

Brianna Smith

Professor Walch

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### Why Children Shouldn't Be Involved in Divorce

*Divorce*. What comes to mind when you hear this word? You probably move to avoid it or cringe at what's become much more than a dirty word. Nowadays, divorce is more than just a dirty word; it's become far less taboo, but still remains a hot topic. Rather, an explosive topic depending on who you talk to. For me, what comes to mind is the toxic throws and turmoil my little brother and I went through at 5 and 9, respectfully. How they involved us in every aspect not only destroyed our relationships with our parents, but also with each other. Through poor communication, brainwashing, and a constant tug of war where we were the rope, it never came as a surprise that my brother and I would struggle with our mental, emotional, and physical health. There are ways to healthily divorce without involving your children, but those aren't very well-versed in divorce culture. Had my parents had a healthy and easy divorce, things could've been much different, but the fact of the matter is: it wasn't healthy or easy. Fueled by competitive urges, money, fragile egos, and jealousy, that divorce broke more than a home. Sadly, my experience isn't just my own. Many others like me and my brother went through the same experience or even worse. Why? Involving your children in divorce can be a losing battle.

When people think of divorcing with children, one thing they fear most is the fighting and the issues between parents continuing on after the dissolution of the relationship. While valid and ultimately quite common, what isn't always the first to come to mind is '*How will my child/children react? What will this be like for them?*' As understandable as it may be to some

for that not to be the initial concern, if not acknowledged, it can leave children feeling overlooked and undervalued. Not only that, but if the fighting or any issues are still left unresolved, it can leave lasting psychological effects on everyone involved. In an article by Matthijs Kalmijn, titled, “Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Parent—Child Relationships: Within-Family Comparisons of Fathers and Mothers”, Kalmijn states, “... emotional problems on the part of the parents not only affects children’s well-being in a negative way, but also lead to less attention and emotional support from parents ... one would expect that a divorce leads to poor relationships with fathers and mothers,” (Kalmijn, 2013). Seeing as these are more of the psychological inquiries and disadvantages within families, they don’t fully cover the mental and emotional disadvantages surrounding children of divorce.

With mental and emotional health awareness and acceptance building more over the past several years, mental-emotional health struggles have subsequently become more prevalent among children of divorce. Regardless of age, children of divorce are more susceptible to declines in both mental and emotional health. In an article titled, “Protecting Children From the Consequences of Divorce: A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Parenting on Children’s Coping Processes”, the authors state, “... stressful events, such as divorce, can lead to an ... increase susceptibility to mental health problems and impairment in developmental competencies,” (Velez, et al., 2011). These mental-emotional health problems can include depression, anxiety, attachment issues, and even heavy separation anxiety. Alongside that, these can also set narratives for children of divorce, as they grow both physically and cognitively. There doesn’t have to be a narrative in place. However, with the psychological, the mental, and the emotional vulnerabilities that come in to play in such a heavy topic as divorce, it’s very

common for narratives to be placed and also heavily pushed. With the mental and emotional damage that many children of divorce experience, this also ties in with physical health.

Something commonly overlooked within children of divorce is the physical toll that the mental and emotional aspects bring about. Without delving into personal experience too much, I can say I have first-hand experience with the physical toll that divorce can take on a child. Some physical effects on children of divorce, from both my brother's perspective and my own, can include eating disorders, lack of sleep, getting sick more often, and even having volatile anxiety attacks that make you sick. To further explain the volatility of the physical effects of divorce on children, an organization in Minnesota by the name of FamilyMeans, states, "Children who have experienced divorce have a higher perceptibility to sickness, which can stem from many factors, including their difficulty going to sleep. Also, signs of depression can appear, exacerbating these feelings of loss of well-being, and deteriorating health signs," (FamilyMeans). To further elaborate, an article titled, "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children: An Update" states, "... individuals who experienced parental divorce... are at greater risk of becoming depressed, and have poorer physical health," (Amato, 2012). With that being said, the use of language comes into play here. If the divorce is toxic, children may feel too scared to speak up if they are feeling unwell, for fear of being overlooked or being accused of seeking attention or lying. This use of language, or rather lack thereof, can set a tone for relationships, both parent-children and sibling relationships.

Touching again on narratives and how they can not only set a tone among these relationships, but it can also set a bias. Referring back to Kalmijn's statement about divorce affecting relationships between parents and children, nothing was inherently mentioned about sibling relationships when involved in divorced. Roles can change unknowingly, parental loyalty and

alienation can ensue, and even estrangement can occur. Though all three of those occurred between my brother and I, one of them outside of the messiness of our parent's divorce, they all destroyed what we once were. Thankfully, we're repairing and healing our sibling relationship, but that doesn't dismiss the damage that was done due to the long-running cycle we were thrown into. Being the older sibling, I found myself looking out for my brother way more once our parents split up, but it was more so that I had slipped into this role I had no place taking on. It wasn't a matter of "*Oh, I need to be a mom when we're with dad, because mom's not around.*" It was more a matter of, "*My world is falling apart, I need to make sure his doesn't fall apart too.*" It was more of an unconscious role assignment and it put a strain on my relationship with my brother. Aside from that, it further proves that there are conscious and unconscious narratives set with children of divorce.

Continuing on the path of strained relationships, it's difficult to avoid the subject of strained parent-child relationships within divorce. Another major concept to touch on within the mental-emotional struggle children of divorce face is language. Language and how we use it can shape relationships, but also shape future. With language and narratives playing two major roles with relationships among divorced families, they also play a key role in making decisions. These decisions can be, at times, detrimental and only to benefit putting the other parent down. An article from the National Institutes of Health titled, "Sibling Separation Due to Parental Divorce: Diagnostic Aspects", states, "As a result of the parental conflict during divorce, the decisions made by them are not always in the best interest of the children but constitute a beneficial solution from the parents' perspective," (Lewandowska-Walter and Blazek, 2023). What could be viewed as a beneficial solution from a parental perspective, can also be one-sided. Take it from someone who watched the fragile ego, greed, and competitive nature of one parent end up,

causing the spiral and fall out of the other parent. Those decisions and false narratives cause the strain of not just our relationships with each other, but also friends and family. In an attempt to link any information regarding neurodivergent children and the impact divorce had on their relationships, I found article titled, “Autism and ADHD: A Literature Review Regarding Their Impacts on Parental Divorce”. The article states, “Family breakdown as a result of divorce represents a traumatic event for a child in itself. This may involve the loss of the known family environment, the need to cope with a forced separation from either parent, and, not infrequently, experiencing parental conflict, which, in some cases, may extend over years, mining the child’s sense of emotional security,” (Anchesi, Smeralda Diandra, et al., 2023). With all of this being said, there are positive and more healthy ways to involve children in divorce, if there is absolute need for it.

With divorce rates rising more and more, it still feels uncommon for parents to achieve healthily co-parent after ending the marriage. In reference to the Lewandowska-Walter and Blazek quote from earlier, sometimes that isn’t always the case. For example, I found it almost unfathomable and unfair for my aunt and uncle to keep their divorce a secret from my younger cousin, continuing to living together. Growing up and having gone through our own parents’ divorce, my brother and I were forced not to say a word to our cousin about his parents’ divorce. While they would disagree and have heated arguments at times, in a way, it worked out in the best interest for their child. Our cousin turned out fine after he was finally sat down and talked about it after he started having secret revelations about it when he was in his early teen years. So, it is absolutely possible to healthily co-parent within divorce. It is also possible to stay together and keep the divorce under wraps until all of the children have turned 18 and/or moved out. Is it truly *healthy*? Depends on who you ask, but I’ve known a few families who’ve stayed together

post-divorce and turned out alright. At the same time, I know others who've had their parents stay together post-divorce and wished to have them split up completely, due to continuing turmoil.

So, divorce. Quite possibly the dirtiest word in my vocabulary, so hopefully you understand why abstain from talking about it. However, that does not mean I'm not passionate about what scared me to speak on. Don't, by any means, shield your children from the inevitable and suffer putting up with each other until they've all moved out, but don't involve your children too much in what might be an already toxic cycle. To wrap things up, I will say this: Divorce, like Crayola markers, should be non-toxic.

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