

It's not divorce that affects kids, it's the conflict

Identify how divorce contributes to negative outcomes for children to help shape the right policies to strengthen families

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The Ministry of Social and Family Development earlier this month published a landmark study on the long-term effects of divorce on children.

Compared with peers whose parents remained married, these children were less likely to have graduated from university, earned less and had lower Central Provident Fund balances at age 35. They were also more likely to be unmarried or divorced.

However, to make sense of what is called the “divorce penalty”, one should go beyond comparing outcomes of children of divorce with those from intact families. There is a need to identify what it is about divorce that contributes to these negative developmental outcomes and why some children are more vulnerable than others.

Divorce may not be a risk factor, but simply a marker of problematic

family dynamics. Children of divorced parents may already be at risk long before divorce occurs.

Also, while some children struggle with the burden of their parents’ divorce years after it happens, many children of divorced parents are as well adjusted as their peers with married parents.

Hence, instead of focusing on divorce, public policy solutions should target strengthening relationships, encouraging effective parenting and promoting mental health.

There are three key factors that can explain poor outcomes in children’s development.

MARITAL CONFLICT

A study of 618 families that were part of the United States National Survey of Families and Households found that high marital conflict was related to more child behavioural problems, but that marital status itself was not significantly related to these outcomes.

In addition, sociologists Paul Amato and Alan Booth studied American families over a 12-year period and found that children whose parents divorce may have better long-term adjustment than do children whose parents remain in high-conflict marriages, if divorce reduces the child’s exposure to the conflict.

In other words, it is not divorce per se, but exposure to marital conflict in couples who eventually divorce that may be the determining factor for their development.

So the link with divorce is that children of divorced parents tend to be at greater risk for problematic developmental outcomes – such as academic, relationship and mental health problems – because they are often exposed to parents in conflict.

This risk is real for many children of divorced parents in Singapore.

A profile analysis completed by the Singapore Subordinate Courts in 2003 found that communication breakdown, physical violence, constant quarrelling and problems with in-laws were the top reasons for divorce. Over 40 per cent of these couples had children below the age of seven.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PARENTING ISSUES

When there is marital conflict and changes in the family structure, parents experience increased stress and mental health problems, which can impact their ability to look after their children.

Indeed, Dr Amato and Dr Booth found that many parents who eventually divorced had problems with parenting as early as eight to 12 years before the divorce.

Of course, divorce can also disrupt parenting by making it more difficult for parents to effectively monitor and supervise their children, discipline them consistently and provide ample warmth and affection, particularly if both parents are not on the same page.

ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

After a divorce, children may have to move homes or neighbourhoods and adjust to new living situations, all of which can impact their well-being. For many families, the day-to-day care of the child usually falls on single mothers who do not have access to the same financial resources as they did prior to divorce; and this financial

instability may be exacerbated if regular child support is not forthcoming.

Therefore, addressing what happens in the family leading up to and following divorce may be more effective in improving children’s outcomes than addressing divorce itself.

Here are some things that can be done.

OFFER SUPPORT AT THE RIGHT TIME

More can be done to incentivise couples to develop stronger conflict resolution skills at key transition points in their relationship.

Providing free marriage preparation courses to all couples who register for marriage, with regular follow-up in the early years of the marriage, could help create strong marital foundations. The positive result of the Bersamamu (Malay for With You) programme, which follows this approach for the Malay/Muslim couples, is evidence of this.

Screening couples for relationship stress during regular antenatal check-ups, particularly before the birth of their first child, and providing them with referrals to subsidised relationship skills-building courses could also help.

Financially incentivising couples who choose to enrol in such courses could help increase the uptake.

For families who need more intensive help, funding is an issue.

While health insurance now covers diagnosable mental health problems, rebates could be provided for public or private preventative care that targets stress, parenting and relationship problems before they become

serious clinical issues.

TRANSITIONAL FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO NEWLY DIVORCED FAMILIES

Recent relaxation in Housing Board rules has made for smoother housing transitions post-divorce. However, more can be done to help newly single parents.

Previously unemployed mothers may have trouble finding a job that accommodates the flexibility that a single parent needs. Some may have problems assessing their changing financial needs and resources.

Adequate employment support, transitional grants and financial planning services, particularly for those outside the typical parameters of “low-income and needy”, are key to ensuring that children of these divorced families are not penalised twice over.

The “divorce penalty” is often framed as a question of whether parents in difficult relationships should stay together for the sake of their children.

The real question we should be asking is what we can do to optimise outcomes for children, given the reality that relationships are challenging.

If children’s needs are truly a priority, then the focus should not only be on preserving marriage, but rather, on strengthening families by promoting well-being and good relationships.

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