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Question: To what extent does parental separation have
an impact on the psychological development of
children?

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Introduction

Over the past decade, parental divorce rates have been spiraling rapidly all over the globe. In advanced countries like the US, the numbers are as high as 50% and are still soaring.¹ With higher and higher divorce rates, more and more children are left with a broken home. Some of the most significant effects recognized include strained parent-child relationships, lost contact with one parent, economic hardships, and increased risk of psychological and behavioral problems; Depression and anxiety are two amongst many others. This research report will review in detail the impacts parental separation has on the psychological development of children. It is paramount that we explore this issue extensively because it is getting more and more pressing by the minute. In order to fully comprehend the extent of this issue, we will be analysing a variety of diverse perspectives on a global and national scale. These include China, USA, and the UK. Different perspectives and viewpoints of researchers, experts, parents, and children involved in the issue will also be presented. Finally, I will propose and evaluate some possible and plausible causes of actions that will potentially solve the issue.

Causes and Consequences

Global Perspective: America

Studies show about 50% of marriages in the United States result in divorce.² In fact, according to the Federal Reserve Board's Survey, only 42 percent of children aged 14-18 in America live in a first marriage family.³

According to the Marriage and Religion Research Institute, divorce causes "irreparable harm to all involved, but most especially to the children."⁴ The harm is presented in three aspects: social skills, psychological health, and behavioral problems.

¹ "Marriage and Divorce - American"

<http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>. Accessed 9 Feb. 2018.

² "Marriage and Divorce - American Psychological Association." 2011. 4 Jun. 2016

<<http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>>

³ "The Effects of Divorce on America | The Heritage Foundation."

<https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/the-effects-divorce-america>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.

⁴ "How Divorce Hurts Children | MARRI Research." 17 Jan. 2012, <http://marri.us/how-divorce-hurts-children/>. Accessed 16 Mar. 2018.

Peer rejection is another common issue amongst adolescents of divorce.⁵ They are found to have more problematic peer relationships. They also tend to have a greater tendency to complain about their lack of peer support.⁶ Children of divorce exhibit psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and antisocial behavior.⁷ These problems are long-term which will persist until the child enters adulthood. Disruptive behaviors such as fighting and stealing in school are also far more likely to come from children with separated parents.

On the other hand, some researchers criticize the idea that parental separation only impacts children negatively.⁸ They feel that we should take into account the nature of relationships between the parents and children before and after the divorce. For instance, as mentioned above, antisocial behavior tends to be a long-term effect of divorce. However, one study concluded that child antisocial behavior decreases after the conclusion of a high-conflict marriage. In a high-conflict marriage, children are exposed to violent and abusive behaviors.⁹ These conditions are not ideal for a child as they constantly witness the lack of respect and trust between parents. Therefore, after the dissolution of a dysfunctional marriage, children tend to develop better psychologically. They no longer feel the need to take sides during an argument and are no longer exposed to conflict. Hence, this proves that it is very crucial to take into account the nature of the marriage when determining the causes that impact the child's psychological development.

Global Perspective: United Kingdom

Unlike the US, the number of divorces declined between 2003 and 2009 in England and Wales. However, this is not an indication of fewer divorces, but rather, the fall in the number of marriages.

⁵ "The Effects of Divorce on Children - Family Research Council." 11 Jan. 2012, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF12A22.pdf>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

⁶ "The Effects of Divorce on Children - Family Research Council." 11 Jan. 2012, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF12A22.pdf>. Accessed 16 Mar. 2018.

⁷ "The Effects of Divorce on Children - Family Research Council." 11 Jan. 2012, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF12A22.pdf>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁸ "Positive Outcomes of Divorce - UCF Undergraduate Research Journal." <https://urj.ucf.edu/docs/mohi.pdf>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

⁹ "Divorce on Children - CSUN." <https://www.csun.edu/~pmm40071/DC.html>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

Over 42% of marriages in England end in divorce.¹⁰ Although the numbers are a little less than the US, it is still quite a large number. According to the Office of National Statistics, there are a total of 94864 children under 16 that have separated parents.¹¹

In a similar vein to America, children with divorced parents in the UK are more likely to have “behavioural problems, exhibit antisocial behaviour and to take part in substance misuse.”¹² These consequences are more or less the same compared to those found in American children. They tend to misbehave in an attempt to seek attention from parents or teachers. They also have a greater tendency to develop antisocial personalities. This, in turn, leads to them making friends with other problematic peers. Hence, their exposure to substance abuse increases. Subsequently, one notable effect divorce has on children in England is a weakened father-child relationship. Bob Greig, the founder of the single fathers support organisation Only Dads, pointed out that nearly half of children reported that their relationship with their father worsened after divorce.¹³ Some of the proposed reasons for this include fathers leaving to start another family. Also, some mothers stand in the way of father-child bonding.

In the children’s perspective, a poll conducted in England found that over 80% of interviewees aged 14 to 22 who have endured family breakups would prefer their parents to part if they are unhappy.¹⁴ Denise Knowles, a counsellor of a support group said: “Evidence suggests that it’s parental conflict which has the most damaging effect on children.”¹⁵ This suggests that prolonged exposure to frequent conflict between parents on top of a sense of insecurity about the future are what cause the most damage to children’s mental health. Consequently, most children believe that their parents should try their best to shelter them from disputes and arguments. Parents should also aim to involve their

¹⁰ "Divorces in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics." 21 Jun. 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2015>. Accessed 16 Mar. 2018.

¹¹ "Dataset: Divorces in England and Wales ... - Office for National Statistics." 2016. 4 Jun. 2016 <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/datasets/divorcesinenglandandwaleschildrenofdivorcedcouples>>

¹² "ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND CONDUCT DISORDERS IN" <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK327832/>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

¹³ "Children of divorce: 82% rather parents separate than ... - The Guardian." 22 Nov. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/nov/22/children-divorce-resolution-survey-rather-parents-separate>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

¹⁴ "Children of divorce: 82% rather parents separate than ... - The Guardian." 22 Nov. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/nov/22/children-divorce-resolution-survey-rather-parents-separate>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

¹⁵ "Children of divorce: 82% rather parents separate than 'stay for the kids" 22 Nov. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/nov/22/children-divorce-resolution-survey-rather-parents-separate>. Accessed 16 Mar. 2018.

children in major decisions such as custody issues. That way, children will not be constantly worried about what is going to happen next. They will also feel like they have a say in their own lives.

National Perspective: China

Since 2004, China has experienced ten consecutive years of rising divorce rate. In 2012, the divorce rate even exceeded the marriage rate. With 3.63 million couples breaking up their marriage, the divorce rate in China increased to 3.9 percent over the last year.¹⁶

According to the University of Nebraska, the impact of divorce on children in China is categorized into two major perspectives: parental absence and economic disadvantage.¹⁷ As we all know, after parents separated, full custody of children will often go to just one parent. However, both parents play an important role in their children's social development.¹⁸ Living with either one parent, children will lose healthy interactions with both parents which cause them to fall behind in social situations. Children tend to become more and more introverted no matter which parent they are living with.

Furthermore, according to the South China Morning Post, 30% of children with divorced parents live in poverty or became poorer after the divorce.¹⁹ This is because up to 75% of children in China live with their mothers after the divorce. Some mothers in China depend only on alimony whilst others have lower paid jobs compared to the fathers, resulting in economic disadvantage. Therefore, single-parent families, especially single-mother families often tend to suffer from financial instability or even poverty in China. Furthermore, having less money also decreases the chance of the children going to a good school, leaving them exposed to problematic peers. They also tend to live in poorer and unsafe neighbourhoods which can cause different troublesome behaviors. These effects can last until adulthood.

Local perspective: Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, divorce rates recorded by the Census and Statistics Department in 2013 is four times larger than that of year 1991. According to the same department in Hong Kong,

¹⁶ "A Discussion of the Divorce Rate | ChinaSource." 2015. 4 Jun. 2016

<<http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/a-discussion-of-the-divorce-rate>>

¹⁷ Xu, A. "Impacts of Parents' Divorce on Chinese Children - DigitalCommons ..." 2007.

<<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1054&context=famconfacpub>>

¹⁸ Xu, A. "Impacts of Parents' Divorce on Chinese Children - DigitalCommons ..." 2007.

<<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1054&context=famconfacpub>>

¹⁹ "Women and children left vulnerable as Hong Kong's divorce rate rises ..." 2014. 4 Jun. 2016

<<http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/family-education/article/1573585/women-and-children-left-vulnerable-hong-kongs-divorce>>

the total number of children (unmarried minors) with divorced parents in 2001 is 1816 and the number in 2011 is 2864.²⁰ This is quite a considerable increase.

Children are often considered the primary victim of divorce. Studies even show that children in Hong Kong from divorced families did worse than those of widowed families.²¹ Children can evidently better cope with the death of a parent than the voluntary separation of parents. The impacts of divorce on children in Hong Kong are generally negative. According to a study conducted by the University of Hong Kong on the phenomenon of divorce, compared with children whose parents are married, children of divorced parents have worse outcomes in academic achievement.²² Some studies even show correlation between parental separation and development of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) symptoms. Consequently, some children display academic difficulties and underachievement. However, one of the interviewees' in the study by HKU claims that her daughter appeared to be much happier after the divorce. This is because her parents had a high-conflict marriage which made life easier for the daughter when her parents are separated. This again re-establishes the impact of conflict and illustrates the two-sidedness of the issue.

Causes of Action

In order to provide some possible solutions to this issue, my first approach would be to aim to decrease the number of parental divorces. With lower divorce rates, naturally fewer children will have separated parents. Fewer children will have to suffer from the trauma of divorce and post-divorce consequences.

Solution one

My first proposed solution is to enact stricter divorce laws. Recently, three states in America, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Arizona, have made "covenant" marriage an option for couples.²³ It requires them to take an oath and receive premarital counseling. Other than that, couples must be separated for a period of time before a divorce can be granted. There must also be a valid reason for the divorce

²⁰ "Marriage and Divorce Trends in Hong Kong, 1991 to ... - statistics.gov.hk." 2015. 4 Jun. 2016
<<http://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B71501FA2015XXXXB0100.pdf>>

²¹ "A study on the phenomenon of divorce in Hong Kong - 立法會." 2014. 4 Jun. 2016
<<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr13-14/english/panels/ws/papers/ws0609cb2-2288-1-e.pdf>>

²² "A study on the phenomenon of divorce in Hong Kong - 立法會." 2014. 4 Jun. 2016
<<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr13-14/english/panels/ws/papers/ws0609cb2-2288-1-e.pdf>>

²³ "Can the Government Prevent Divorce? - The Atlantic."
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1997/10/can-the-government-prevent-divorce/306294/>.
Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

such as abuse or adultery.²⁴ In a recent study, researchers polled people regarding covenant marriage. This study found almost 40% of the adults surveyed were strongly supportive whilst under 15% were strongly opposed to covenant marriage.²⁵ Covenant marriage is a relatively new option that only first came up in 1997. And until now only 5% of marriages in Louisiana are covenant marriages. Therefore, there is no conclusive research on the effects it has on divorce rates. However, I feel that this method, if more people participated, will effectively reduce divorce rates as it will cause couples to take their marriage more seriously and be more committed to making their marriage last. Marriage will not be considered “disposable” under the rules of covenant marriage. Therefore, I think covenant marriage should become an option in more countries around the globe.

Solution Two

Another solution would be to mandate premarital education or counselling. Marriages can be made better from the start by making premarital counselling a requirement for obtaining a marriage license.²⁶ Some states in the US (e.g., Maryland and Michigan) give longer waiting periods to couples that didn't receive counselling in an attempt to encourage more couples to participate. According to a survey conducted in Missouri, 80% of people agreed that premarital education is crucial. However, over 66% of people are unhappy with the government's decision to prolong waiting periods for those who did not receive marriage counselling.²⁷ Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program is a popular marriage education program. Some studies found that couples who participated in PREP have a higher marital satisfaction when compared to those who didn't. They are also less likely to get divorced 5 years after the program.²⁸ Therefore, I believe that mandating marriage counselling will be a good way to reduce parental separation as couples will be better equipped for marriage and have a better understanding of what marriage entails.

Solution Three

Although the two solutions above might successfully lower divorce rates, there is no way to eliminate parental separation altogether. There are bound to be couples who split up due to countless reasons. There will definitely still be children who will experience parental separation. Thus, the most paramount thing to consider is the children's well-being after the divorce. To ensure the children are

²⁴ "Covenant Marriage: What Is It and Does It Work? - Missouri Families." 12 May. 2009, <http://missourifamilies.org/features/divorcearticles/divorcefeature23.htm>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

²⁵ "Covenant Marriage: What Is It and Does It Work? - Missouri Families." 12 May. 2009, <http://missourifamilies.org/features/divorcearticles/divorcefeature23.htm>. Accessed 16 Mar. 2018.

²⁶ "Can Governments Save Marriages? - Smart Marriages." <http://www.smartmarriages.com/8.html>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

²⁷ "Covenant Marriage: What Is It and Does It Work? - Missouri Families." 12 May. 2009, <http://missourifamilies.org/features/divorcearticles/divorcefeature23.htm>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

²⁸ "Covenant Marriage: What Is It and Does It Work? - Missouri Families." 12 May. 2009, <http://missourifamilies.org/features/divorcearticles/divorcefeature23.htm>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

being cared for properly, the government should provide programs to help children cope with divorce. Therapeutic emotional support should be provided to help children work through their feelings and eradicate their tendencies toward self-blame, anxiety, and depression.²⁹ Through these programs, children can also interact with other participants experiencing the same problems. That way, the children will have a safe space to express their feelings to other sympathetic children and adults.

Conclusion

As a child of a nuclear family, I cannot help but feel incredibly privileged. But a few years ago, my parents actually came very close to getting divorced. They had conflicts and thought they wouldn't be able to live with each other anymore. However, unlike most parents, my parents were willing to share their problems with me. They did not ask me to pick sides but they would ask for my opinion and my help. I told them with total honesty that I didn't want them to separate. At last, they made compromises and came to terms with each other. Therefore, I speak from experience when I advise parents to talk to their children instead of hiding the truth thinking it would spare their feelings. The initial shock of the news can often act as a trigger for other psychological issues.

This research report has allowed me to gain a lot of insight on the issue of parental divorce. Even though I was aware that divorce rates are soaring all over the world, I was still startled when I discovered the number of divorces that take place every year and the number of children affected. Other than that, I have acquired extensive knowledge of the negative and positive impacts it has on children's psychological well-being. Initially, I had the misconception that divorce can only be harmful to children. It is common knowledge that the separation of parents is very stressful to the children involved. However, I learnt that the most important thing to consider is the precise nature of the relationships before and after the divorce. In some cases, divorce can actually benefit children. Although parental separation is not the only factor that affects children's psychological development, no matter good or bad and presented in what way, divorce always has an impact on children. Therefore, to answer my question, parental separation has an impact on children's psychological development to a large extent.

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