

Researchers' advice to save the relationships of parents of small children

January 12 2016



Malin Hansson. Credit: University of Gothenburg

According to Statistics Sweden, 30 percent of all parents of young children in Sweden separate. Researchers at the University of Gothenburg have mapped the most important factors behind the separations and divorces - and offer five tips that can save the relationship.

According to 2012 statistics from Statistics Sweden, one out of three Swedish couples that have [small children](#) get separated. The average age of the first child at the time of the separation or divorce is 4 years and 8 months.

In a study at the Sahlgrenska Academy of the University of Gothenburg, 452 parents answered a scientific questionnaire that measures [relationship](#) quality in five different dimensions: Consensus, Cohesion, Satisfaction, Sensuality and Sexuality. The questionnaire was answered at three occasions, when the first child was 6 months old, 4 years and finally when the child was 8 years old.

Measured relationship quality

Of the respondents, 23 couples had separated after four years, and after eight years, another 16 had separated. In the study, the researchers measured the [separated parents'](#) relationships quality before they went separate ways, and compared the results with those who still lived together.

The study found certain similarities:

"When the child was 4 years old, both sexuality and sensuality were at constant low levels both among the couples who separated and those who had not," says Malin Hansson, doctoral student at the Sahlgrenska Academy.

Less togetherness

The largest statistically significant differences were seen in the dimensions of Satisfaction, Consensus and Cohesion: when the child was 6 months old, the separated respondents agreed less about different matters, they were less satisfied with the relationship, and felt less togetherness and lower quality in their sexual lives compared with those who did not separate.

Higer risk of separating

The study showed that the risk of separating was twice as high among co-habiting partners as married spouses. A low level of education and unemployment were also risk factors (which agrees with Statistics Sweden's statistics from 2012).

Using the parents' answers to the question "What factors do you think contributed to your current situation (both positive and negative)?", the Gothenburg researchers were able to formulate seven factors that contribute to separation. They were: strains from parenthood, stressful conditions, lack of intimacy, insufficient communication, differing personalities and interests, no commitment (in the relationship), and negative effects of addiction.

"Unnecessary divorces"

"If you were to generalize, you could say that the separated fathers wanted to have more time for themselves, while the mothers wanted more time together with both their partner and with their children," says Malin Hansson:

"It is not always bad that parents separate. But there are "unnecessary

divorces" that are a result of communication problems or a temporary downturn in the relationship, which could be avoided with more support. The healthcare system also has a responsibility here. Healthcare staff come into contact with most prospective and new [parents](#), and should take on the task of supporting them in the relationship by for example emphasizing the importance of sharing responsibility for the home and the children, arranging relief and emphasizing the importance of maintaining sensuality and a shared sex life."

Provided by University of Gothenburg

Citation: Researchers' advice to save the relationships of parents of small children (2016, January 12) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-advice-relationships-parents-small-children.html>

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