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The Impact of Parental Divorce on Juvenile Delinquency and Preventive Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Field and Aim: Parental divorce is recognized as one of the most significant threats to the psychological and social stability of children and adolescents, potentially increasing the risk of delinquent behavior. This article examines the consequences of divorce on children's delinquency and proposes preventive strategies.
Method: This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. Given the availability of numerous scientific research articles on the subject, the study reviews, classifies, analyzes, and synthesizes research findings concerning the effects of parental divorce on children in Iran. This process involves examining and integrating existing research in this field. In contrast to the position held by Golafshani, Valik, and Loyk, who do not agree with this perspective, Golafshani explains the distinction among three types of analysis: primary analysis, which focuses on original research data; secondary analysis, which reexamines existing research data to answer new research questions; and meta-analysis, which statistically combines the findings of a large body of individual studies to produce an integrated assessment.
Findings and Conclusions: Research findings indicate that divorce contributes to high-risk behaviors in adolescents through mechanisms such as reduced parental supervision, academic decline, economic hardship, and emotional detachment. Adolescents raised in single-parent households or those exposed to post-divorce conflicts are particularly vulnerable to associating with deviant peer groups and engaging in criminal activities. The study proposes preventive strategies at three levels: individual, familial, and societal. At the individual level, enhancing resilience skills and providing emotional regulation training can help deter delinquency. At the familial level, post-divorce parenting education and maintaining healthy parent-child relationships are crucial. At the societal level, school-based interventions, such as group counseling, economic support for divorced families, and community programs, including sports and cultural activities, can mitigate the adverse effects of divorce. This article emphasizes the importance of non-punitive prevention and supportive measures over punitive approaches. The results suggest that combining psychological, educational, and social interventions can help break the cycle of divorce and delinquency and foster a safer society. Future research should assess the effectiveness of these programs across diverse cultural contexts to inform targeted policymaking.

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1. Introduction

Divorce is one of the most difficult and challenging decisions a person can make. It is an intensely stressful and emotional experience for every member of the family and can feel like a storm disrupting family life. However, this decision becomes even more complicated when the couple are also parents and children are involved.

For children, understanding their parents' decision to separate is often difficult, and they may feel as though their entire world has been turned upside down. They may experience shock, sadness, grief, anger, or anxiety. Some children may even feel guilty and blame themselves for the problems at home and their parents' divorce.

Because children differ in age and personality, the effects of divorce on them can also vary. Some children experience no particular psychological or behavioral problems after navigating the initial turmoil and challenges of post-divorce life, whereas others may struggle with the changes and their consequences for an extended period. It is important to remember that even children who are resilient and adjust quickly to their parents' divorce may experience various difficulties or concerns later in life. For example, they may experience painful emotions and distressing memories during significant life events, such as graduation ceremonies or marriage. In such circumstances, seeking help from an online family counselor may provide valuable support for both parents and children.

According to an article by Deonfir and Robert E. Emery (2019), parental divorce is associated with an increased risk of adjustment difficulties among children and adolescents, including academic problems (such as lower grades and school dropout), disruptive behaviors (such as behavioral problems and substance use), and depressive symptoms. Children of divorced parents are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, experience poverty, and encounter family instability. In fact, divorce increases the likelihood of these outcomes by approximately 1.5 to 2 times. In contrast, Lamman and Emery argue in their article that separation may be relatively harmless and can even represent a positive change, particularly for children raised in highly stressful and conflict-ridden family environments.

How Does Divorce Affect Children at Different Ages?

The following sections examine the effects of divorce on children at different developmental stages.

The Effects of Divorce on Infants (Birth to 18 Months)

Although it may be surprising, even infants can be affected by divorce, particularly when conflict between parents leads to arguments and tension at home. During infancy, babies can sense stress in their home environment and may develop insecure attachment patterns. They may also exhibit developmental regression or signs of developmental delay.

The Effects of Divorce on Children Aged 18 Months to 3 Years

Divorce can affect children aged 18 months to 3 years emotionally and psychologically. During early childhood, children's primary bonds are with their parents, making major disruptions to family life difficult for them to accept and understand. Toddlers whose parents are divorcing may cry frequently,

The Effects of Parental Divorce on Adolescents⁂

Unlike younger children, adolescents have a more complete understanding of what is happening. They may express their feelings in different ways. For example, they may become withdrawn and less talkative, reduce their communication with you, or express their emotions through anger or rebellious behavior. They may also blame one or both parents for the situation and direct their resentment toward you.

⁂The Initial Effects of Divorce on Children⁂

The first effects of divorce on children often include anger, worry, sadness, confusion, and frustration. Children commonly experience mental health or behavioral problems during or after their parents'

divorce. At this stage, these reactions are generally a natural part of the divorce process, and children may experience short-term effects. However, some children may develop more persistent difficulties if they do not receive adequate emotional support, which can be a cause for concern.

The Psychological Effects of Divorce on Children

The most common initial psychological effects of divorce on children include anxiety, stress, feelings of loss, and confusion. They may feel abandoned or betrayed and struggle to process these complex emotions. According to a report by The Wave Clinic, children aged 7 to 14 whose parents have divorced are 16% more likely to experience mental health problems, including anxiety and depression. Some of these mental health difficulties may contribute to risky behaviors during adolescence, including substance abuse, delinquency, and early sexual activity.

Other psychological effects of divorce may include the following experiences in children:

- General anxiety about adjusting to a new life with one parent or alternating between both parents' homes.
- Pressure to take on additional responsibilities in their new living arrangements.
- Feelings of guilt resulting from blaming themselves for what has happened.
- Loneliness because they may no longer spend as much time with both parents as they did before.
- Anger toward their parents over the breakdown of the family.

The Social Effects of Divorce on Children

Following their parents' divorce, some children become more withdrawn and limit their social interactions with others. They may feel embarrassed or ashamed about their parents' separation and worry that their friends and acquaintances will find out. Others may engage in disruptive behavior to gain their parents' attention. For example, they may get into unnecessary fights with others at school or in the street.

Other social effects of divorce include difficulties in social relationships and feelings of insecurity. Children's friendships may become strained, and they may even be teased by their peers. They may compare themselves with other children their age and wonder whether their family is the only one that has experienced divorce.

The Effects of Divorce on Children's Academic Performance

The stress and emotional turmoil caused by divorce can make it difficult for children to concentrate, potentially leading to a decline in their academic performance. Younger children may develop negative attitudes toward school because they fear that their classmates will find out about their parents' divorce. In some cases, family financial difficulties or the behavioral and psychological problems children experience may also contribute to school dropout.

The issues discussed above represent some of the potential consequences of divorce for children. However, there is no need to assume that these outcomes are inevitable. Such effects are neither universal nor absolute. By implementing appropriate strategies and seeking professional guidance from psychologists at Agah Clinic, you can help reduce or manage these difficulties.

What Factors Can Influence How Your Children React to Your Separation and the Extent of Their Reactions?

According to the website Whoum, the following factors play a role in how children respond to their parents' divorce:

Age and Developmental Stage: Younger children may find it more difficult to understand the situation. They may feel guilty and blame themselves. Adolescents, on the other hand, may react with

anger or by withdrawing from family activities.

⁎⁎Gender Differences:** Boys and girls may respond differently to divorce. The effects of divorce on boys often manifest in more externalizing behaviors, such as aggression. In contrast, girls may be more likely to internalize their emotions, keeping their feelings to themselves, which can contribute to depression or anxiety.

⁎⁎The Quality of Parental Relationships After Separation:** The level of conflict and communication between you can significantly affect your child's adjustment. Maintaining an amicable relationship and cooperating in co-parenting can help reduce the negative effects of divorce.

A strong support network, including extended family, friends, acquaintances, and professional counselors or psychologists, can play an important role in helping your children cope with these changes.

⁎⁎Strategies for Reducing the Effects of Divorce on Children⁎⁎

⁎⁎Allow Them to Feel Sad⁎⁎

Stephanie Samar, a child psychologist, advises parents not to become overly concerned about some of the reactions children may display during or in the early stages of divorce. Consider the emotional turmoil you experience as an adult, and recognize how much more difficult this period may be for your children. This transitional period, during which children adjust to their new circumstances, is necessary. Therefore, avoid making statements such as, "I just want you to be happy".

For children, divorce can feel like a profound loss: the loss of a parent, the loss of their family, or simply the loss of their former way of life. Help your children express their feelings. You may not be able to solve all their problems or turn their sadness into happiness, but it is important to allow them to grieve rather than dismissing their emotions. Give them time to adjust to their new circumstances.

⁎⁎Listen to Your Children and Let Them Express Their Feelings⁎⁎

Children may be reluctant to share their true feelings because they fear hurting you. Take the time to listen to them and reassure them that it is okay to say what they really feel. They may blame you for the divorce or feel angry or disappointed with you. However, if they cannot share their honest feelings with you, they may have a much harder time coping with the situation.

⁎⁎Let Your Children Know That They Are Not to Blame⁎⁎

Many children believe that their parents divorced because of them. They may remember times when they argued with you, received poor grades, or got into trouble. To help your children overcome this misconception:

-Explain why you decided to divorce in a way that is appropriate for your children's ages and levels of understanding. Reassure them that both parents love them and that they are not responsible for the divorce.

-Whenever possible, explain the situation in clear, simple, and honest language that your children can understand. For example: "We both love you and will continue to take care of you," or "We have decided that living separately will be the best choice for our family".

-Your children do not need to know every detail, but they have the right to understand what will happen, where they will live, and who will take care of them.

⁎⁎Avoid Blaming the Other Parent⁎⁎

Whatever led to your divorce, it was a marital issue and was not your children's responsibility. This does not mean that you should lie to them. On the contrary, being honest with your children is very important, but you should do so without criticizing or blaming your spouse.

After all, your children will continue to have a relationship with both of you, and they should not be

caught in the middle of your arguments and disagreements. You should agree in advance on how to explain the reasons for your separation or divorce and remain consistent in your explanation.

Plan the conversation with your children and, if possible, tell them about your final decision to divorce together. Remember to treat each other respectfully when explaining the reasons for the separation, rather than assigning blame or trying to identify who is at fault.

⁂Pay Attention to Your Children's Concerns⁂

Divorce and the events that follow can create countless concerns and worries for children. There may be specific anxieties underlying each question they ask you. For example:

⁂Suggest Someone Else They Can Talk To⁂

Sometimes, children find it easier to share their feelings and thoughts with someone other than their parents. You can encourage your children to talk to another trusted adult, such as a friend, teacher, grandfather, or grandmother.

⁂Involve Your Children More in Decision-Making After Separation⁂

Involving your children in small decisions, such as how to arrange their rooms or what to have for dinner, can help them feel that at least some aspects of their home life remain within their control while so many other things are changing.

For older children, it is important to listen carefully to their opinions and let them know that their views matter to you. For example, ask them which days of the week they would prefer to spend with their mother and which days with their father.

Remember to give children choices and opportunities to make decisions that are appropriate for their ages. Do not place an excessive burden on them, particularly by asking them to make decisions that force them to choose between you and the other parent or put them in the middle of your disagreements.

⁂Spend Quality Time with Your Children⁂

Set aside time to be with your children and enjoy yourselves together, even if it means sharing a quick hug, listening to a song, or having a snack together.

For many families, divorce is often the only option available. There is no doubt that divorce is an extremely stressful experience for every family member, but it can be even more challenging for children. The effects of divorce on children can vary considerably.

Your child may face a difficult struggle and experience changes in behavior, mood, or personality. Some of these changes may include:

- Bedwetting and nighttime enuresis
- Sleep problems
- Increased aggression
- Persistent sadness and excessive crying
- Declining academic performance
- Excessive stress

⁂The Role of Schools, Counselors, and Social Institutions in Preventing Juvenile Delinquency⁂

As the second major social institution after the family, the school plays a central role in identifying and preventing adolescents' tendencies toward delinquent behavior. Informed and attentive teachers can raise the alarm by recognizing behavioral changes in a timely manner, such as declining academic performance, aggression, or social withdrawal. School counselors, meanwhile, can establish an effective link between vulnerable adolescents and support networks by providing targeted psychosocial services

and organizing workshops to develop coping skills.

Education, as a fundamental institution responsible for nurturing and educating future generations, has a particularly important role in preventing the early onset of criminal behavior. Schools are environments in which students spend a substantial proportion of their time and therefore have a direct influence on the development of their personalities, behaviors, and attitudes. Educational and developmental programs implemented in schools can play a decisive role in strengthening students' social skills, self-control, and problem-solving abilities, thereby helping prevent their involvement in deviant and delinquent behavior (Moghadami, 1041: 1).

In accordance with the principles of developmental crime prevention, families are required to ensure that children attend school and receive an education. Furthermore, under the Law on the Protection of Children and Adolescents, preventing children and adolescents from accessing education is recognized as a criminal offense (Makrami et al., 1042: 141).

According to social control theory, individuals are less likely to engage in criminal behavior when they maintain strong social bonds with their families, schools, and communities. As one of the principal institutions of socialization, schools can help prevent delinquency by fostering attachment to rules, strengthening commitment to positive goals, keeping adolescents engaged in constructive activities, and reinforcing their belief in moral norms (Melos, 2410: 2223).

According to Hirschi's social control theory, schools can play a central role in preventing crimes that threaten public order and security by establishing strong social bonds. The theory emphasizes that the likelihood of adolescents engaging in delinquent behavior, particularly offenses that disrupt public order, decreases when they develop strong attachments to teachers and classmates, strengthen their commitment to education and future career goals, participate more actively in extracurricular activities, and internalize moral and legal norms (Mabouth, 2441: 022).

After the family, the educational environment plays a fundamental role in educating individuals and helping them conform to social norms. If schools fail to fulfill their responsibilities in socializing children and adolescents and in supporting and complementing the family's role in this process, students, who are the principal architects of society's future, may be diverted from a path of growth and development toward delinquency and criminal behavior (Mofaqieh, 1135: 5).

Social institutions serve as an essential support system within society and play a decisive role in reducing the harm that divorce can cause to children and adolescents. By establishing psychological and social safety networks, these institutions address risk factors that may push children from divorced families toward

⁂The Role of Divorce in Weakening Parental Supervision and Increasing the Risk of Juvenile Delinquency⁂

One of the significant consequences of divorce is a reduction in the effectiveness of parental supervision over children's behavior. Following separation, one parent, particularly the father in many cultures, is often physically absent from the child's daily life. The other parent may also lack sufficient time and capacity to supervise the child closely because of increased financial pressures, emotional strain, or work commitments. This reduction in supervision creates a more permissive and less controlled environment for children and adolescents. When combined with negative environmental influences or peer pressure, it can contribute to risky and delinquent behavior.

Studies have found significant positive and direct relationships between parental supervision and academic adjustment, between appropriate social behavior skills and academic adjustment, between the skills associated with non-aggressive behavior and impulse control and academic adjustment, between self-confidence skills and academic adjustment, and between peer relationship skills and academic adjustment. A significant negative relationship was also found between inappropriate social behavior and academic adjustment (Maparsa & Soudani, 1044: 235).

Research findings indicate a significant negative relationship between parental supervision and risk-taking behavior. Male and female participants did not differ significantly in their overall levels of risk-

taking. However, boys had higher mean scores on measures of substance use, alcohol consumption, and sexual activity (Mopordel, 1130: 25).

Research has also demonstrated a negative correlation between parental supervision and risky behaviors, whereas a positive correlation exists between associating with delinquent peers and engaging in risky behaviors. Therefore, weak parental supervision and association with delinquent peers appear to play important roles in adolescents' tendency toward risky behavior (Modargahi, 1131: 1).

A lack of family cohesion, inadequate behavioral monitoring, and communication gaps may lead children to seek ways of compensating for these deficiencies outside the home, where they face a greater risk of being influenced by delinquent groups and entering the cycle of criminal behavior.

⁂The Role of Psychological, Emotional, and Social Support in Reducing Juvenile Delinquency⁂

Human emotions sometimes influence decision-making and lead individuals to engage in particular behaviors. Emotions can be positive or negative, and some negative emotional states may manifest in delinquent behavior (Mozadeh Bagheri, 1133: 150).

Alongside social and emotional support, resilience is also an important consideration for children and adolescents. A significant positive correlation has been reported between social support and resilience following emotional divorce. This indicates a significant relationship between psychological and social support and resilience in the aftermath of emotional divorce (Moshhadi Abbasi & Shojari, 1042: 1).

Psychological and emotional support can act as a protective buffer against the negative consequences of divorce. When children and adolescents can express their feelings in a safe and accepting environment and feel understood and supported by parents, counselors, or teachers, the likelihood of aggressive and delinquent behavior decreases.

Social support, provided through healthy friendship networks, group programs, and community-based activities, can also offer constructive alternatives to seeking negative attention or joining harmful peer groups. Strengthening emotional resilience and fostering a sense of belonging can help adolescents find healthier ways to cope with the challenges of life following parental divorce rather than turning to deviant behavior.

Emotional and psychological support can serve as a protective shield against the harm caused by parental divorce. When adolescents have opportunities to express their feelings in a safe and accepting environment and receive support from their families, schools, and communities, the likelihood of their engaging in delinquent behavior can be substantially reduced.

Individual and group counseling, self-esteem-building programs, and problem-solving skills training can help adolescents cope more effectively with the emotional challenges associated with parental divorce. Social support, including community-based programs, sports and cultural activities, and positive friendship networks, can also provide alternatives to involvement in unhealthy groups.

Strengthening social bonds and a sense of community belonging through participation in collective activities helps adolescents find positive ways to express themselves rather than resorting to risky behaviors. Ultimately, combining these forms of support can foster psychological resilience and substantially reduce the risk of delinquency among adolescents affected by divorce.

⁂Non-Penal Prevention of Child and Juvenile Delinquency⁂

Prevention refers to efforts to stop crime from occurring through various interventions designed to reduce delinquency. Its objective is to limit opportunities for crime, whether exclusively or as part of a broader strategy. Such measures may achieve this by eliminating, obstructing, or reducing opportunities to commit offenses (Moboui, 2411: 2).

Crime prevention seeks to address problems before they occur. Its central priorities include establishing proactive mechanisms through society and the relevant institutions to promote education, upbringing, empowerment, and improvements in quality of life while preserving citizens' dignity (Mozka, 1042: 2).

Non-penal prevention is one of the most effective and influential approaches to preventing delinquency and social harm. Creating a safe society requires identifying the root causes and contributing factors

behind deviance and nonconformity with social values and norms, and preventing these inconsistencies from escalating. A review of humanity's historical efforts to combat deviance, misconduct, and delinquency suggests that prevention, particularly non-penal prevention, is among the most appropriate strategies for addressing delinquent behavior (Mosafri Zadeh, 1044: 250).

To reduce the negative effects of divorce on juvenile delinquency, non-penal preventive strategies are essential. These include psychosocial interventions, parenting-skills education, and comprehensive support services. Family counseling programs, psychotherapy sessions for children and parents, and stronger support networks involving schools, counseling centers, and civil society organizations can help reduce tension and improve children's adjustment.

Teaching adolescents life skills, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution can also reduce the likelihood of their engaging in risky behavior. Social policies that facilitate access to welfare services, create employment opportunities for single parents, and establish safe educational environments also play a key role in preventing delinquency.

The following sections discuss several of these strategies for preventing children and adolescents from engaging in criminal behavior.

⁂The Importance of Parent Education After Divorce⁂

Divorce refers to the legal termination of a marriage and the separation of spouses. It usually occurs when the marital relationship deteriorates and incompatibility and tension arise between the spouses. This social phenomenon can have profound and potentially irreversible effects on other social phenomena and various aspects of society (Marshidi & Sada Hosseini, 1044: 1).

Parenting after divorce requires a new model of shared responsibility in which parents, despite their separation, can maintain a basic level of stability and emotional security for their children. This sensitive stage requires parents to shift from a marital relationship to a co-parenting relationship and to maintain healthy communication boundaries with greater self-awareness.

Parenting is one of the most demanding responsibilities parents face and is among the factors that influence children's psychological well-being. Divorce is one factor that can significantly affect the parenting process. Studies indicate that parents describe post-divorce parenting as a challenging responsibility. The nature of parental communication, individual needs, and available support resources after divorce can influence parents' attitudes and emotions toward parenting. Psychological distress, personal growth, and maturity are among the experiences parents may encounter while navigating parenting after divorce (Khojasteh Mehr, 1132).

Although divorce marks the end of a marital relationship, it also represents the beginning of a serious responsibility toward children. Teaching parenting skills after divorce, particularly in conflict management, effective communication with children, and the maintenance of emotional stability, can help prevent many negative outcomes, including juvenile delinquency.

Parents who consciously adopt strategies to reduce tension, such as refraining from criticizing each other in front of their children, maintaining regular daily routines, and responding to their children's emotional needs, establish a strong protective barrier against social harm.

Educational programs specifically designed for divorced parents should focus on strengthening cooperation between parents outside the marital relationship, developing effective supervision strategies, and creating a safe environment for children. When parents learn to focus on their children's needs rather than engaging in power struggles, they can provide a secure environment for healthy development, even after separation. Such educational interventions not only help prevent behavioral problems but also enable children to accept divorce as a stage of life rather than an unbearable crisis.

⁂Conclusion⁂

Parental divorce is a complex crisis within the family structure that has profound and multidimensional effects on children's and adolescents' psychological, social, and behavioral development. The findings of this study indicate that the breakdown of the family environment not only disrupts children's

emotional and psychological stability but also exposes them to a significant risk of delinquency by creating gaps in emotional support and upbringing. These effects are primarily manifested through reduced parental supervision, declining academic performance, weakened emotional bonds, and exposure to high-risk social environments.

Psychologically, children of divorced parents may experience feelings of rejection, insecurity, anger, and, in some cases, identity confusion. If these experiences are not identified and addressed in a timely manner, they may lead to aggression, social withdrawal, or antisocial behavior.

Sudden changes in financial circumstances and living arrangements, such as relocation to disadvantaged areas or contact with unhealthy peer groups, can also constitute additional risk factors that increase the likelihood of behavioral problems. In this context, institutions such as schools, educational counselors, and social organizations can help prevent these difficulties from escalating through timely intervention.

The preventive strategies emphasized in this study can be organized into three main levels. At the individual level, they involve teaching life skills and strengthening children's psychological resilience. At the family level, they involve empowering parents to fulfill their parenting responsibilities effectively after divorce. At the social level, they involve expanding access to social support, counseling services, and community-based programs.

Successful experiences in other countries also suggest that early and multifaceted interventions can interrupt the pathway from divorce to delinquency. A key point to emphasize is that divorce does not inevitably lead to negative outcomes; rather, the way the period following divorce is managed plays a decisive role in shaping children's futures.

If families, communities, and governments adopt a comprehensive and preventive approach, it is possible to create a safe and constructive environment for children's development even in the aftermath of divorce. Achieving this goal requires the development of well-designed social policies, effective investment in support services, and the establishment of interinstitutional cooperation among families, schools, civil society organizations, and legal authorities.

Ultimately, a realistic understanding of divorce as an unavoidable social phenomenon leads us toward a shared responsibility: one that calls on us to focus on healing rather than blame, and on taking action rather than ignoring problems. Only through such an approach can we help prevent cycles of harm from recurring and nurture a resilient, responsible, and healthy generation.

⁂Recommendations⁂

- Establish dedicated financial assistance funds for single-parent families to reduce economic pressure and prevent relocation to high-risk neighborhoods.
- Expand social housing programs, prioritizing divorced families, to provide a safe and stable living environment.
- Require parents to participate in post-divorce parenting education programs as a condition for obtaining or maintaining custody rights.
- Establish judicial oversight of the implementation of parenting agreements to ensure that both parents maintain ongoing contact with their children.
- Organize mandatory workshops for divorced parents covering topics such as:
  - Managing conflict without disparaging one another in front of their children.
  - Effective supervision of adolescent behavior in single-parent family situations.
- Establish student behavioral monitoring teams in schools to identify early warning signs, such as declining academic performance and aggression.
- Involve adolescents in free sports and cultural activities, such as local clubs, as alternatives to unhealthy peer groups.
- Implement media campaigns to reduce the social stigma associated with children of divorced parents

and encourage support from family members, friends, and the wider community.

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