Development: Mediating Factors and Developmental Outcomes

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Abstract

Parental divorce can impact the development of children significantly. This literature review, which includes cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews, considers the effects of divorce on children's emotional, behavioral, and neurobiological outcomes, as well as environmental factors that potentially mediate adverse effects. Research findings have linked divorce to both internalizing and externalizing behavior patterns. Studies show that prolonged stress from experiences of divorce is associated with dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, thus causing chronic cortisol elevation and leading to future risks for mental and physical health. Evidence suggests that genetic factors, including the oxytocin allele type, can influence adjustment after divorce. Specific environmental factors, such as minimal interparental conflict, higher quality parent-child relationships, and adverse parenting practices (e.g., role diffusion and triangulation), have been shown to mediate long-term negative effects of divorce. Divorce early in a child's life can alter their attachment style, making them more prone to anxious and avoidant attachment, leading to issues in future relationships. Broadly, the overall body of literature suggests that a child's broader environmental context, including familial relationship quality, conflict, and structure pre- and post-divorce is generally more impactful in respect to child development than divorce itself. Additional research is needed in order to identify parenting practices that help protect children from negative outcomes of divorce, and to more clearly elucidate the role of neurobiological variables in emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Introduction

In 2026, divorce is the outcome of around one-third of marriages in America (MFL Team). Throughout the divorce process, children face a myriad of challenges. Prior to or leading up to the divorce, there are often stressors such as financial challenges, conflict between parents, abuse, or infidelity. During and after separation, parents may be depressed or emotionally unavailable to care for their children, unwilling to communicate with their former spouse, or involve the child in complex issues such as custody agreements or financial dealings (Kleinsorge & Covitz, Van Dijk et al.). Within four years, around one-half of divorced adults in America remarry (Kleinsorge & Covitz 150). With this may come the complex introduction of a stepparent and possibly stepsiblings. Various challenges and new dynamics through divorce can affect children through feelings of loss, grief, stress, and uncertainty, all of which impact development (Auersperg et al., Kleinsorge & Covitz, Cox et al.). On the other hand, relief and security can be derived from divorce if the child was previously exposed to a high-conflict marriage. Further, the dissolution of a high-conflict marriage can result in healthier parenting practices post-divorce. Divorce can affect the development of a child in many different ways, whether it is positive or negative.

Given that divorce represents an event with profound emotional and practical implications for a substantial number of people, psychology researchers have sought to gain a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the effects of such events on child development. Existing research findings link divorce to emotional, neurological, and psychological difficulties. These outcomes are not universal; rather, they are contingent on specific mediating and moderating

factors, including post-divorce familial structure, interparental conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the support available to the child (Van Dijk et al. 4).

This paper reviews the current body of empirical literature on the effects of divorce on child development, including neurobiological and psychological outcomes, as well as the specific environmental circumstances or genetic factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of these outcomes. The first section of this paper discusses research on the emotional effects of divorce, including behavioral changes and psychological implications. The second section presents findings on neurobiological outcomes. Finally, the third section reviews studies demonstrating the mediating or moderating effects of specific environmental and biological variables.

Method

Articles related to the effects of parental divorce on children were found using Google Scholar and PsycINFO. Search terms included combinations of some of the following: "Divorce," "Emotional affect on children," "Attachment styles," "neurological effects," "child development," and "behavioral development," combined with AND/OR as needed. Studies used were published between 1984 and 2020. The primary year range was between 2010 and 2020. A single study from 1984 was selected due to its historical significance and continued relevance. Only English-language articles were included. Studies were included if they identified specific emotional, psychological and neurological effects, as well as potential mediating effects in children and adolescents. Studies were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed or focused only on adults.

Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the effects of parental divorce on child adjustment and development. The full text of the remaining articles was then reviewed for eligibility. In total, nine studies were included in the review. The included studies were organized into three thematic categories: the emotional outcomes of divorce on children, the neurological outcomes, and the mediating factors. This organization enabled comparisons across areas and guided the review's structure. Some relevant studies may have been missed, such as articles not in the databases searched and studies in other languages. The choice of keywords and databases also influenced which studies were identified, potentially leading to the exclusion of some relevant studies.

Emotional outcomes among children of divorce

Divorce has a profound impact on affected children and adolescents. For many, there is an adjustment period following separation and divorce, involving practical changes, emotional reactions, and the processing of both (Cox, Cox & Heatherington 518). Psychologists have conducted extensive research aiming to better understand the specific emotional outcomes of divorce and divorce-related experiences on youth (Cox, Cox & Heatherington 518). Researchers have suggested that divorce is not commonly the direct cause of maladjustment, while age, gender, interparental conflict, and remarriage are all vital factors in determining how a child will be emotionally affected (Cox, Cox & Heatherington 518). In this body of research, emotional challenges are often measured in terms of internalizing and externalizing behavioral challenges. Emotional and psychological stress can be examined most visibly through internalizing behaviors and behavioral challenges.

To track child trajectories and examine potential effects of remarriage, Cox, Cox, & Heatherington conducted a longitudinal study in 1984 with check-ins at two months, one year, two years, and six years post-divorce. Specifically, this study aimed to clarify the effects of parental divorce and remarriage on children by measuring internalizing and externalizing symptoms, as well as social competence. The authors also sought to understand potential sex differences in such outcomes. The sample consisted of 144 White middle-class families, 124 of whom participated in the follow-up. Later, 180 new families (i.e., nondivorced and divorced parents who did or did not remarry) were added to the sample to further study the effects of remarriage in a larger sample. Within the remarriage group, researchers additionally measured how recent the new marriage was (i.e., over or under two years).

Internalizing and externalizing behaviors were assessed using seven measures, including scales administered to parents, teachers, children, and children's classmates (Cox et al. #). These measures evaluated behavioral functioning across settings, including home and school, and with peers or family (e.g., parent rating scales, peer nominations, 24-hour behavior checklist, child self-report checklist, life experience surveys).

The results suggest that internalizing behaviors are more common among girls than among boys (Cox et al. 518). Despite externalizing factors being more common in boys, aggression was associated with low social competence in the future, specifically for girls. Surveys were particularly valuable because they allowed children to report their internalizing behavioral patterns that teachers or caregivers might not have identified.

The authors suggest that remarriage can influence child development to a comparable degree, if not more than divorce, depending on the circumstances (Cox et al. 529). Overall, findings suggest that divorce had more persistent effects on the development of boys, as certain behaviors were still seen at a six-year follow-up, while remarriage primarily disrupts development in girls (Cox et al. 527). In this study, stepfathers frequently reported patterns of high internalizing behavior and low social competence, often describing these as challenges in the new family structure. Daughters of remarried mothers reported the most negativity on a questionnaire, along with boys whose mothers did not remarry. This suggests that remarriage might be more challenging for the development of girls, while for boys, the presence of a stepfather may be beneficial.

Cox and colleagues (518) additionally suggest that the presence of a same sex parent plays a role in a child's development. Supporting this interpretation, daughters whose mothers did not remarry seemed to adjust and report similar levels of negative experiences as non-divorced families. These findings suggest that a child's perception of experiences as positive or negative is closely related to their development and behaviors. A strength of the study is its longitudinal design, which allows researchers to examine individuals over a six-year period.

Age and emotional response

In 2012, Kleinsorge & Covitz published a narrative literature review exploring how divorce affects children's development across developmental stages. Results from different studies are synthesized, while a systematic method for selecting them is not included. The authors discuss the child's age at the time of parental divorce to identify differences in emotional maturity and cognitive understanding that affect adjustment.

While divorce does not guarantee children will experience psychological distress, interparental conflict is a significant contributor (Kleinsorge & Covitz 148). Infants and toddlers (ages zero to three years) do not understand the concept of divorce, yet they can perceive changes in their daily routines and caregiving environment (Kleinsorge & Covitz149). This instability may contribute to stress, which manifests as restlessness and variability in how infants sleep and eat (Kleinsorge & Covitz149). Furthermore, divorce in these first years can influence the attachment style of children, since that is largely shaped by the type of relationship young children have with their caretaker (Kleinsorge & Covitz 148). On the other hand, school-aged children can understand the concept of divorce. Children often feel anger, wish for their parents to reconcile, and exhibit behavioral issues because the boundaries of their new circumstance are unclear (Kleinsorge & Covitz148). This may, in part, stem from the child believing they are at fault for the divorce. School-age children are also susceptible to feeling that they must choose one parent, which may cause additional stress (Kleinsorge & Covitz149). Discipline and setting expectations are important to keep kids on track at this age. By adolescence, divorce is typically fully understood. Adolescents may worry about their parents and the issues between them. Findings suggest that stress caused by parental divorce in adolescents is linked to more substance abuse and behavioral challenges, but also more internalizing behaviors and depressive symptoms (Kleinsorge & Covitz 149). As adolescents are in the formative years of identity development, negative feelings about romantic relationships may arise. Findings suggest that children whose parents were divorced during their adolescent years are more likely to participate in sexual activity earlier than adolescents in integrated families (Kleinsorge & Covitz149). Important findings from this review were that children (kindergarten-fifth grade) are most prone to internalizing behavior, whereas adolescents (specifically boys, sixth-tenth grade) are most likely to experience academic challenges (Kleinsorge & Covitz149). The review emphasizes the benefits of a present father figure for both sexes (Kleinsorge & Covitz149). All adolescents and children are more likely to adapt better with the presence of their father (the mother is typically the primary caregiver), and tend to benefit from overnight stays (Kleinsorge & Covitz150). This review suggests that in the context of remarriage, issues take longer to resolve, and girls tend to adjust more poorly (Kleinsorge & Covitz 150).

Long-term emotional effects

In 2019, Auersperg, et al. conducted the fourth and only up-to-date meta-analysis focusing on how long-term mental health is affected in children of divorce once they are teens and young adults. This study has a particular focus on depression, anxiety, distress, and substance abuse. The studies included a total of 506,299 participants across 3,278 studies and 117 effect sizes. The results of 54 studies are synthesized in the paper. Studies were narrowed to those published between 1990 and 2018; participants were required to be 18 years old, and their parents' divorce had occurred prior to this. Finally, the studies had to be published in English.

The key finding of the research is that while there is a definite connection between the four long-term effects and divorce, older studies reported a much higher negative correlation between them (especially distress) than newer studies (Auersperg et al. 115). The author speculates that the reason for this is that in previous years, stigma around mental health and divorce was strong, causing people to argue that it has extremely detrimental effects, when this is not always the case. Additionally, there was a moderate increase in the relationship between

divorce and substance abuse, contrary to the author's hypothesis (Auersperg et al. 113). However, anxiety seemed to decrease from previous years and studies. The paper outlines some possible reasons for the correlation between these aspects of mental health and the role divorce plays in them.

The first possible reason is attachment theory, which holds that people's perceptions of relationships are shaped by the care and relationships they form with their caregiver during infancy (Brennan & Shaver 162). Second is a change in socioeconomic status, meaning that the quality of health care and education could deteriorate in the wake of a bad divorce. The third is stress from divorce, which increases cortisol levels (Davidson et al. 35). Increased cortisol levels is a major contributor to the physical and mental challenges discussed in this article. The article concludes by stating that the author's initial hypothesis of increased negative effects from divorce is supported, but it is not as strong as once hypothesized in studies, and it does not apply to every situation. One limitation of this study is that many studies did not specify how long had passed since the child's parents divorced, which is information that plays a key role in determining how long-lasting the effects are. Additionally, the study styles synthesized in the paper vary and are often self-reported, which may introduce inaccuracies.

Overall, these authors agree that there is a range of emotional and psychological outcomes in children that result from divorce. These outcomes are often resolved within the first few years post-divorce; however, depending on the familial structure, distress, relationship difficulties, and internalizing or externalizing behaviors can last for an extended period. Future research should consider the extent to which factors contribute to the continued negative impact compared to issues resolved early in the process.

Neurological outcomes of divorce

Beyond the emotional outcomes of divorce, a child may experience biological and neurological effects of divorce. Chronic stress, deregulation of the stress system, and predetermined genetic factors can disrupt neurological processes temporarily or permanently and influence the emotional and psychological outcomes of divorce. The following literature examines this through narrative reviews, meta-reviews, and longitudinal empirical research.

In 2014, Davidson et al. published a literature review aimed at identifying the significance of the relationship between parental conflict and biological processes in children. The demographic for this study is children whose parents have divorced. Given the paper's nature as a narrative review, no specific methodology for citing research is described.

While the article acknowledges that many factors come into play when talking about the effect of divorce on children, it is important to highlight that research shows that divorce in itself is less harmful than conflict between parents. The literature review focuses on how this activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, alongside the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). These systems are integral to stress regulation through the release of hormones such as adrenaline, norepinephrine, and epinephrine (Davidson et al. 35). Heightened conflict within the household environment overactivates both the HPA axis and SNS, which in turn leads to the release of these hormones. This can yield many negative health effects in children, including increased cardiovascular risk, poor sleep quality (due to circadian rhythm imbalance), inflammation, and emotional insecurity (Davidson et al. 40). Children in families with stable marriage environments are shown to have less cardiovascular risk. Cortisol, the "stress hormone," is also released during conflict and can remain elevated for extended periods,

resulting in chronic cortisol dysregulation (Davidson et al. 38). Research shows that when the vagus nerve, a part of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), has a low vagal tone, it is associated with emotional and behavioral challenges (Davidson et al. 38). Overall, this study shows a plausible negative correlation between parental conflict during divorce and biological effects, while still considering the previous emotional condition and environment of the child as a key factor.

Similarly in 2019, Olofsson wrote a meta-review at the University of Skövde considering the psychological and neurological effects that manifest in children post-parental divorce. The goal of this study was not only to evaluate the long-term effects present in children of divorce (CD), but also in young adult children of divorce (ACD). Data from over 10,000 CDs and ACDs were included in this review, with studies based in Sweden and the United States. The method used to find research was databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Boolean operators were used to narrow the search using the key terms: “children of divorce,” “cortisol levels,” and “HPA axis.” The articles were sorted by content into the categories of psychological and neurological effects. Articles were then reviewed based on their methods, and the number of citations each article had was considered.

Olofsson’s largest finding was that the baseline cortisol levels of ACDs were lower than those of adult children of marriage (ACM) (Olofsson 15). Chronic stress at a young age causes the HPA axis to produce cortisol at levels for extended periods. For that reason, when the child is older, the brain starts with a lower cortisol level to protect against damaging prolonged spikes (Olofsson 5). The stress system is less responsive; therefore, baseline cortisol levels in ACDs are lower (Olofsson 5). Additionally, CDs (ages 12-15y) are more likely to experience depressive symptoms, along with self-isolation, lower self-esteem, and a lack of social competence (Olofsson 7). Furthermore, girls showed higher baseline levels of cortisol and were more prone to depressive symptoms, while boys were more likely to show poor social performance. ACDs are more likely to have less higher education, seek out mental health assistance, abuse substances, and have a child prior to marriage (Olofsson 18). It is also more likely that ACDs will experience divorce in their own marriages.

One limitation of the review is that studies often do not consider external factors that influence children’s development (e.g., timing of divorce, parental conflict, primary caregiver, puberty). Additionally, the paper does not account for diversity, as studies on the effects of divorce in Eastern cultures were not considered, suggesting that this research applies only to Western cultures.

Genetic indicators of development

In 2015, Mrug & Windle conducted a longitudinal empirical study to examine the correlation between oxytocin alleles and depression initiated by parental divorce. The authors hypothesized that female participants who possessed the homozygous Guanine (GG) oxytocin allele were more susceptible to depression post-parental divorce. The GG allele is associated with lower self-esteem, higher need for social approval, higher levels of social anxiety, and increased empathy (Mrug & Windle 2). Conducted in five waves, the study included 340 participants (98% white; $M_{\text{age}} = 15.54$ [waves one-four; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.5$ [wave five]). During the first four waves, surveys were administered in schools to determine parents’ marital status and assess sociodemographics (i.e., socioeconomic status [SES], age, education level, parental occupation). Additionally, depression was tested via survey during the fourth and fifth waves,

and a four milliliter sample of saliva was taken in order for participants to be tested for oxytocin allele type.

Findings indicate that female carriers of the GG allele, whose parents divorced during adolescence, were twice as likely to report depressive symptoms as female carriers of the AA and AG alleles (Mrug & Wrindle 1). In male, it was reported that depressive symptoms for carriers of the GG allele were slightly lower than those of carriers of the AA and AG alleles.. The opposite effect of differing sexes indicates that sex is a key factor in determining depressive symptoms, along with the type of oxytocin allele carried and the parental status of marriage. Broader generalizability is threatened given the lack of racial diversity in the predominantly White sample. Additionally, as the first study that measures oxytocin in relation to parental divorce, more research needs to be conducted to solidify findings.

These studies suggest that divorce, specifically those with high conflict, affects the neurological and biological processes in a child (Davidson 33). Skewed cortisol levels and regulation, and heightened depressive symptoms highlight the connection between family dynamics and healthy child development (Olofsson 17). However, some factors can influence the biological effect of divorce on children, such as genetic factors, gender, parenting style, and individual child differences.

Mediating factors

Researchers have determined that divorce affects children in different ways due to environmental factors post-parental divorce, rather than the event itself. Evidence suggests that interparental conflict, parenting style, family relationships, and attachment style all play a role in shaping a child's emotional and neurological response. The following literature examines how these mediating factors affect children.

In 2020, Van Dijk et. al conducted a meta-analysis examining the factors influencing child adjustment following parental divorce. Specifically, they researched how different parenting styles stunt or promote healthy adjustment. A total of 115 studies were used, involving 24,854 divorced families, and over 2,257 correlations were reported. An amount of 73.5% of the studies were cross-sectional, while the other 26.5% were longitudinal. The average age of the participants in the studies was 12 years old. The authors searched for English-language literature published before October 2019 and included both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed sources. Most of the studies used questionnaires, interviews, skill tests, or combinations of these to obtain their results. They used multiple phrases for their search regarding parental conflict and child adjustment. Three categories were examined, including interparental conflict (arguments, aggression, etc.), parent behaviors (support, hostility, structure, etc.), and child adjustment (internalizing, externalizing, self-esteem, social competence). A meta-analytic structural equation model (MAESM) was used to determine results.

The authors found through their model that post-divorce parenting is one of the largest mediators for child adjustment (Van Dijk et al. 3). Their article emphasizes the strong correlation between parental conflict and healthy parenting practices. Aggression towards the opposite parent makes it far more likely that the same aggression will be directed towards the child (Van Dijk et al. 6). Energy is spent fighting between parents, and little energy is put towards positive parenting practices. The impact that interparental conflict has on healthy parenting indirectly affects child development, but the direct effect that the conflict has on children is that it causes

stress, which promotes opportunities for internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Van Dijk et al. 25).

While it is important to acknowledge that positive parenting is still very important and often effective, overall, conflict and negative parenting are extremely harmful and have greater negative effects than the positive effects of positive parenting. Role diffusion is shown to be the most harmful parenting practice, in which adults place children in roles of high responsibility, making children feel they have to care for their parents emotionally (Van Dijk et al. 10). In other words, the roles of parent and child are somewhat switched. Similar to this is triangulation, where parents involve children in their personal conflicts. These parenting practices are the highest contributors to future anxiety, depression, and lower social ability.

Likewise, in 2020 Garriga and Pennoni analyzed data from the first three waves of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a longitudinal study conducted in England. The authors claim that the impact of divorce on children heavily depends on the parent-child dynamic that existed pre-divorce. They also explored the direct impact that the event of divorce had on the cognitive and psychological well-being of children. Data from the first wave (Sept. 2000 - Jan. 2002) of the MCS comprised 18,819 babies from 18,533 families, with infants ranging from nine to eleven months. The second consisted of children aged three to five, from 2004 to 2005. The third wave in 2006 included children aged five and older (no upper age limit specified). Three groups of families were evaluated: the nondivorced (stable group, N=9001), the divorced group (when children were between five and nine, N=1177), and the separated-but-got-back-together group (together during key child ages of nine months to five years, N=299).

Garriga and Pennoni controlled for external factors to make the groups as comparable as possible. To assess cognitive abilities, the second edition of the British Abilities Scale (BAS II) assessed aptitude in language, problem-solving, spatial awareness, and related domains (Garriga & Pennoni 981). Psychological abilities (i.e., social behavior, conduct, emotional regulation, etc.) were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Garriga & Pennoni 981). The parental relationship to the child was assessed through parents' reports of their satisfaction with the relationship and its quality pre- and post-divorce. This was most important for the first research question regarding parental relationship as a mediator for child development during divorce because it distinguishes the effect that nondivorced and stable parent relationships have, in contrast to high-conflict parental relationships and home environments. The BAS II showed slightly lower results overall; however, the psychological effects inferred from the SDQs showed a more drastic difference, with children of divorce scoring lower than those in nondivorced households (Garriga & Pennoni 981). The difference between internalizing and externalizing behaviors in both groups of children was notable, with the divorced group scoring higher in the frequency of these behaviors.

One of the most important results from the Garriga and Pennoni (981) study was that children who were in households of high conflict and had a poor relationship with their parents adjusted better to divorce than children who had low parental conflict and a higher quality relationship with their parents. This is because divorce can come as a shock when there has been no previous conflict; therefore, there is a larger sense of disruption and instability present in the child's life. This is suggested by data from the BAS II scale, revealing that a child's vocabulary worsens in the context of divorce, particularly when the household seemed stable before the divorce but has become unstable (Garriga & Pennoni 983). The study supports that temporary separation yields more harmful effects on children than permanent divorce. Separation seems to be most correlated with problems with conduct. That is, children of

separation were 30% more likely to exhibit misconduct, while divorce was 16%) (Garriga & Pennoni 983). This could be explained by increased uncertainty and inconsistency, as separation complicates children's emotions and causes a unique shift in family dynamics.

The study emphasizes that family structure and parental relationships before divorce are key mediators of how children adjust and develop in response to new familial dynamics (Garriga & Pennoni 965). A potential limitation the authors point out is the overrepresentation of impoverished families, so results may vary when considering families from higher socioeconomic classes. A second potential limitation is that the parent-child relationship quality was reported on only by parents, not by children. Obtaining reports from both sides could increase the accuracy of the results.

Attachment style and divorce response

In 1994, Brennan & Shaver conducted a cross-sectional empirical study focusing on divorce and attachment style, a natural and emotional response to relationships. The goal of their study was to determine whether children's attachment style is affected by divorce, the differences that varying attachment styles have for children of divorce, and how these attachment styles affect future romantic relationships. Their study includes 863 students at State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo: 560 were male, and 333 were female. The median age of students was 19y. Students self-reported information on questions related to their relationships with their parents and their personal lives, including attachment-related questions. The authors used that data to compare attachment styles between young adults with divorced parents and young adults with married parents. They compare anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and secure attachment. The authors found that the students with divorced parents showed more anxious and avoidant attachment than those with married parents (Brennan & Shaver 170). These students also had more trouble in their own romantic relationships, including fear of abandonment and less emotional openness. Subsequently, parental conflict has this same effect. Students who were exposed to high conflict in the home as children are far more prone to insecurity in their own relationships (Brennan & Shaver 165).

The authors conclude that divorce itself does not guarantee anxious or avoidant attachment, but there is a notable correlation, especially when there is conflict involved (Brennan & Shaver 168). Caregiver and family dynamics are primary influences of attachment style and children's future romantic relationships (Brennan & Shaver 168). This suggests that attachment style and prior parental relationship to divorce are both key mediators of what the child's romantic life will look like in the future. A limitation is that the study included a majority of male participants, raising questions about whether the results apply to women as well. Additionally, the study does not specify how old the students were when their parents divorced, even though that factor plays a key role in what adjustment should look like.

The studies above address which factors in the child's environment play the most important role in mediating developmental, cognitive, and psychological outcomes in children through meta-analysis, longitudinal empirical study, and cross-sectional empirical study. These studies consistently suggest that relationships with parents and the level of conflict in the home are the most important mediators for child well-being. Attachment style can play an additional role in this. The studies urge more attention and support for parents to promote healthy parenting practices. A common limitation in the studies is the lack of specific key numerical data. Reducing this would make results more reliable.

Conclusions

In the first section, findings related to varying behavior patterns, increased connections between divorce and mental health issues (anxiety, depression, substance abuse), and the stage of child development due to age are discussed. Researchers have found that children who have lived through parental divorce are more susceptible to emotional and behavioral difficulties (Kleinsorge & Covitz 148), Cox et al. 529, Auersperg et al. 128). However, the duration and severity of these difficulties vary depending on the child's individual traits, the severity of familial conflict, and the circumstances of remarriage. Broadly speaking, internalizing behaviors like anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviors such as aggression and acting out, are often more common among children of divorce (Kleinsorge & Covitz 148, Cox et al. 522). To be sure, girls tend to exhibit internalizing behavior more frequently than boys, who are typically more prone to externalizing behaviors (Cox et al. 522).

In the second section, the authors determined that chronic stress is associated with parental conflict and divorce, which can lead to longstanding neurological and biological changes in children (Davidson et al. 39, Mrug & Windle 6, Olofsson 17). Chronic interparental conflict can contribute to deregulation of cortisol due to overactive stress system responses, increasing the likelihood of emotional and psychological difficulty later on (Davidson et al. 36). Predetermined genetic factors play a role in a child's vulnerability to negative outcomes through the process of a divorce. These findings suggest that supportive parenting practices and healthy parent-child relationships may help protect against and reduce negative outcomes.

In the third section, environmental factors such as interparental conflict, parent-child relationship, attachment style, and parenting practices play a strong role in determining child adjustment (Brennan & Shaver 173, Garriga & Pennoni 981, Van Dijk et al. 24). Across every section, findings support that the event of divorce may not affect a child's adjustment as much as the quality of family relationships throughout the divorce process. Studies examining emotional, neurological, and environmental mediators attributed poor adjustment to parental conflict and nonsupportive parenting practices ((Auersperg et al.; Brennan and Shaver; Davidson et al.; Garriga and Pennoni; Hetherington et al.; Kleinsorge and Covitz; Olofsson; Van Dijk et al.; Windle and Mrug). In contrast, minimized conflict and attentive parenting practices are likely to play a role in healthy adjustment.

The studies included in this review encompass different types of research, such as longitudinal studies, meta-analyses, and literature reviews, often with large sample sizes to examine the validity of the authors' hypotheses. Multiple methods are used throughout the studies, such as surveys, observations, interviews, and genetic testing. The consensus across studies in all sections, despite differing focus questions, is that conflict and parenting are consistently predictive and manage child adjustment ((Auersperg et al.; Brennan and Shaver; Davidson et al.; Garriga and Pennoni; Hetherington et al.; Kleinsorge and Covitz; Olofsson; Van Dijk et al.; Windle and Mrug).

While these studies have strengths, there are still several limitations. Many studies place heavy reliance on self-reporting, which may introduce bias. Additionally, all of this research cited originates from Western countries. The exclusion of data from Eastern countries limits racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Greater representation of diverse demographics is necessary to generalize the findings of these studies.

While there is a large body of research on the emotional outcomes of divorce, research is lacking in exploring the biological factors that determine how a child responds to divorce, as well as the outcomes afterward. Only a few studies have explicitly explored this, and even fewer



have conducted genetic testing to determine factors that increase vulnerability. Future research should focus more on biological and genetic factors that may contribute to post-divorce vulnerability. More longitudinal studies are needed to examine and generalize these effects.

Mental health professionals must consider this further when treating children, in addition to considering and expanding the support available for children and parents as they navigate divorce. Overall, the findings from this review support an emphasis on positive parenting and reducing conflict in the home as significant for healthy adjustment in children.



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