

A Review of Literature on the Impact of Parental Divorce on
Relationships in Adolescents

by

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ABSTRACT

This study reviewed the pertinent literature on divorce and how this can affect adolescent relationships. The purpose of this study was to also examine the different relationships adolescents have. This study specifically looked at mother-adolescent, father-adolescent, and adolescents own relationships. The research has demonstrated that divorce can affect adolescent's relationships, but it is not specifically the divorce but rather the effects of divorce. These can include less time with parents, economic distress, or moving to a new area. The research has revealed that adolescents can be affected by these factors as it relates to social, academic and personal well being. Adolescent relationships can be affected in different ways depending on the consistency and dependence put on the adolescent after the divorce. Literature has also concluded that it may not be the divorce

that impacts the adolescent but other factors due to the divorce such as lower socioeconomic status, moving, or conflicts between parents are some examples.

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I would like to thank my friends and family for being supportive through my college years. There have been several times where I did not want to keep going and without their commitment I would not be completing this. I would also like to thank my professors who have leaded me to where I am today. They have had valuable information that has helped in my road to being a school counselor. I would especially like to thank my parents for being the most support for me through college, without their love and support this would have not happen.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this research study to all children who have had to experience divorce at some point in their lives. It is important to recognize individuals who have dealt with this in order to provide the right support to prevent negative consequences resulting from divorce. I dedicate my career as a school counselor to helping students through hard stages in life by empowering them in all areas of academic, career and personal/social to be the most successful person they can.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In today's society, there are many different types of families. Some include intact, non-intact, single families, stepfamilies and a variety of others. Along with these different varieties of families there is one common incident that can cause the family structure to change. Divorce is an unplanned event in a family's life. It is something that affects each member of a family at different times and in different ways. About half of all marriages will end in divorce, leaving one million children each year to deal with the process of divorce (Martin et al, 2003).

Divorce rates in the United States rose since the Civil war, decreased during the Great Depression while peaking in 1980, and have remained around fifty percent since then (Lazar et al, 2004). Studies predict that thirty-eight percent of white children and seventy-five percent of black children born to married parents will experience divorce prior to sixteen years of age (Lazar et al, 2004). The majority of these adolescents will become part of a remarried family prior to turning eighteen years of age (Martin et al, 2004). Due to this, their family structure will become different causing many changes and adjustments in their life.

Families that come from lower incomes are more likely to divorce, which in turn cause these families to have a lower standard of living (Emery, 2004). Due to the lower incomes having a lower standard of living Emery (2004) found that children may have to change schools, a parent may have to work longer hours, older children may be told they

have limited choices for college and may have to deal with their parents fighting over financial issues. These are concerns that children may face after their parents divorce. This could add more stress, anxiety and emotions for an adolescent.

Several changes can take place during a families divorce. Some of these changes could include moving, loss of contact with a parent, involvement in conflict between the parents, and possibly financial difficulties (Lazar et al, 2004). The changes can affect a person at different times and can affect genders in different ways at different points in the process (Hines, 2007).

Bowlby, back in 1969 created a theory of attachment, and defined attachment as the relationship between parent and child, this attachment provides the child with an idea of how to form a relationship and adjust to various life experiences (Hines, 2007). The theory assumes that adult friendships or romantic relationship develop from parents or early caregivers examples. (Carranza et al, 2009). Carranza et al (2009) also suggests that since these are formed early, a parental divorce or separation could cause the child to have relationship issues later in life.

Divorce can change this attachment style and can make a child have feelings of anger, resentment and confusion, which can alter the child's ability to form meaningful relationships (Hines, 2007). This is one impact divorce can take on adolescents, after a parental divorce. It is hard for adolescents to understand this process, while trying to figure out who they are themselves. Family structure plays an important part in helping an adolescent adjust and understand to the changes in their life and body. It has been shown in prior studies that family structure is one of the factors that influence an adolescent's success (Hines, 2007).

Building relationships and committing to a relationship is one of the impacts on adolescents during divorce. Research has shown that marital conflict can effect the development of intimate relationships during adolescents (Martin et al, 2003). Along with building relationships, several other factors contribute to effected relationships. Adolescents and young adults have shown that they have trouble with commitment, lower trust in their partners, lower satisfaction, trouble with interpersonal skills and greater acceptance of divorce (Fine & Harvey, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

A relationship is one factor compared to several that have an impact on an adolescent. Adolescents are in a crucial time for cognitive, psychosocial and emotional transformation (Hines, 2007). These are all impacts that adolescents face and a parental divorce can make this process more difficult during these transformations. There has been several studies conducted that conclude the different impacts that divorce can have on adolescents. Some of these include lower academic achievement, psychological adjustment, and self concept . Adolescents will be the primary focus, since the prevalence of divorce is so significant and adolescents have enough changes to adjust to. This literature review is to help parents, teachers, counselors, and other professionals working in the field to recognize the impact in order to allow adolescents the support they may need or want.

Purpose of Study

This study will review significant literature on the impact parental divorce has on adolescents on their relationships. Since divorce is prevalent in today's society, understanding the impact on adolescents will aid in their success.

Research Questions

This study will address the following questions:

- What impact does parental divorce have on the mother and adolescent relationship?
- What impact does parental divorce have on the father and adolescent relationship?
- What is the impact on the adolescent's relationships?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, there are different terms that need to be defined in order to understand and recognize these terms in this review of literature.

Adolescent- In this study adolescent is referring to an individual between fourteen and eighteen years of age.

Impact- Any change on the adolescent relationship during or after the divorce.

Assumptions

There are a couple of assumptions to this research. One assumption is that there are several studies that have been published relating to this topic. The second is the assumption that they are readily available. Since this study will focus specifically on

adolescents and their relationships may present a limitation due to the possibility of the current research focusing on future relationships.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation to this study is that it assumes that adolescents recognize how the divorce has changed their relationships and views on relationships. Another limitation is that adolescents are answering the questions, specifically the younger adolescents not knowing what the question is asking or how they have felt about the change at that point in their life.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Divorce is not an intended event in a family's life. It is something that can affect each individual of the family differently and at different times. Today a couple's chance of getting a divorce is around fifty percent. Since this is an event that is not intended to happen, many factors need to be considered when children are involved. Literature shows that children from divorced families experience difficult adjustments such as social, academic, and behavioral compared to children of intact families (Doherty & Needle, 1991). Woosley et al, (2009), also concluded that children from non-intact families tend to have lower psychological well-being as compared to those from intact families.

This study will be looking at the impact that a divorce can have on adolescent relationships. It will look at the impact on the parent to adolescent relationship and the relationships that adolescents have themselves. The review of literature will provide an overview of what has already been concluded about adolescent relationships and what could be further looked at. This will also look at the research questions that were presented in this study which were the impact on mother to adolescent relationships, the impact of father to adolescent relationships and the impact on relationships of adolescents.

Theory

Adolescents can be put in a situation during the divorce of their parents that can cause a triangulation between family members. One researcher found that when parents form alliances with a child/adolescent against the other parent, the parent to parent and parent to child relationships become unclear (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch , 1991). This type of relationship puts the child/adolescent into parent negotiations, tension and active conflicts causing and impact on their relationship (Buchanan Maccoby, & Dornbusch , 1991).

The interaction between parents can cause the adolescent to have mixed feelings about what and whom they should be “siding” with. The theory of triangulation is considered a family systems theory (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). This theory will be the base for this study. This theory will aid in looking at the relationships that are formed after a parental divorce.

The relationship between the child and parent is one factor that may change or add stress to all involved. The parent child relationships are a representation of how the child views relationships not only with friends but also with a romantic partner (Bartell, 2001). Many changes occur during and after a divorce that can impact this relationship. The negative effects that can happen to the parent child relationship such as less time together and the degree of closeness and warmth can effect the attachment between the two (Mahl, 2001).

The next part of this literature review will look at the relationships between the mother and child and the father and child. It will take into account the effects described above. Poor quality relationships with parents after a divorce are related to less

satisfaction in romantic relationships, more fear and anxiety, less trust and happiness in love (Bartell, 2004). Due to this it is important to look at both of these relationships.

Mother-Adolescent Relationship

Divorce can be a difficult time for a family, especially if children are involved. A mother is someone who most children have a relationship with, but a divorce can affect this relationship in a couple of different ways. The mother-adolescent relationship could be changed due to divorce. The relationship depends on several factors, such as which the adolescent lives with, closeness prior to divorce, and socio-economic status (Lazar et al, 2004). Research has been done in order to see the affects of the different factors that may affect the relationship between mother and child.

The mother is affected by the divorce as well as the adolescent. Due to this a study found that mothers that are divorced have a difficult time providing the same level of emotional support as compared to non-divorced mothers (Fagan, 1999). Fagan (1999) also found divorced mothers to have less affection and communication with their adolescent, creating inconsistent discipline. This study researched some of the ways the mother is affected by divorce leading to the adolescent feeling the affects as well.

The older an adolescent gets, they may change or gain a different perspective on marriage. Knox, Zusman & DeCuzzi (2004), looked at older adolescents and the impact on their relationships. This study found that older adolescents from divorced families were more likely to feel less close to their mother. The closeness of the adolescent to mother was dependent on the emotional stress put on the adolescent from their mother following the divorce (Knox, Zusman, & DeCuzzi, 2004).

Adolescents are going through several changes in their lives, adding the divorce of their parents can add difficulty and confusion to those changes. In another study, divorce was correlated with depression, anxiety and stress to the adolescent (Richardson & McCabe, 2001). The conflict of the parents prior and after the divorce may also affect the outcome of the adolescent. Richardson & McCabe (2001) also looked at the conflict and concluded that the more conflict between the parents created a negative affect with same-sex relations, global self-concept, life satisfaction and the intimacy with the mother and family.

Mothers tend to have a child more frequently than fathers. Due to this, mothers are more likely to disclose information to their children about negative information about their father (Keynon et al, 2008). Kenyon et al, (2008), found that mothers revealed this information in order to have their children see their fathers in a negative light and put the blame on their father, creating the relationship with the mother and adolescent to be impacted.

The studies discussed have showed the different factors that have an impact of adolescent relationships. Emotional support of the mother seems to be one factor that the majority of the studies concluded as a contributor to the change in the dynamics of the mother to adolescent relationship.

Father to Adolescent Relationship

A father is also an important part to a family. Divorced families have been looked at on how the father responds after the divorce relating to the relationship with the adolescent. In most cases fathers tend to be the parent who leaves. During this time,

fathers have little or no contact with their children, according to national surveys (Emery 2004). Emery (2004) also found one third of divorced fathers had seen their children only once or not at all during the first year of being divorced, four out of ten fathers had seen their children about three times a month and one fourth of fathers had seen them once a week.

In that same survey fathers who had been divorced for longer periods of time were found to have less contact with their children. Thirteen percent of fathers who had been divorced for two years only saw their children once a year, forty-three percent saw them once a week or more (Emery, 2004). Lastly, fifty percent of fathers who had been divorced for eleven years or more saw their children only once a year compared to twelve percent who saw their children once a week or more.

During a divorce, a custody battle can take place. Fagan (1999), found several factors that influence the relationship. Once a divorce has happened fathers that do not have legal custody tend to drift away, the younger the child is at the time of divorce. He also found that fathers who remarry tend to be more involved with the children in that marriage. This study showed some of the possible factors that create the difficult relationship with the father and adolescent.

Knox, Maccoby, & Dornbusch (2004) also found a similar result relating to the outcome of closeness to the adolescent and father. Older adolescents, whose fathers were remarried, felt less close to their father, supporting the Fagan (1999) research. Studies have been conducted in order to look at this relationship. Knox Maccoby, & Dornbusch (2004) also concluded that divorce is not the impact on the relationship, but the

involvement of the father afterwards that seems to affect the closeness of the father to adolescent relationship.

As these studies have shown, the father relationship is negatively affected by divorce. Adolescent's relationships with their fathers seem to be poorer than intact families (Dunlop, 2001). Portnoy's (2008) study also concluded these results. His study found that adolescents see their father as less caring, and in early adulthood one-third of divorced adolescents wonder if their father loves them. A study conducted earlier than Portnoy's (2008), revealed some of the same findings. Billing's and Emery (1998) found that forty six percent of adolescents from divorced families wished they were able to spend more time with their fathers, and twenty-nine percent of adolescents from divorced families wondered if their father really loved them. From both of these studies, it is important to know how fathers can be viewed from their children. The father is an important figure in a child's life, and when their father is not around it can make it more difficult for the adolescent.

Both parents take a strain on their relationship with their adolescent after divorce. Parenting styles is one factor that declines after divorce. Both parents may be lonely or take on more financial responsibilities resulting in less effective parenting (Conger et al, 2000). Due to the less effective parenting such as ineffective discipline, lack of empathy and nurturance may result in the child becoming less socially competent in conflict resolution (Conger et al, 2000).

However, father and adolescent relationships are most vulnerable (Knox Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 2004). Several of these studies concluded that the involvement of the father after divorce is one factor that can aid in the father to adolescent

relationship. Along with the difficulty of parent child relationships, adolescents face challenges in their own relationships and also in their own relationships later in life.

Adolescent Relationships

Now that the literature review has looked at the relationships of the parents, it will look at the relationships that an adolescent has after divorce. The literature review will also take into account the impact of those relationships in each gender.

The relationship of the parents and adolescent are not the only impacts. The adolescent is more likely to associate with antisocial peers, become sexually active earlier in life and possibly have mental health problems (Brown et al, 2006).

Adolescents from divorced families are also twice as likely to receive psychological help at some point during or after the divorce and are twice as likely to drop out of high school (Emery, 2004). According to Emery (2004), there are four factors that can make these statistics more likely. These include the child's relationship with their residential parent, the extent of conflict between parents, the families' economic standing, and the frequency of contact with the nonresidential parent.

The adolescent faces many challenges and changes after the divorce as well. Literature shows that adolescents perceived themselves as more mature due to the responsibilities they take on. Parents will turn to the child for emotional support and disclose personal concerns about parenting or financial issues, in turn the adolescent feels older and mature (Buchanan et al, 1991). Kenyon et al, (2007) also found similar results. Adolescents that take on more responsibilities after divorce tend to perceive themselves

as more mature. Responsibilities are not necessarily forced upon the adolescent but are taken on due to less family members in the house.

The impact the divorce has on the relationship of adolescents after divorce also depends on a couple of factors. Adolescents and adults from divorced families can still recall shock, unhappiness, loneliness and anger brought on by the divorce (Portnoy, 2008). Portnoy (2008) also concluded that divorce is a “life transforming” experience for adolescent into adulthood. Adolescents are affected by divorce, and due to this impact may change their way of thinking about marriage, divorce and future relationships.

Relationships later in life are affected from divorced and non-divorced families. Individuals that come from divorced families tend to have lower marital satisfaction, more marital discord, thoughts of divorce and are more likely to get a divorce. (Portnoy, 2008). Thompson (1999) also found similar results including hesitancy toward commitment, lower satisfaction in relationships, poorer interpersonal skills, earlier involvement in relationships and greater acceptance of divorce.

Fagan (1999) also concluded the increase of divorce to be a much as two times more likely to divorce later in life. His study also found that children/adolescents of divorced families tend to have negative views towards marriage, leading to a higher cohabitation rate. Knox, Maccoby, & Dornbusch (2004) found that adolescents whose parents were divorced were in relationships longer than those with married parents.

Billings & Emery (1998) conducted a study of college students from divorced families. From that study, seventy-three percent of students reported that they felt they would be a different person if their parents would have stayed together. Fifty percent of students reported that they worried about events such as graduations and weddings where

both parents would have to be present. Forty-eight percent of students reported that their childhood was harder than most and forty percent wished they grew up in a married family.

Individuals who come from divorced families tend to have concerns in later relationships. They seem to be more fearful of marriage, in turn having less favorable expectations (Pennigton & Spink, 2001). Pennigton & Spink (2001) also found that due to this fear many reported no desire to marry, and felt their chances of having a long term relationship would be greater than in a marriage.

Attitudes toward divorce also tend to change in individuals who come from non intact families as compared to intact families. When discussing divorce, individuals from divorced families are going to be more open to the idea of it when they report being unhappy in their relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). There are a couple of different attitudes that seem to be common among individuals from non intact families.

Another attitude that is shown in a couple of different studies is the level of trust in their partners (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Trust can be broken at the beginning of divorce when attachment between parents is lost due to circumstances. The lost of trust in their parents may make the individual trust their partners less or other relational partners less (King, 2002).

The way an individual displays love for their partner is also a common theme among non intact families. Individuals report less altruistic love for their dating partner than intact partner (Thompson, 1999). Thompson (1999) also found that women had lower practical and dependent love along with altruistic love where men had higher erotic loves that were from non intact families.

A study found positive attitudes in individuals who come from divorced families. Individuals who come from divorced families spoke about their desire to do better than their parents, by not rushing, being careful when ending relationships that are problematic and by developing strong communication skills, personal identity and financial stability prior to committing to a long term relationship or marriage (Darlington, 2001).

Adolescent females tend to be impacted differently in their relationships compared to males. Females from divorced families have been found to be more sensitive and emotional to the divorce (Doherty & Needle, 1991). They were also found to be more depressed (Portnoy, 2008). According to Portnoy (2008), adolescent females are more likely to have sex at a younger age and reach menarche at an earlier age. Adolescent females tend to have anxiety over making long-term commitments, and think a potential mate could never contribute loyalty, faith and love to them (Hines, 2007). The impact on females can be physical and emotional.

Another study concluded that women have a different way of communicating if they were in a household that divorced. Women reported less effective communication with their partners resulting in negative consequences (Herzog & Cooney, 2002). Some of these consequences resulted in higher rate of conflict and more withdrawal from their partners.

Male adolescents have a different impact on their social and physical state. Adolescent males tend to be able to disconnect emotionally until a little time has passed after the divorce (Doherty & Needle, 1991). Divorce may also cause adolescent males to have lower self-esteem, and become more likely to drop out of school (Hines, 2007). Males are able to distant themselves, until they can no longer hold back. Males tend to

have more hostility and aggression after the divorce (Fagan, 1999). This aggression, blaming, withdrawal and inattentiveness were also confirmed in a different research study (Hines, 2007). Hines (2007) study showed that males have a more difficult time with divorce and need three to five years to accept the divorce compared to females who need about one.

In summary, there are several different factors that affect adolescent relationships between their parents and relationships with partners. Mother and adolescent relationships can be impacted by several factors; father involvement is one of the reoccurring factors relating to father and adolescent relationships. Adolescent relationships can also be impacted in the present and future.

CHAPTER 3

Summary, Critical Analysis and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will include a summary of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. It will also include a critical analysis of the literature that was studied through this review. Recommendations will be discussed for parents, professionals in the field, and for future research that is needed to fill in the gaps on what is currently known about the impact of divorce on adolescent relationships.

The presenting study was conducted in order to look at the impact of divorce on adolescent relationships ranging in age from fourteen to eighteen. This study reviewed significant literature on the impact of divorce on adolescents. Since divorce is prevalent in today's society, understanding the impact on adolescents will aid in their success. This study addressed the following three questions: What is the impact of parental divorce on the relationship between mother and adolescent? What is the impact of parental divorce on the relationship between father and adolescent? What is the impact on the adolescent's relationships?

The literature has shown divorce can affect an adolescent, but it may not be the divorce it self, but the factors resulting from divorce. Many studies have shown or demonstrated this (Woosley et al, 2008; Kenyon, 2009). The divorce rate is still around fifty percent (Martin et al, 2003), indicating the need for research on the effects of adolescents. The literature review has shown that there are many different outcomes from divorce.

Mother-Adolescent Relationship

There are many different relationships that an adolescent can have. The literature has shown that the mother is usually the parent that has the children most often. The mother is affected by the divorce as well as the adolescent. As shown in the literature review Fagan (1999), found divorced mothers to have less affection and communication with their adolescent, creating inconsistent discipline. The study researched some of the ways the mother is affected by divorce leading to the adolescent feeling the affects as well.

Several other studies also found the impact on the mothers transferring to the child. Knox, Zusman & DeCuzzi (2004), found that adolescents who were from non intact families felt less close to their mothers due to the emotional support put on them during the time of divorce. Literature showed that the mother and adolescent relationship can be affected by the divorce. There are many factors that can contribute to this relationship, and are not present in all cases of divorce.

Father-Adolescent Relationship

Literature has shown that the relationship between the father and adolescent seems to be one that is affected more often than the mother adolescent relationship. . Adolescent's relationships with their fathers seem to be poorer than intact families due to the father having less involvement after divorce. (Dunlop, 2001; Portnoy, 2008) Adolescents dealing with divorce mainly feel closer to their mother and not their father concluding that the father's relationship has more of an impact from the divorce.

Chapter two has shown that there is an impact both on the mother and father relationship. There are many influences that can change both of these relationships. It can not be generalized to all individuals. Individuals who maintained high quality relationships with both parents following the divorce may be more likely to develop high quality romantic relationships and tend to have more satisfied relationships (King, 2002).

Adolescent Relationships

Literature has shown that the adolescent may have difficulty in their relationships and also in later relationships. Parental divorce makes adolescents rethink trust in their own relationships. Adolescents recognize how divorce can affect many relationships and also their own. It has also been shown to change adolescents view and beliefs about marriage (Kenyon et al, 2007).

There are many factors such as communication, trust, conflict and commitment that can all affect an adolescent's relationship (Portnoy 2008; Fagan 1999; Pennigton & Spink 2001). Many signs may give adolescents feeling about marriage. Individual who can see divorce as a learning experience could identify warning signs of problems and characteristics of healthy relationships (Mahl, 2001).

Critical Analysis

The literature for chapter two presented information relating to the relationship between the mother and adolescent. The literature showed the effects the divorce can have on mothers such as lack of emotional support (Fagan, 1999).

The literature also showed how mothers that are divorced tend to have their children report they feel less close to them (Knox, Zusman & Decuzzi, 2004). However, it can not be generalized to all relationships between mothers and adolescent. There needs to be further research to show the impact on adolescent and their mothers after divorce (Thompson, 1999).

Another important factor to be considered is the experience over time, the length of time since the divorce and age of the adolescent should be looked at more closely (Carranza et al, 2009). There are many studies that looked at younger children, and they are still in a time of processing and not understanding their feelings related to the divorce.

The parent child relationship is one that is difficult to recognize. There are many different aspects that can affect the relationships. However, marital status does not necessarily a key influence. Children and adolescents were seen as having a higher well being when their parents had less conflict displayed as compared to children whom witness their parents in conflict often (Woosley et al, 2009). The quality of parent child relationship, amount of contact with parent and parenting style seem to play a role in the affects of divorce (Thompson, 1999).

Adolescent relationships later in life have been shown to have been impacted by a parents divorce (Thompson, 1999). Although many studies conducted about this are from non-diverse populations. As Thompson (1999) suggested there needs to be research with samples of individuals from diverse backgrounds including age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social economic status. By looking at the different samples will give a more clear view on the impact of relationships.

In addition to the diverse sample looking at the descriptions of an individuals divorce and their own relationships there may be connections between the two.

Parental divorce is not a universal experience and many individuals experience different situations which create variable outcomes (Thompson, 1999). It would be beneficial to look at divorce as a significant life event and looking at it over the course of life and by viewing the experience as open may prevent the variability in outcomes.

Recommendations

School counselors should especially be educated and aware of how divorce may impact adolescents in the schools. Teachers, parents, and students should be able to come to counselors for assistance and on how to provide support for those children impacted by divorce. As the literature pointed out in this review, divorce can be highly detrimental to the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of children and adolescents. School counselors need to be able to provide students, staff and parents with resources in order to aid in the success of adolescents that come from non-intact families.

Many of the studies conducted on the impact of divorce are conducted with younger children. There are several studies that look at the younger adults as well, but not at adolescents. Adolescents are dealing with many changes and challenges as shown in the research and understanding more of the impact that it may have on these adolescents would help in creating a positive ending.

Research has been done on some of the impacts on mother and child relationships and father child relationships, but there is not a significant amount. There are many different changes that affect everyone in the family. Mothers and fathers face different

challenges when they become single. Looking at the impact that this has on the children closer would aid in the success of children. It would also be beneficial to educate parents on this topic, in order for them to understand how their behaviors may influence their children. There is still further research done in order to see the impacts of divorce on children and adolescents.

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