Divorce Doesn't Stop at Home

By Robert B. McCall and Gwendolyn Gilliam
Sheila was an effusive two-year-old who celebrated every experience of object, texture, and color throughout her days at preschool. Then, abruptly, she stopped attending.

She returned eighteen months later, but as a different person. Her infectious enthusiasm had been buried under a mountain of hostility. The once adorable Sheila would stand up and scream if the teacher gave another child attention. “I’m going to kill you,” she would shout at her teacher. Sheila began throwing furniture. Once she threw a chair at a child, and relived the event for several days, saying, “I hit him. I made him bleed.”

Sheila’s parents had just divorced.

The drastic emotional pain that transformed Sheila from a flower to a thorn is extreme and unusual. But divorce and its disrupting effects on children’s behavior and happiness are not.

Approximately one out of four children born between 1910 and 1960 lived in a single-parent family at one time or another. But a third to half of the children born in the 1970s will do so.

Divorce is now so common that it has sometimes been romanticized as a route to freedom, self-fulfillment, and “the new you.” Once, spouses stayed together for the sake of the children. Today, people seem to feel their children “will manage somehow.”

But psychologists and sociologists who have studied divorce do not agree with these fanciful interpretations. Although most families eventually adjust and live happy and productive lives, the transition from a two- to a one-parent family is usually disruptive for adults and children alike.

That divorce affects children is hardly news to day care, nursery, or elementary teachers. The aftermath of divorce has seeped into their centers and classrooms for years. Since the average marriage that ends in divorce does so after seven years, most children of divorce are likely to be in preschools and elementary schools at the time.

Teachers of young children have long suspected that divorce increases hostility and aggressiveness and hampers a youngster’s ability to concentrate and maintain attention on a single task. New evidence not only confirms these suspicions, it goes much further. But the situation is not entirely bleak. There are ways to help.

In the Classroom

For most children, divorce means separation from Dad, and that tends to hamper their academic achievements. Dr. Mary Beth Shinn of the University of Michigan has investigated the subject. She concludes that although “early, long, and complete absences are particularly detrimental, any absence of a father can have harmful effects upon a child’s intellectual growth.”

Teachers have long recognized that children of divorce have a difficult time concentrating on their work, but there are other effects, too. For example, school-aged children of divorce are often behind academically, sometimes by as much as a year, with special problems in quantitative and problem-solving areas. Even divorced children as young as four to six years old score lower on tests of arithmetic, designs, and mazes that require sustained concentration.

No one knows exactly why this pattern of scoring higher on verbal and lower on spatial tasks emerges after divorce, but it occurs especially in boys. One reason may be that most children of divorce tend to be reared in the custody of their mothers who tend to emphasize verbal rather than mathematical skills. Also, research shows that mental performance may begin deteriorating even a year before the separation and divorce, presumably because the stress produced by parental conflict interferes with attention and concentration.

Scientists know that school-aged children whose fathers display active concern for their child’s performance by attending conferences and the like, do somewhat better at school. And children of divorce adjust faster to their new situation if the father continues to have an active, caring mature involvement with the child. Recent research by Dr. Robert Hess of Stanford University indicates that a child may cope quite well if the relationship with at least one of his or her parents is warm, secure, and healthy, although a positive relationship with both parents is even better.

Dr. Mavis Hetherington, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, suggests that young children need a highly structured environment to learn the internal discipline and control required for sustained attention and competent problem solving. While some single moms are able to organize their households immediately, Hetherington found that many are not. Furthermore, she has observed that it is those single-parent homes that are highly disorganized, lack standardized routines and defined household roles, and are characterized by inconsistent and erratic discipline which produce children who are more distractable in school and poorer in problem-solving skills.

Such circumstances are common in the homes of the newly divorced. Researchers don’t know whether a highly organized nursery school experience can compensate for domestic disorder, but it seems worth a try.

On the Playground

Research shows that children of divorce, especially preschool boys, may be behavior problems at school. They may be disobedient and hostile, both physically and verbally. On the average they are less happy, less affectionate, less sharing, less smiling, and less cooperative.

One teacher remembers such a boy:

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