

2009

# Effects Of Divorce On Age and Gender On Childhood Aggression

Ashley Stapleton

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Effects Of Divorce On Age and Gender On Childhood Aggression

Thesis submitted to the  
Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
The requirements for the degree of  
Education Specialist  
In School Psychology

by

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Marshall University

August 2009

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## **Abstract**

The goal of this study was to investigate the effects of divorce on children in regard to aggression. Specifically, the roles of age and gender in relation to the amount and type of aggression the children displayed were examined. The Aggression Questionnaire was administered to a nonclinical sample of 35 children ranging in age from 7 to 14 years old. The subjects consisted of a divorce and nondivorce group of 17 boys and 18 girls each. All subjects attended elementary school in middle-class Charleston, WV and/or Lanesville, IN. All subjects were tested individually using the Aggression Questionnaire. Subjects included age, gender, and parental marital status on each questionnaire. There was no significant effect of divorce on any measure of aggression. Girls had significantly higher hostility scores than boys after adjusting for divorce and age, but there were no between-sex differences in any other measure.

### **Effects Of Divorce On Age and Gender On Childhood Aggression**

During the last decade there has been a significant increase in divorce rates with more than 50% of marriages ending up in divorce (Goode, 1993). Several studies have shown that divorce is associated with problems in children's psychological functioning. Children from divorced families have more behavior problems, more social difficulties, more psychological distress, and poorer academic performance. Adolescents from divorced families are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior and early sex and to exhibit emotional distress and academic difficulties.

#### **Age Differences**

**Preschool and younger.** Rohrlich, Ranier, Berg-Cross, and Berg-Cross (1977), reviewed the available literature on divorce with particular emphasis on how children at different stages are differentially affected by divorce. The following four developmental stages were reviewed: infancy, preschool years, school-aged children, and adolescents. The results show that divorce during pregnancy or within the first six months spare the child possible separation anxiety and therefore severe trauma, unless the primary caretaker is so overwhelmed by the experience that she may suffer depression and be unable to adequately care for the child. Even then research shows that infants from divorced families prosper as much as other infants do in a good day care facility, and that day care service may provide a healthy mother substitute during the crisis period.

When the child moves into the preschool years the consequences of divorce shift because the child of this age is more aware of the loss of a parent. Most preschoolers will be affected in some manner; however, long term effects are not known. Those children most vulnerable seem to be those who are the least well adjusted prior to the divorce.

There is some evidence that divorce may be particularly difficult for very young children. Children who were younger (toddler or preschool age) at the time of the marital disruption were more severely emotionally disturbed than those who were older (school age) (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). The effects of marital disruption on behavior problems, psychological distress, and academic performance were larger for children who were under age 5 at the time of the marital dissolution (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). Children who experienced parental divorce before age 6 exhibited more behavioral disturbance than children whose parents divorced later (Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, & Vitaro., 1997). Even controlling for predivorce and premarriage factors, these children became more anxious, hyperactive, and oppositional over the course of middle childhood.

**Latency.** When children enter school the influence of the parents lessens and the influence of teachers and peers becomes increasingly important. Part of the interaction with peers includes comparisons of one's self and one's family. This can present an additional burden for those children whose parents are divorced. School-aged children were broken into two groups: early latency (7 and 8 years old) and late latency (9 and 10 years old). Families were observed shortly after the initial separation, 12-18 months later, and planned for future interviews. While the younger children were sad and without defenses against their feelings, the 9 and 10 year old children used denial, avoidance, courage, and activity to master their feelings. Demanding and aggressive behavior in both older and younger children was

increased due to the lack of disciplinary experience of most of the mothers. At the follow-up one year later all but 4 of the 15 children who had shown an academic decline had returned to their prior levels of performance (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976).

**Adolescence.** Achieving independence from parents is the major goal of adolescents. Adolescents displayed aggressive and anti-social behavior due to the loss of necessary behavioral constraints and positive models (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974). These adolescents had not fully established their own inner controls.

The length of time since the divorce is another major factor that has an effect on children of divorce. In general, it does appear that most children can adjust to divorce over a period of years. Older children whose parents have been divorced a long time may come to function quite well despite experiencing lingering emotional traces of sorrow and anger (Royal & Knoff, 1990).

### **Aggression**

Most definitions of aggression share two common features: the behavior is intended to harm and the behavior is perceived as hurtful by the victim. Children can be extraordinarily mean to one another. Mean behaviors can take a variety of forms: physical aggression, verbal insults, relationship manipulation, and nonverbal expression of disdain or contempt (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001).

**Pre-Adolescence.** Physical aggression is more normative and frequent during the preschool years but more deviant and rare later (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). Physical aggression may begin in early childhood and remain stable or increase with development, or may be evident in childhood and decline later (Loeber & Hay, 1997). By the

middle elementary school years, most children refrain from physical aggression (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Once children develop verbal skills, they may choose to use a more indirect approach to harm others because they often believe that the risk of punishment may be less than that of physical aggression (Bjorkqvist, 1994).

Tremblay, Nagin, Seguin, Zoccolillo, Zelazo, & Boivin (2004) found the following: most children have initiated the use of physical aggression during infancy, and most will learn to use alternatives in the following years before entering primary school. Humans seem to learn to regulate the use of physical aggression during the preschool years. Those who do not, seem to be at highest risk of serious violent behavior during adolescence and adulthood. Children who are at highest risk of not learning to regulate physical aggression in early childhood have mothers with a history of antisocial behavior during their school years, mothers who start childbearing early and who smoke during pregnancy, and parents who have low income and have serious living problems. (p.43)

**Post-Adolescence.** Physical aggression may appear for the first time during adolescence (Loeber & Hay, 1997). According to Underwood, Galen, & Paquette (2001) indirect, relational and social aggression may be more developmentally normative in older age groups than physical aggression. Forms of aggressive behavior among older children become infrequent and covert.

**Male.** Gender differences in physical aggression are fairly clear: boys fight more than girls do (Coie & Dodge, 1998). The most typical form of aggression in males is physical

aggression (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette 2001). Boys hold more instrumental representations of aggression (Archer & Parker, 1994).

**Females.** The most typical forms of aggression in females include the following: indirect aggression, relational aggression, and social aggression (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). Girls are more likely to use relational aggression because it harms friendships and peer status, which they value dearly (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Girls hold more expressive representations of aggression (Archer & Parker, 1994).

### **Divorce Effects on Aggression**

Children's age at the time of their parents' divorce and children's gender have emerged as important considerations in attempts to understand how experiencing parents divorce affects children's adjustment (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). When parents split and one goes away, it's as if children lose a part of themselves. It's normal for kids to feel angry, sad, confused, and even responsible in some ways. Feelings of anger, sadness, betrayal, loss, and sometimes rejection and abandonment are all part of the trauma of divorce. For many teens, these feelings persist even though their parents divorced 4, 8, or even 10 years ago (Gaskins, 1996).

Royal and Knoff (1990) found the following: parents' own emotional stability is clearly important to their children's divorce adjustment. Many divorced parents may need up to two years to overcome the emotional effects of divorce. During the first year, these parents may be less able to accomplish their parenting tasks, more likely to make unrealistic maturity demands on their children, be more inconsistent with

discipline approaches, and less affectionate and involved with them. By the end of the second post-divorce year, these difficulties begin to resolve. (p. 293)

The relationship between marital status and children's behavior problems, taking into account the mothers' own histories of antisocial behavior, was examined. The authors found a greater level of child behavior problems among divorced than married families. Similarly, a greater level of mothers' past delinquent behavior was found among divorced than married mothers. The authors also found that children's behavior problems were significantly associated with marital status and mothers' delinquency. However, mothers' delinquency was also found to be significantly related to children's behavioral problems (Emery, Waldron, Kitzmann, & Aaron 1999).

The relationship existing between family structures as expressed in cohesion and adaptability, and the emotional state parental anger with children's behavior problems was examined. Higher anger levels were expected to create more behavior problems since it has been shown that angry mothers tend to judge children more negatively which leads to negative parent-child interaction. Another factor that might influence adjustment is imitation, as postulated in social learning theory. The theory predicts that an angry parent serves as a negative role model, directly affecting children's manifest behavior and adjustment. One explanation is that divorced mothers have difficulties in establishing parental controls and disciplining their male child in the absence of a father figure. The results showed that mothers reported the fewest behavior problems at the highest level of cohesion, and the most behavior problems at the lowest levels of cohesion. They also reported the fewest behavior problems at the highest level of adaptability, and the most behavior problems at the lowest

level of adaptability (Dreman, 2003).

**Pre-Adolescence.** Children who experience their parents' divorce as preschoolers show more long-term adjustment difficulties compared to children who are older when their parents divorce (Malone, Lansford, Castellino, Berlin, Dodge, & Bates, 2004). Elementary school-age children experience anxiety and concern about separating from the parents. Older children, at the ages of nine and ten, get a rise in anger, especially at the parent who children think is responsible for the divorce. The kids see no logic in terms of why their parents got a divorce. You will also find a rise in aggression on the playground, minor delinquencies, and difficulties in learning among boys.

**Post-Adolescence.** As adolescents, some children of divorce are in trouble, depressed, and not doing well in school, or have behavior problems. Many were happy, achieving children. Closeness between children and their custodial parent turned out to be a primary factor predicting adolescents' well-being (Buchanan, 1997). Closeness predicted less depression, especially for mother-custody adolescents. When custodial parents were close to their children, they were more aware of their friends, activities, and whereabouts. The more aware the parent, the less likely the adolescent was to be in trouble. Having organized routines in the household was also good for the children. Family decision-making practices that involved the parent and the adolescent were linked to better adjustment. Adolescents who experience loyalty conflicts were more depressed and more likely to have behavior problems than adolescents who did not experience them.

### **Gender Effects on Aggression**

Disruption caused by divorce affects children both before and after the fact (Shansky & College, 2002). In the case of boys' conduct problems, the authors found a significant relationship with parenting practices. They suggested that divorce tends to impair mothers' and fathers' parenting, through mothers' depression and fathers' reduced involvement. In the case of girls' conduct problems, a significant association was found with parental conflict. The authors concluded that impaired parenting is responsible for much of the negative effects of divorce on children. The relationship between stressful divorce related events and adjustment problems were stronger in the case of older children and higher levels of negative cognitive errors.

**Males.** Divorce affects boys significantly more than girls. Boys experience more long-term developmental and adjustment problems (Royal & Knoff, 1990). The repercussions of the divorce process depend on several factors, the first being the age of the child at the time of the divorce. Infants' reactions to divorce can be related to their primary caregiver's emotional status and adjustment. School-aged children are at greater social and academic risk. They commonly react with depression, withdrawal, grieving, fear, fantasies of responsibility for the break-up and of possible reconciliation, anger, shame, decreased school performance, a sense of loss or rejection, and conflicts over which parent to express loyalty to. Adolescents' reactions can be similar to those of younger children and they may feel anxious about the future and their own potential marriages. Adolescents' may more easily adjust to their parents' divorce.

**Females.** Over time, girls appear able to make a satisfactory adjustment. Within the home, girls respond more favorably to permissive child-rearing styles, while boys do

better with an authoritative approach that directs the child using reason, problem-solving, yet firm structure. The authoritarian attitude stressing punishment, force, and rejection to control a child's behavior has been unproductive with either sex (Royal & Knoff, 1990).

The present paper examined the effects divorce has on children, and if the age and gender of the child had an effect on the amount and type of aggression the child displayed. It was hypothesized that younger children and boys would display more physical aggression and older children and girls would display more verbal aggression. Children from divorced families would be more aggressive than children from intact families. The previous literature reviews attempt to demonstrate and support these hypotheses.

### **Methods**

#### **Subjects**

The subjects used in this study were 35 school children, 21 from broken homes (divorced children: 11 girls, 10 boys) and 14 from intact homes (nondivorce children: 6 girls, 8 boys) between the ages of 7 and 14 years-old. A convenience sample was drawn from two different schools due to internship location. All subjects attended elementary school located in predominantly middle-class Charleston, WV and Lanesville, IN.

#### **Procedure**

Having obtained the cooperation of the schools, information about the project was sent to the parents of all children attending those schools. Upon agreement of the parents to their child's participation in the study, the children were tested on school premises and during school hours.

All subjects were tested individually using the Aggression Questionnaire. The test was administered by a female experimenter who was unaware of which group (divorce or

nondivorce) the children belonged to. Subjects included their age, gender, and parental marital status on the subject identification section of the questionnaire.

### **Instrument**

The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) is an instrument for assessing anger and aggression. The AQ is an updated version of the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (BDHI) (Buss and Durkee, 1957). This version of the AQ is a 34-item instrument. Each AQ item describes a characteristic related to aggression. The subject rates the description on an intensity scale ranging from 1 to 5; with 1 indicating Not at all like me to 5, indicating Completely like me. The 34-item instrument is intended to sufficiently cover the following five scales: Physical Aggression (PHY), Verbal Aggression (VER), Anger (ANG), Hostility (HOS), and Indirect Aggression (IND). The total AQ score is a summary measure of the overall level of anger and aggression expressed by the subject. The norms for the AQ are based on a standardization sample of individuals ages 9-88; however, the AQ has been used in research for children under the age of 9 (Reynes & Lorant, 2004; Reynes & Lorant, 2001). Reliability is generally adequate and the items are worded in a clear, specific manner. The Aggression Questionnaire scales have been found to have moderate to high reliability, both from internal consistency estimates and test-retest correlations over a period of seven months. The scales also appear to have convergent validity with other self-report measures of aggression. Finally, the standardization sample was underrepresented by minorities, which limits its use with these populations. Overall, the AQ is a suitable measure for assessing anger.

### **Results**

### Differences between divorce and nondivorce children

A series of two-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed with parental status (divorce or nondivorce) and subject gender as the independent variables and age as the covariate. The dependent variables examined were physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility, and indirect aggression. Children from divorced homes did not have significantly higher levels of aggression than children from nondivorced homes as shown in Table 1. No significant interaction effects were found between the child's gender and family status (divorce and nondivorced). However, girls ( $M=57$ ,  $SD=12$ ) had significantly higher hostility scores than boys ( $M=46$ ,  $SD=8$ ),  $p=.008$  after adjusting for divorce and age, but there were no between-sex differences in any other measures.

TABLE 1  
Means and Standard Deviations of the Aggression Scores

Scores	Divorce <sup>1</sup>	Nondivorce <sup>2</sup>	Total <sup>3</sup>	p-Value
Physical				
M	49.86	50.71	50.20	.955 ns
SD	10.84	12.64	11.42	
Verbal				
M	52.14	50.79	51.60	.533 ns
SD	10.62	6.96	9.24	
Anger				
M	48.10	53.93	50.43	.123 ns
SD	11.41	8.40	10.58	
Hostility				
M	51.62	53.21	52.26	.716 ns
SD	12.73	10.66	11.80	
Indirect				
M	46.86	49.86	48.06	.571 ns
SD	13.07	12.61	12.79	

<sup>1</sup>n=21, <sup>2</sup>n=14, <sup>3</sup>N=35, ns=not significant

### Discussion

The findings do not support the assumptions that parental divorce is associated with increased levels of aggression in children involved. Limitations of this study include the small number of enrolled subjects. Also, previous studies have suggested that the length of time since divorce plays a role in the development of aggression in children of divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989); however, this was not controlled for or examined in the present study. It is conceivable that although many divorce children are more aggressive than children from nondivorce families, these differences between the groups are not observable at a manifest level after a certain lapse of time following the breakup (Spigelman, Spigelman, & Engleson, 1991). The present study finds no significant differences in regard to aggressive behavior between children in divorce or nondivorce homes; therefore it appears that most children can adjust to divorce.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, there was no significant effect of divorce on any measure of aggression. Girls had significantly higher hostility scores than boys after adjusting for divorce and age, which is in contrast to the existing literature which suggest that males have higher levels of hostility. This self-selected sample may not reflect population well in contrast to larger scale samples which were assessing other things too such as length of time since parental divorce. Other factors that may have contributed to different findings when compared to existing literature were small N and low rate of return. However the findings did suggest that children from divorced homes were able to adjust to divorce in regard to aggression. The length of time since divorce is a factor that should be taken into account in future studies.

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Monday, December 01, 2008

Stephen L. O'Keefe, Ph.D.  
Psychology  
MUGC  
South Charleston, WV. 25303

RE: IRB Study # 9366                      At: Marshall IRB 2

Dear Dr. O'Keefe:

**Protocol Title:**  
The Effects of Divorce on Age and Gender on Childhood Aggression

**Expiration Date:** 11/30/2009  
**Our Internal #:** 5429  
**Type of Change:** (Other)    Expedited  
**Expedited ?:**   
**Date of Change:** 12/1/2008  
**Date Received:** 12/1/2008  
**On Meeting Date:** 12/17/2008

**Description:** In accordance with 45CFR46.110(a)(7), the above study and informed consent were granted Expedited approval today by the Marshall University IRB#2 for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire 11/30/09. A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date. This study is for student Ashley Stapleton.

The purpose of this study is to look at the effects of parental divorce on the levels of aggression in children as measured by the Aggression Questionnaire.

Respectfully yours,

Stephen D. Cooper, Ph.D.  
Marshall University IRB #2 Chairperson

**WE ARE... MARSHALL™**

**Parental Consent/Permission**

Age, Gender, and Marital Status Effect Childhood Aggression in  
Elementary Age Children

Dr. Stephen O'Keefe, PhD, Principal Investigator  
Ashley Stapleton, Co-Investigator

Introduction

Your child is invited (with your permission) to be in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. Your child may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. There may also be risks associated with being part of research studies. Participation is voluntary so please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research investigator or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to look at the effects divorce has on children and if the age of the child at the time of divorce has an effect on the amount of aggression the child displays.

How Many Will Take Part In The Study?

Approximately 48 children will take part in this study. A total of 120 subjects are the most that would be able to enter the study.

What Is Involved In This Research Study?

Upon agreement of the parents, each child will be given an Aggression Questionnaire, in which they will rate each question on a scale from 1 to 5; with 1 indicating not at all like me, to 5 indicating completely like me. Each child will specify the following identifying information before completing the survey: grade, age, gender, and parental martial status.

How Long Will Your Child Be In The Study?

Your child will participate in this study for one day only, which will be the day that they answer the questionnaire.

You or your child can decide to stop participation at any time. If you decide to stop your child's participation in the study we encourage you to talk to the study investigator or study staff as soon as possible.



MU IRB  
SJK

DEC 1 2008

**APPROVED**

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

The study investigator may stop your child from taking part in this study at any time if he/she believes it is in your child's best interest; if your child does not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

What Are The Risks Of The Study?

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

Are There Benefits To Taking Part In The Study?

If you agree to allow your child to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefit to them. We hope the information learned from this study will benefit other people in the future.

What About Confidentiality?

We will do our best to make sure that your child's personal information is kept confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your child's study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your child's records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University IRB, Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your child's rights and safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, your child will not be identified by name or in any other way.

What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?

There are no costs to you for allowing your child to take part in this study. All the study costs, including any study tests, supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

Will You Be Paid For Participation?

You will receive no payment or other compensation for your child's participation in this study.

What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to allow your child to take part or you may withdraw them from the study at any time. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you or your child are entitled. If you decide to stop your child's participation in the study we encourage you to talk to the investigators or study staff first.

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Initial \_\_\_\_\_

Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?

For questions about the study or in the event of a research-related injury, contact the study investigator, Dr. Stephen O'Keefe at (304) 746-1937. You should also call the investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University IRB#2 Chairman Dr. Stephen Cooper at (304) 696-7320. You may also call this number if:

- o You have concerns or complaints about the research.
- o The research staff cannot be reached.
- o You want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

**SIGNATURES**

You grant permission for your child \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in this study. You have had a chance to ask questions about this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are stating that you are not giving up any legal rights to which you or your child are entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**MU IRB**  
 DEC 1 2008  
**APPROVED**

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

**Marshall University**  
**Child's Assent for Being in a Research Study**

Title: Age, Gender, and Marital Status Effect Childhood Aggression in Elementary Age Children

Why are you here?

We are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how divorce affects children.

Why are they doing this study?

In this study we will be asking you to complete a 34-question survey. You will rate each question on a scale from 1 to 5; 1 mean that question is not at all like you, and 5 means it is completely like you.

What will happen to you?

The following identifying information will be obtained: grade, age, gender, and parents marital status before completing the survey. All of your answers will be kept confidential because you will not be putting your name on the survey. After you have completed the survey you will be finished with the study.

Will the study hurt?

This study should not hurt you in any way.

Will the study help you?

There may or may not be any direct benefit to you.

What if you have any questions?

You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call Dr. Stephen G. Keefe at (304) 746-1937 or ask me next time



**MO IRB**

DEC 1 2008

SDC

**APPROVED**

Initials \_\_\_\_\_

