Child Development and Behavior: Broken Homes, Hopes, and Dreams

Child development/behavior can be affected by a number of things, but a big factor may be the parents. Depending on the severity of a broken home, the parent’s relationship with each other, as well as their children, can affect how their children behave and may even develop. This doesn’t mean that a parent’s divorce can make it so a child can never climb steps or hop on one foot, but it can make it harder for children to develop social skills and may even set back their achievements. Depending on a child’s age, the separation of their parents may cause extreme stress and, in the worst case, even depression. However, keeping the parent’s married might not be in the best interest either, depending on the family’s situation. In my experience of coming from a broken home, I have never suffered from developmental or behavioral problems. However, this may be due to my parents living in the same house after the divorce, the age I was when my parents got divorced, and also the relationship I had with both of my parents, as well as the relationship they had with each other. Parents have an impact on their children, married or not. However, on average, broken homes have a significant impact on children and may even continue throughout their life.
To understand how a broken home affects child development/behavior, it is important to understand how children should normally develop/behave. Although a child may behave and develop at their own rate, there are guidelines for a child’s development, as well as behavior, when it comes to their mental ability. The image above shows the developmental skills that a child should have at the given ages, many of which have to do with motor and social skills. As seen in the diagram, children need to develop things they can do to help them do simple tasks, like brushing their teeth and walking heel to toe. Developing motor skills will make a child become more independent, seeing how they will be moving and grasping things on their own. So this is a no-brainer: children need to develop motor skills. But another thing a child needs to develop, also shown by the chart, is social skills. This would include naming things and understanding words. Barbara Solomon, a social worker with a Bachelor of science degree in psychology and a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California, comments how “a lack of social abilities could signal a medical or developmental problem” (Solomon, 2004). So not only are a lack of motor skills an issue at a young age but so are social skills. Lastly, there are three types of behavior that parents should understand when it comes to their children. First, there is a behavior that is approved. This includes behavior such as being kind to other people, being understanding, and listening to others. The second type of behavior is one that is not necessarily wanted at all times but is tolerated. This behavior can be caused by the child being stressed or sick and is understood in context, and, depending on the family, different types of behavior are tolerated. The last type of behavior is one that should not be tolerated. This type can be troublesome for a child’s intellectual development and may even cause harm to the “physical, emotional, or social well-being of the child” (Normal Child Behavior, 2015). This type of behavior can also be caused by the parent, depending on how they act emotionally. Children may start to copy their parent’s behavior because of how closely they follow them for the normal emotional reactions of society. This may get troublesome, depending if the parent is aggressive and acting upon anger. In this case, when a child starts to mimic their parent, they develop the third type of behavior.

(I couldn’t copy the image because it is in a pdf and screen shots are not working at the moment, so if you’d like to see the image click here. It is the only image in the pdf.)

![Developmental Milestones 2 – 6 years](https://www.youthvoices.live/2017/01/12/child-development-and-behavior-broken-homes-hopes-and-dreams/)
A study to show cognitive testing in teenagers is shown in the image above. This study was done by Anna Sanz-de-Galdeano and Daniela Vuri along with IZA, The Institute for the Study of Labor, in 2004. This was a study to see if the cognitive development of adolescents were changed based on the fact of their current family situation. This data shows the families that are intact has a higher cognitive ability than families that are not intact. However, the research that was also conducted showed the same children having lower cognitive ability before their parents got divorce. The research in this study shows that teenager’s cognitive ability will not necessarily decrease, but that does not say anything about the effect on younger children. This study concludes that in the short run, adolescents with divorced families may have a lower cognitive ability, even if they have a lower cognitive ability before their parents are divorced. In the long run, this is the same. This study is consistent with was Cherlin et al. (1995) said, as far as the timing of a parental divorce, the age that divorce occurs “(ages 7 to 11 versus ages 11 to 16) in a child’s life does not make a difference for young adult outcomes” (Sanz-de-Galdeano and Vuri, 2004). So whether a child is younger versus older when their parents divorce, that does not necessarily mean it will affect them as an adult: the child will have the same cognitive ability before divorce, as shown in this study, as well as after the divorce.

Another study suggests that a parent has a big outcome on their child’s emotional development. Being physically present may not be enough for a child, and all that matters is their parent’s emotional attachment to them (Volling cited in Moges and Weber, 2014). If the parent is not emotionally connected to their child, “the child will struggle to learn how to regulate his emotions and interact with others appropriately” (Moges and Weber, 2014). With my personal experience with divorce, my mother was physically there, but she was never emotionally there. I would say that I suffered from irregular emotions when it came to my mother. Sometimes, I would be really happy with her because she was there with me. Other times, and perhaps most of the time, I was angry with her because of how little she seemed to care about my life. Because I was so negative towards my mother’s negative attitude, it shows that this can “often [lead] to even more behavioral problems” (Moges and Weber, 2014). This is problematic when raising a child to become a well-adjusted adult because it may lead to further complications when interacting with others normally. There is no one way to raise a perfectly well-adjusted child, but parents can take a few precautions when taking care of them emotionally. It is important to give them “supportive environment, positive feedback, role models of healthy behavior and interactions, and someone to talk to about their emotional reactions to their experiences” (Morges and Weber, 2014). This will assure that the child will be alright emotionally when growing up, and not having any problems when it comes to regulating emotions and interacting with others.

A study in 1971 showed 60 divorced families along with 131 children. After five years, two-thirds of the children “were clinically depressed, were doing poorly in school, had difficulty maintaining friendships, [and] experienced chronic problems such as sleep disturbances” (Amato, 2005). As supported by the study, these children may have started acting aggressive and “engaging in bullying behavior, both of which can negatively affect peer relationships” (Green). However, another study, done in 1970, showed how after two years of their parent’s divorce, preschoolers did not show emotional and behavioral problems like they did the year before. So why does one group of children
show more severe symptoms than the other group? The answer is this: research shows that the second most vulnerable group to divorce is young teenagers, represented by the group of children in the study done in 1971 (Blakeslee and Wallerstein, 2006). The first group to be the most affected by divorce are young children before they enter school. So, in this case, preschoolers will not be as affected as much as young adolescents would. At this age, young adolescents are being nudged slightly into the world, thinking about future jobs, school, sports and clubs, romantic relationships, and the list goes on. With all of this, divorce might add to the list to make it more stressful for the child resulting in emotional and behavioral issues. However, if a parent did not want a divorce because of this reason, the outcome might not be as well aspected as one might think. If a child’s parents are always fighting, this will add more stress to the family and also may emotionally damage a child. As stated previously, parents have some say in how a child is emotionally. A child will also see how their parents interact and their imitate behavior, as well as negative energy (Moges and Weber, 2014). Fighting parents that stay together because of their child may end up doing more harm than none. Broken homes may not harm a child developmentally or cognitively but instead may have an important role within their education, behavior, social skills, and emotional skills depending on their age.

Compared to a child being from a divorced family, a child that is born outside of marriage or only has one parent may “reach adulthood with less education, earn less income, ... are more likely to have a nonmarital birth, ... and report more symptoms of depression” than a divorced child would (Amato, 2005). The single parent is also at a loss financially, making it harder to buy their child things for school they will need to succeed. When it comes to education, children with broken homes may experience a lack of academic progress. This may “stem from a number of factors, including instability in the home environment, inadequate financial resources and inconsistent routines” (Green). Education is generally linked with the type of job a person receives, which in turn predicts their income. A survey done on average income based on the level of education in 1996 showed a high school graduate having $7,143 more annually than a high school dropout. Continuing, someone with a bachelor’s degree shows to have $23,101 more annually than a high school dropout, and an advanced degree shows $46,306 more (Fagan, 1999). The story is the same with divorced parents: earning annually $29,500 less than a married family would, says a study was done in 1995 (Fagan, 1999). A child with only one parent is two times more likely to drop out of school, making it more difficult for them to earn a higher annual income than someone who had graduated high school. Research shows “that children do better at school and exhibit fewer behavioral problems when nonresident fathers pay child support” (King cited in Amato, 2005). With more money coming into the household, children are more likely to receive things that will help them in school as well as outside of school, building their academic progress, and making them stay in school.

I conducted a survey asking teens the marital status of parents and also behavior they have shown previously in their life. Although I only got thirteen responses, they were responses I was not intending to get. Out of the eight people who said their parents were married, five of them said they have suffered from aggressive and depressive behavior. Out of the four people who said they had divorced parents, none of them suffered from aggressive/ depressive behavior. It’s already been confirmed with research that, on average, children will be better off growing up in a home where
there are two biological parents that maintain a safe environment for their children. As far as depression goes, depression can be triggered by a lot of things including grief, stress, major life changes, and even side effects of medication (Tandoc, 2016). Depression and aggressive behavior cannot always be directly connected to a child’s parent’s relationship, but on average it has a big impact on the child’s life. However, if a child is experiencing this type of behavior and it is directly linked to the married parents, it may be because of fighting. E. Mark Cummings, a psychologist at the University of Notre Dame, explains how “[k]ids pay close attention to their parents’ emotions for information about how safe they are in the family” (Cummings cited in Divecha, 2014). Children go home for a place to feel safe, not attacked. Understanding how close children follow their parent’s emotions will make parents think differently about what they are saying when around their children. Cummings goes on to say “[w]hen parents are destructive, the collateral damage to kids can last a lifetime” (Cummings cited in Divecha, 2014). Parents have an impact on their children directly, but also collaterally, meaning they do not know what ways their parents have impacted them. When I was growing up, I remembered a fight my parents had that I could not remember until something triggered it. After remembering the memory, I realized why I feel the way I do towards aggressive behavior. This has impacted me, and most likely will throughout my life, because of a fight my parents had when I was younger. This continues to show the effect that parents have on their children, even if they are still married. But in the end, several studies still show children who have divorced parents may experience struggles such as these and many others that will hinder their life in the future.

It is hard to pinpoint what makes a child behave a certain way, or do things the way that they do. But it has been shown over and over through research that broken homes affect children, depending on their age emotional standpoint with their parents, more than married families do. There is never one way that a child can be raised, and just because one may be brought up in a broken home does not mean they will suffer from depression or emotional problems. Broken homes will not necessarily hinder a child’s development or cognitive ability, however, it may cause a problem with their education or behavior. On average, a single parent or divorced parents earn less money than a married family does, making it harder to pursue things that their children might need for education or other needs, causing further problems in the future. It is important for families to understand how to provide a stable and safe home for children to grow up in to limit problems, such as these. In the long run, a child that grows up in a safe environment will grow into a well-adjusted adult and will pay off in the generations to come.

Works Cited


Tandoc, D. (2016) Lecture on Depression Personal Collection of D. Tandoc, Okemos High School, Okemos MI


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