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## New look at kids' divorce trauma

### Study finds impact on behavior isn't as bad as thought

By Bonnie Miller Rubin

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For years, social scientists have believed that children of divorce have more behavior problems than kids growing up in two-parent homes.

But the impact may not be as damaging as previously believed, according to new research to be released Friday.

Instead of comparing these youngsters to those with intact families—the usual methodology—a more accurate assessment would be to evaluate them before and after the divorce, said Alan Li of the RAND Corporation.

Many of the problems could be a result of pre-existing characteristics that would be a factor in emotional and behavioral issues even if parents had remained married, said Li, who will present his findings this weekend at the annual conference of the Council on Contemporary Families at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"Many studies end up comparing apples and oranges," Li said. "Personality, parenting strategies and detailed aspects of a person's biography all affect children, but researchers haven't been able to measure many of these constructs."

In addition, the report said, many earlier studies failed to take into account differences among families, such as parents' socioeconomic status and education, which can affect a youngster's well-being, whether a couple stay together or not.

When these variables are added to the mix, the psychological fallout is negligible, said Li, associate director of the Population Research Center for the Santa Monica-based non-profit.

He drew upon a national sample of about 6,330 children ages 4 to 15, whose mothers were surveyed repeatedly from 1979 to 2002.

Mothers filled out a 28-item checklist on whether their children engaged in conduct such as cheating, crying, arguing and breaking things. On average, less than half showed a one-item increase after divorce, which is not statistically significant.

Stephanie Coontz, a historian who has written extensively on marriage, called the findings



provocative, adding that they could reframe the national debate on divorce.

The findings, suggest that staying together at all costs may not be the best solution, said Coontz, the family council's director of research.

"It lets people know that there are variable outcomes . . . which will come as a relief to many people who went through divorce and raised healthy children," she said. "But there are others who will object to the idea. . . . They will see it as giving people permission to divorce."

Robert Emery, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, takes issue with the conclusion. While Li may not have found increased negative behavior, less quantifiable is the hurt that can reverberate across a life span, he said.

"For example, graduation and weddings can be turned into anxiety-ridden events for children whose parents are divorced," Emery wrote in a response to Li's findings.

Closer to home, most experts agreed that it isn't the split but the discord attached to it that is so harmful.

In eight years as a mediator in the domestic relations division of Cook County Circuit Court, Jeff Ginsburg has seen it all.

"It never ceases to amaze me when divorcing parents cannot get past their anger with each other to decide what is in the best interest of their children," he said.

Two periods of conflict surround dissolution, said Ginsburg, who is both a social worker and an attorney.

"During the divorce itself, if parents litigate their case, deplete their assets and spend several years in court, what we find is that parents will almost never be able to end the high level of conflict," he said.

Post-decree, minimizing conflict is still essential, he said. Kids can get through the process if parents are able to develop and maintain "a cordial or businesslike co-parenting relationship."

Tim Yehl was 7 and growing up in Des Plaines when his parents ended their marriage. Now 40 and a public relations executive in Washington, he recalled it as a sad and confusing time.

"All those traumatic feelings were there," Yehl said. "But I had parents who helped walk me through those feelings so I could reconcile them, grieve the divorce and move on."

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