Unspoken: the Untold Effects of Divorce on Teenage Girls

In the 21st century, divorce is almost as common as marriage. We hear every day about the next celebrity or office worker who is divorcing their spouse. So what does this mean for the kids left behind? Studies show that the very nature of divorce causes teen girls to deal with mature issues at a young age, thus increasing the likelihood of risky behavior and harmful circumstances. There are certain issues that arise for girls despite the best intentions of divorced parents.

One of these issues is feeling caught in the middle of parental conflict. In an intact family, children view parents as a single unit. To achieve this perception, parents usually try to present themselves in agreement by covering for each other’s mistakes and settling conflict behind closed doors. In a divorce situation, marriage falls apart and the conflict is spilled directly on top of the child. Instead of trying to brush away faults, parents may now have a vested interest in exposing the mistakes of the other. Suddenly each parent is sending their child very different messages and teens are forced to sift through their parents’ arguments to decide who is right and which parent they should side with.

Elizabeth Marquardt conducted a survey studying 1,500 young adults from both divorced and intact families. One of the statements participants were asked to react to was, “At times one of my parents would ask me to keep important secrets from the other parent.” To this statement, 27.1 percent of children from divorced families agreed, as opposed to the 9.6 percent from intact families. Keeping secrets brings division between parents and children (Marquardt 91-99, 200).

Teens feel as though they need to decide between parents when a divorce occurs. They are not accustomed to having to reconcile their parents’ conflicts, so they react by
choosing one parent to side with. Even if the divorce is a “good divorce” – one with minimal conflict – any divorce is evidence of conflict, and teens have to decide who is right and who is wrong. Frequently, teens are even explicitly asked to choose one parent over the other. In Elizabeth Marquardt’s study, one-third of children from divorced homes were asked which parent they wanted to live with (Marquardt, 206).

Another contributing factor to feeling caught in the middle is the fact that divorced parents attempt very limited interaction, even when trying to mediate time with their children. Thus, teens are forced to carry messages back and forth between parents and initiate communication when necessary.

Custody arrangements vary widely. They range from teens switching houses every other year, to living with only one parent and visiting the other just a few times. But one aspect remains the same whenever contact with both parents is maintained: the need to travel between houses. Children are forced to pack up and move during every visitation. Besides this, most kids report feeling more at home at their mother’s house than with their father, meaning they spend a lot of time at a house where they feel uncomfortable (Marquardt 68).

Keeping secrets, feeling forced to choose between parents, and traveling between houses all point to the child’s position of being on the outskirts of their family. One possible result of divorce is that teens will grow rebellious. From their perspective, the family structure is falling apart and so are the boundaries that were formerly present. Even if rules are kept in place, the teen is less likely to obey them. Teens reason that if the parents can “break the rules” of marriage and relationships, why should they not follow suit? Teens from divorced homes are more likely to engage in drug use, alcohol
abuse, robbery, and crimes eligible for prison sentences. In fact, 70% of long-term prison inmates were brought up in broken homes (Fagan; Bilotta).

Another serious consequence of divorce is the suicide rate. Various studies indicate that girls in divorce situations are twice as likely to commit suicide than girls in stable families. According to the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, individuals from single-parent homes commit 63% of all suicides. This doesn’t take into account the numerous suicidal thoughts that thankfully never come to fruition. One sentiment behind this suicide rate is rejection by one or both parents. During a divorce process, parents will inevitably spend less time and attention on their children since they are busy grieving themselves. After the divorce, single parents spend even more time away from their children, working longer hours to sustain a family, seeking a new spouse, and participating in recreational activities. Girls may take this diminished interaction as a form of rejection. In fact, the rejection felt from parents divorcing is more pungent than the pain resulting from the death of a parent. Loneliness, caused by switching between homes during visitation, is also a major contributor to the high suicide rate. Being on the outside of their family can produce a particular loneliness that comes from feeling like strangers in their own home (Bilotta; “A Generation at Risk;” “The Hidden Effects”).

These side effects of divorce occur much too frequently in the lives of teen girls. The feeling of being caught in between their parents and thus being alienated from them contributes much crime, brokenness, and loneliness to their lives. Nearly half of all the girls born in the United States are growing up without involved fathers since mothers earn custody more frequently than fathers. Females miss the affection of a male figure in their lives. They look to fill this void with romantic relationships, which causes a spike in
the teen pregnancy rate among this segment of the population. According to Morse’s book, *Parents or Prisons*, fatherless girls are over seven times (711%) more likely to experience teen pregnancy than girls from intact families. There are several reasons why fatherlessness contributes to early pregnancy. The most obvious is the need for a male figure in a girl’s life. Out of the girls whose fathers live outside the home, 40% have no contact with them, while the other 60% reported having contact an average of sixty-nine days per year. Even when girls regularly visit or live with their fathers, the contact is much less than in situations with married biological parents. Often girls are looking for the love, comfort, affirmation, and security that they didn’t receive from their absent fathers (Morse qdt in “Parenting Statistics”; Halle).

Surprisingly, teen girls tend to follow their mother’s example in the area of romantic relationships. Single mothers frequently look for a partner soon after the divorce. Lisa Mancini says in her thesis, “A man is a crucial ingredient to a strong nuclear family. Mothers who are not with a man may date several men to find a suitable mate for her and her children” (Mancini 10-11). Mancini then goes on to describe how girls watch their mothers’ patterns and mimic them in their own relationships. These girls begin dating at an earlier age and change partners more often, thus increasing the risk of early pregnancy.

Another important factor in why the risk of pregnancy is dramatically increased after divorce is because girls actually go through puberty prematurely. The absence of a father, and especially the presence of a stepfather, causes girls to undergo adolescent changes earlier than females from intact families. In a study on this topic, Ellis states, ‘The theory that we’re working from suggests that something about the children’s
experiences in their families, and particularly about the presence of different members of
the families in the home, actually alters the reproductive axis and timing of puberty”
(Ellis qtd in Mancini 9).

The fact that teen pregnancy is seven times more likely to occur when the father is
absent is quite a sobering statistic. But some statistics about the general safety of kids in
broken homes are equally shocking. Girls who have gone through their parents’ divorce
and live in female-headed homes are ten times more likely to be beaten or murdered.
There are no specific conclusions about why this is true, but it can perhaps be assumed to
be because they lack the protection of a father and are exposed to riskier environments.
Out of the young adults studied by Marquardt, half of those from divorced homes said
they “had a harder childhood than most people,” and 28.3% disagreed with the statement,
“I generally felt emotionally safe.” Over 10% disagreed with the statement, “I generally
felt physically safe,” as opposed to the 3.1% of kids from intact families (Bilotta;
Marquardt qtd in “Children of Divorce;” Marquardt 221-222).

In remarriage situations, fear for physical safety is quite legitimate. About 75% of
divorceses will remarry within four years of the divorce. This means children are put in
contact with strange adults. Stepparents are 100 times more likely to abuse their
stepchildren than biological children. Mesa Community College cites statistics that
stepfathers account for 41% of child sexual abuse, and girls are six to seven times more
likely to be sexually abused by a stepfather. Bill Muehlenburg writes that children are
much safer with both biological parents in the home, and at far greater risk of any type of
abuse when a stepparent is involved. Teen girls in divorced homes are about six times
more likely to be kidnapped by one of their biological parents. Even when not actually
Kidnapped, comments made by the other parent often necessitates that teens consider the possibility of abduction (“Remarriage;” Tudge; Fagan; “Correlation Between;” Muehlenberg; Marquardt 223).

The facts are clear: divorce increases the risk of homicide, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and kidnapping. This environment permanently affects the attitude of teen girls. Teens from divorced homes are more anxious, withdrawn, depressed, and likely to abuse substances. The extent is hard to measure because surveys would need to get this information from parents who may have vested interest in keeping certain information to themselves. It is imperative that society takes steps to reduce the abusive situations that children of divorced parents often find themselves in – both for the safety of the children and the general welfare of our country, a country which is inheriting a generation of scarred adults (Kirby).

The statistics are staggering. Divorce is causing girls to experience strictly adverse side effects. Parental betrayal, an increase in criminal activity, a higher suicide rate, astounding numbers of teen pregnancies, and rampant child abuse are just some of the most observable symptoms. But what about the teens who experience divorce and silently suffer? One result is threaded through the story of every girl who has grown up in this type of family: they grow up more quickly. They learn how to adapt to their new situation by acting different around each parent and stepparent. Divorce significantly decreases parental involvement, which means teens spend more time alone and are not disciplined as often. They learn to fend for themselves when their family splits apart. Their family situation suddenly becomes precarious. In Marquardt’s study, individuals who grew up with divorced parents said they felt responsibly to protect the emotions of
their parents, that they they did not play as much as young children, and that they always felt like little adults. Childhood is cut short when girls are awakened to trouble within the place they used to feel most secure: the home (Marquardt 54, 123-129; Hughes).

Society needs to take measures to reverse these problems. The first step is to change the way our country views divorce. Today, divorce is seen as a convenient way to end an inconvenient marriage. Couples divorce without pursuing the marriage counseling that could repair a relationship and without even knowing the true problems in their marriage. This hurts the adults, who experience the same problems in remarriage, and it hurts the children who have to deal with dozens of adverse results (Warren; “The Hidden Effects”). The majority of potential divorcees do not even stop to seriously consider the consequences for the children. Even if they do, they often value the convenience of divorce over the emotional and physical health of their children. This must stop.

Additionally, modern America requires an increase in responsible fatherhood. Divorce has left a path of broken, fatherless teens in its path. Men need to step up to the plate, even in the lives of children who are not their own. Society must be educated about the effects of divorce so that we can come alongside these girls. It is necessary that lonely teen girls have a friend to cry with, someone to love them, and someone to hold onto when everything else seems to be crashing down. With changes in how society thinks about divorce and parenting, we could see a major decline in the problematic effects of divorce on teen girls.
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