

Girls perform better on tests when feuding parents divorce

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A clean break from a bad marriage is actually better for the couple's school-age daughters than a troubled union, a new University of Florida study finds.

Contrary to the expectation that marriage is always good for children while divorce is bad, the study found that the schoolwork of girls whose parents split up is better than that of girls who live with a mom and dad who don't get along, said Mark Hoekstra, who did the research for his doctoral dissertation in economics at UF.

“There is no question, as I and other researchers find, that boys and girls from two-parent intact families perform better academically than boys and girls whose parents divorced,” Hoekstra said. “But I was surprised to learn that girls whose parents divorced do better in school than girls from similarly troubled families whose parents went to the brink of divorce but remained married.”

In the study, girls between first- and 10th-grades whose parents divorced scored an average of slightly more than eight points higher on standardized reading and mathematics tests than girls whose parents filed for divorce but later requested the case be dismissed. These differences persisted four years after the divorce, he said.

No academic differences were found for boys, although they did experience a short-term increase in disciplinary problems immediately after divorce that did not last beyond three years, said Hoekstra, who is

now an economics professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

One possible reason girls in families with troubled marriages are more likely to experience academic problems is that they may be more adversely affected by conflict, he said.

The opportunity for girls to have a closer relationship with their mothers when parents divorce may also explain their stronger academic performance, Hoekstra said. "Since in most cases mothers have primary custody, there may be a mother-daughter bond that forms as a result of a divorce that daughters respond to in a positive way compared to what would have happened if the parents had remained married," he said.

The results have important implications for divorce reform initiatives that have gained popularity recently because of concerns about the effects of divorce on children, Hoekstra said. Since 1996 at least eight states have considered legislation that would make it more difficult for parents to end their marriage by limiting grounds for divorce and requiring pre-divorce counseling, he said.

"My research suggests that policy-makers ought to be less concerned with whether or not parents legally dissolve their marriages and more concerned with helping them overcome the types of problems that cause them to contemplate divorce in the first place," Hoekstra said. "Unless the intervention can resolve the issues that got the family to the point of considering divorce, it will result in considerably lower academic achievement for the daughters involved."

Discipline is the issue with boys, Hoekstra said. "There has been some research suggesting that when boys lack a male role model in the home, which often happens after a divorce, they may be more affected than their sisters and act up, but my study shows that the effects are not permanent," he said.

In Alachua County, Florida, Hoekstra studied detailed student records on behavior and standardized test scores, as well as divorce records, from 1993 to 2003. By matching divorce records to student records, he was able to identify 690 students whose parents divorced and 111 students whose parents filed for divorce but later withdrew from the process.

“The typical approach used by other studies is to compare children whose parents divorced to children in traditional two-parent families,” he said. “The problem is that it’s hard to control for the differences between these two types of families to ensure that you’re not picking up all the things that cause the parents to divorce rather than the effect of the divorce itself.”

The increased incidence of divorce in American families is one of the most significant social trends of the 20th century, as more than 1 million children experience divorce every year, Hoekstra said. The number of divorces per 1,000 married women 15 and older more than doubled from 9.2 in 1960 to 19.5 in 1996, and demographers project that if current rates continue, about 50 percent of recent first marriages will end in divorce, he said.

Robert Hughes Jr., professor and head of the department of human and community development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said Hoekstra’s study builds on evidence that has been accumulating for the past 10 years that indicates the negative effects resulting from divorce are not the result of a “legal event,” but rather dysfunctional family processes, particularly conflict that disrupt healthy child development.

Source: University of Florida

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