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DIVORCE AND CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: FAMILY PROCESSES, RISK FACTORS, AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

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Abstract: Parental divorce is a multifaceted family change that may affect children's emotional security, behavior, educational functioning, social relationships, and long-term psychological well-being. However, contemporary scientific evidence does not support the deterministic view that divorce in itself inevitably leads to impaired psychological adjustment in the child. Rather, a child's condition is shaped by the interaction of the family climate before the divorce, interparental conflict, the quality of parenting, economic resources, living conditions, the child's developmental stage, and the quality of relationships after the divorce.

This article theoretically and analytically synthesizes scientific research on the effects of parental divorce on children's psychology. Particular attention is paid to internalizing problems, externalizing behavior problems, emotional security, parent–child relationships, educational functioning, and psychological resilience. Recent meta-analyses show that interparental conflict and parenting processes are important mechanisms explaining the adjustment problems that children of divorced families may experience. Accordingly, psychological support should target not only the fact of divorce itself but also the reduction of destructive conflict, the strengthening of parental competence, the maintenance of a stable daily routine, and the avoidance of drawing the child into the conflict between the parents.

Keywords: parental divorce, child psychology, psychological well-being, emotional security, family conflict, parent–child relationships, behavior, educational functioning, psychological resilience.

Introduction. The family is one of the most important environments for a child's psychological, social, and intellectual development. It is in the family that the child acquires his or her first emotional experiences, a sense of security, ways of communicating, and the basic forms of social relationships. For this reason, a sharp change in the relationship between the parents may have a considerable effect on the child's development.

Parental divorce is one of the significant family events in modern society, and its consequences are not the same for every child. Some children experience intense emotional difficulties in the period following divorce, while others adjust relatively quickly. In some cases, the post-divorce environment may even improve the child's psychological state compared with the previous conflict-ridden family circumstances.

Therefore, a simple cause-and-effect model of the form "divorce = psychological impairment of the child" is scientifically insufficient. Alongside the divorce itself, a child's well-being is also influenced by the family climate before the divorce, the level of conflict between the parents, the quality of parenting, economic conditions, changes of residence, the school environment, and the relationship between the parents after the divorce.

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The main aim of this study is to analyze the effects of parental divorce on children's psychological well-being on the basis of contemporary scientific research and to identify protective mechanisms that reduce negative outcomes.

Literature Review. The effects of parental divorce on children have for many years been one of the important research areas in developmental psychology and family psychology.

In their classic meta-analysis, Amato and Keith examined the association between parental divorce and children's psychological and social well-being. The authors showed that children of divorced parents may exhibit moderate levels of psychological and social difficulties.

Subsequent studies have emphasized that the quality and duration of interparental conflict is a more important factor than the divorce itself.

The 2020 meta-analysis by van Dijk and colleagues included 115 samples and 24,854 participants and analyzed the relationships among interparental conflict, parenting, and child adjustment in divorced families. Its results indicated that factors such as parental support, hostility, and structure and consistency in parenting may be associated with children's internalizing and externalizing problems.

A meta-analysis conducted by van Eldik and colleagues likewise found that non-constructive interparental conflict is associated with children's emotional and behavioral reactions.

With regard to long-term outcomes, the meta-analysis by Auersperg and colleagues showed a statistical association between parental divorce and later depressive states, anxiety, psychological distress, and certain harmful behaviors. However, interpreting such findings as direct cause and effect requires caution.

A systematic review by Sands, Thompson, and Gaysina likewise demonstrated an association between parental divorce and certain forms of affective disorders in offspring later in life.

Thus, the scientific literature shows that the effect of divorce on the child cannot be explained by a single factor. Family conflict, parenting quality, economic status, and family relationships after the divorce jointly influence the child's adjustment.

Research Methodology. This article was developed as a theoretical–analytical study. The study analyzed meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and scientific articles devoted to parental divorce and children's psychological well-being.

The main methods of the study were as follows: systematic analysis of the scientific literature, comparative analysis, theoretical generalization, interpretation of meta-analytic findings, and systematization of psychological and pedagogical factors.

In the analysis, the factors affecting the child's emotional, behavioral, cognitive, social, and long-term psychological state were divided into separate groups.

Analysis and Results. Emotional and Psychological Adjustment.

After parental divorce, children may show a variety of emotional reactions. These include sadness, anxiety, irritability, fear, feelings of loneliness, and self-blame.

Younger children in particular, because they cannot fully understand the reasons for the divorce, may attribute the event to themselves. There is a possibility that the child will draw the mistaken conclusion, "My parents divorced because I was a bad child."

It is therefore important to explain clearly to the child during the divorce process that he or she is not the cause of the parents' decision.

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However, not all children show the same emotional reaction. If the family climate before the divorce was marked by intense and persistent conflict, a stable and calm environment after the divorce may improve the child's emotional state.

Behavioral and Social Consequences. Parental divorce may lead to an increase in externalizing behavior problems in some children. Such problems include aggression, disobedience, irritability, impulsivity, and conflicts with peers.

In other children, by contrast, internalizing problems—shyness, social withdrawal, anxiety, and emotional instability—are more prominent.

A child's behavior is influenced not only by the divorce itself but also by how the parents manage the divorce process. When parents set the child against one another, use the child as a messenger, or disparage the other parent, the child's psychological burden may increase.

For this reason, in the post-divorce period the child should be shielded from conflict between adults as much as possible.

Cognitive and Educational Functioning. A sharp change in the family may also affect the child's educational functioning. If a child is constantly anxious or preoccupied with family problems, it may become difficult to concentrate on lessons. Disrupted sleep, a change of residence, or a change of school also places additional stress on the learning process.

As a result, decreased learning motivation, distractibility, poorer quality of task completion, attendance problems, and lower academic performance may be observed.

At the same time, such changes do not necessarily occur in all children. A stable school environment, teacher support, and emotional security within the family help the child to continue his or her education.

Parent - Child Relationships. One of the most important factors after divorce is the quality of the parent–child relationship. For the child, parental divorce is not merely a structural change in the family but also a change in the order of everyday life. Whom to live with, when to see the other parent, and the new living conditions and routines all require the child's psychological adjustment. If the parent provides the child with sufficient attention, affection, and stability, the negative effects of divorce may be reduced. Conversely, a parent's emotional distancing from the child, the loss of consistency in parenting, or criticism of the other parent in front of the child may negatively affect the child's sense of security.

It is therefore important that the child feels that parental responsibility continues after the divorce.

Long-Term Outcomes and Psychological Resilience. Research on the long-term effects of parental divorce indicates that some risks may persist into adulthood. These may include problems such as depressive states, anxiety, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and psychological distress. However, these results cannot be applied to all children of divorced families. Many children adjust well over time, form healthy social relationships, and continue to develop normally.

Psychological resilience is thus closely related to the child's individual characteristics, support within the family, parenting quality, and the social environment.

Discussion. The analysis of the research shows that the effect of parental divorce on children's psychology is a complex and multifactorial process. One of the most important conclusions is that divorce itself should not be regarded as the sole cause of a child's psychological problems. In some cases, prolonged family conflict before the divorce may affect the child's psychological state even more strongly than the divorce itself.

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Constructive communication between the parents is likewise an important factor that enhances the child's psychological security. Contemporary studies are also examining constructive conflict separately. That is, disagreement between parents is natural; what matters is how the conflict unfolds in front of the child. Respectful communication, joint problem-solving, and not drawing the child into the conflict support the child's psychological adjustment.

From this perspective, the main purpose of psychological support after divorce should be not merely to "fix the child's problem" but to stabilize the family and social environment surrounding the child.

Scientific Novelty. The scientific novelty of this study lies in examining the effect of parental divorce on children's psychology systematically—not merely as a consequence of the fact of divorce, but as the result of the interaction among family conflict, parenting quality, emotional security, economic conditions, the educational environment, and post-divorce relationships.

The following main scientific conclusions were generalized in the study:

1. The effect of divorce on a child's psychological well-being depends on individual and contextual characteristics.
2. Destructive conflict between parents is an important risk factor for the child's adjustment.
3. A consistent and supportive model of parenting serves as a protective mechanism.
4. A stable daily routine and school environment facilitate the child's adjustment.
5. Psychological support after divorce should not be limited to the child alone but should also encompass parenting relationships.

Practical Recommendations. The following recommendations may be proposed for preserving a child's psychological well-being during parental divorce:

- First, it is necessary to protect the child from verbal abuse, threats, humiliation, and destructive arguments between the parents.
- Second, the reason for the divorce should be explained in an age-appropriate way, and it should be made clear that the child is not responsible for the parents' decision.
- Third, the daily routine—sleep, school, meals, rest, and contact with significant adults—should be kept as stable as possible.
- Fourth, it is important not to turn the child into a messenger between the parents and to ensure an emotionally consistent approach to parenting.
- Fifth, teachers and school psychologists should monitor prolonged changes in learning activity, behavior, attendance, peer relationships, and emotional state.
- Sixth, if psychological symptoms persist for a long time or seriously interfere with learning, sleep, relationships, and daily functioning, professional psychological help should be arranged.
- Seventh, it is advisable to make it possible for the child to maintain meaningful relationships with both parents, under safe conditions and in a manner consistent with the child's best interests.
- Eighth, where economic instability intensifies family stress, psychological support should be organized together with social and material assistance.

Conclusion. Parental divorce is a complex family event that may affect a child's psychological well-being. Scientific research shows that some children may experience heightened emotional, behavioral, social, and educational difficulties after divorce. However, the consequences of divorce are not deterministic. How a child adjusts depends largely on the family climate before the divorce,

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interparental conflict, parenting quality, economic and social conditions, and the quality of relationships after the divorce.

Therefore, educators, school psychologists, and parents should focus not on the fact of divorce itself but on the child's real psychological needs. Creating for the child an environment of emotional security, a stable daily routine, parental love and affection, and protection from conflict is among the most important protective factors.

Overall, parental divorce is not an inevitable factor that determines a child's future psychological development. Properly organized parenting, a stable social environment, and timely psychological and pedagogical support are of great importance in ensuring the child's healthy development and psychological resilience.

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