

Divorce may widen distance between teens, fathers

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The typical distancing from parents by adolescents is exacerbated by divorce for fathers, but not for mothers, according to a recent study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

"Historically, teens distance themselves from parents and increase involvement with peers," says co-author Dr. Alan Booth, distinguished professor of sociology, human development and demography at Penn State. "Coupled with divorce, this distancing may result in further declines in father-child closeness."

Although research demonstrates that fathers' involvement with children has increased in recent decades, mothers continue to do the majority of childcare while fathers are the less involved parent.

Parental divorce creates an immense pressure to decrease father-child closeness, supplemented by the many barriers created by a father's physical separation from the children. Fathers, who often are the less involved parent before divorce, would have to increase their investment in the relationship just to maintain pre-divorce levels of closeness, which the vast majority of fathers do not do, according to the study.

"Therefore, fathers are at a disadvantage in closeness to start, and then divorce makes it even more challenging to be close," say the researchers.

The team comprising Mindy Scott of Child Trends and Booth, Valarie King and David Johnson, all faculty at Penn State, examined information

reported by high school students participating in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent health.

A sub-sample of youth, drawn from a nationally representative sample, was interviewed at the beginning and the end of a five-year period. Reports from youth whose parents remained married were compared with reports from youth whose parents were divorced by end of the period.

Prior to divorce, 71 percent of youth reported being very close to their mothers, while 57 percent reported being very close to their fathers.

The teens' withdrawal from fathers was much more severe among those youths with divorced parents (56 percent) than among those with non-divorced parents (28 percent), the study says.

The proportion of youths who reported a consistently close relationship with their father was much higher among those with still-married parents (48 percent) than among those with divorced parents (25 percent).

There was no significant difference in the change in closeness to mothers reported by youths in either group.

"Those teens who maintained a close relationship with their father had a stronger mother-child bond and a greater sense of well-being, defined as feelings about relationship qualities and perception's of their own qualities and abilities," Booth notes.

He adds, "Future research may look at information directly from the fathers about their evaluation of father-child closeness and his views of opportunities and constraints affecting before and after-divorce closeness with their children."

Source: Penn State

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