

A study on the causes and influence pathways of psychological problems of children from divorced families

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Abstract. China's divorce rate reached 43% in 2024, significantly increasing the mental health risks faced by children from divorced families. This study investigates the complex mechanisms behind these risks and reveals that family reorganization can undermine children's sense of security, long-term parental conflict may accumulate psychological stress, and poor parenting combined with social stigma can intensify emotional problems. Nevertheless, cooperative parenting and children's psychological resilience can serve as protective factors that help mitigate these negative effects. Data show that the rates of depression and anxiety among children from divorced families are 20%-30% higher than those from intact families, with elevated Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) scores indicating poorer mental health. These children also exhibit more aggressive behavior and academic difficulties, with boys showing higher levels of hostility and girls more prone to depression. Effective interventions such as school counseling, family therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and expressive art therapy have demonstrated positive outcomes. The main contribution of this study is to clarify the risk and protective mechanisms and propose a feasible framework for family-school-society collaboration, aiming to support the mental well-being of children from divorced families through conflict reduction, psychological education, and expanded social services.

Keywords: children of divorced families, mental health, educational methods

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the social economy, people pay more and more attention to mental health. Mental health, as the core dimension of individual development, is usually defined as a satisfactory state in which various psychological states (such as general adaptability, personality health, etc.) of an individual remain normal or good, and the internal self (self-awareness, self-control, self-experience, etc.) and the self and the environment remain harmonious and consistent. As an important part of human capital, adolescents' mental health not only relates to their personal growth but also directly affects social stability and national future development. However, with the transformation of social structure and the change of family concept, divorce rate continues to rise, becoming one of the important social factors affecting adolescents' mental health. According to the Civil Affairs Statistics of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China for the fourth quarter of 2024, divorce registration accounts for 43% of marriage registration, a common phenomenon that has led to high attention to children's mental health. Parental divorce is not a short-term event for adolescents but can cause long-term harm and impact [1].

The study pointed out that family changes, parent-child relationship changes, and school and social environment adaptation are multiple factors in the process of divorce. It is easy for teenagers to have many problems on the psychological level. However, the relevant impact mechanism is complex and diversified, and there is still a lack of systematic sorting and in-depth discussion.

2. Prevalence and incidence of mental health problems in children of divorced families

This study focuses on divorced families, and single-parent families resulting from separation and widowhood are not discussed. A large number of studies at home and abroad have shown that children of divorced families face significantly higher mental health risks. Amato noted in his meta-analysis that children of divorced families were 20-30% more likely to experience clinically significant depression and anxiety symptoms than children of intact families [2]. In China, the same risks have been empirically tested. For example, Zang et al. used the SCL-90 scale to evaluate and found that the total score of psychological symptoms of students from divorced families (136.94 ± 39.52) was significantly higher than that of students from non-divorced

families (130.93 ± 33.06), and there were statistically significant differences in all sub-dimension scores ($p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$). Among them, the depression dimension (1.51 ± 0.54 vs. 1.44 ± 0.45), obsessive dimension (1.88 ± 0.60 vs. 1.80 ± 0.54), hostility dimension (1.47 ± 0.53 vs. 1.37 ± 0.44), and anxiety dimension (1.50 ± 0.52 vs. 1.43 ± 0.43) were especially different (t values > 5.0), reflecting that children from divorced families were more likely to have emotional distress, repetitive compulsive behavior, and interpersonal conflict tendency [3].

In addition, aggression, social withdrawal, and the incidence of academic difficulties increased significantly in this group. It is worth noting that this effect also has age and gender differences: studies have discussed that children's behavior and emotional development present phased characteristics; usually around two and a half to three years and three months old, children may have behavioral regression [4]. From three years and eight months to four years and eight months, the child's mood swings increased significantly, often showing irritability, aggressive behavior, and confusion and self-alert state. Between the ages of five and six, your child's anxiety gets worse, and aggressive behavior may reappear. Between the ages of seven and eight, children begin to develop more complex negative emotions, such as fear and sadness, and their demands on their parents often swing between extreme compliance and resistance. 9- to 10-year-olds often feel helpless, confused, lost, and angry, struggling between compliance and resistance. Adolescents older than 11 are more likely to experience embarrassment, shame, and deep sadness, sometimes even fear and resistance to growth itself (fear of future responsibilities such as growing up and marriage).

In terms of gender differences, the data show that the school interruption rate of male students in divorced families is 22% higher than that of female students, and hostile behavior is more significant; female students are more likely to fall into depression and low self-esteem, especially in the absence of father love [2].

3. Multiple influence mechanism of divorced families on adolescent mental health

In recent years, more and more researchers have focused on the study of factors affecting children's mental health due to parental divorce. The effect of divorce on children's mental health is a dynamic process of multiple factors interwoven in series. Among them, the continuous interaction of four core factors at different levels shapes the psychological adaptation trajectory together.

3.1. Predisposing factors: family situation prior to divorce

Song and Jiang published a study in the British Medical Journal Pediatrics Open that preschool children from divorced families lag significantly in social psychology and physical development [5]. From the perspective of susceptible factors, families often have many unstable factors before divorce.

First of all, in terms of family structure factors, some families may be in a state of structural instability for a long time before parents divorce, such as long-term tension between parents and a depressed family atmosphere. Children grow up in such an environment, and their inner security is continuously eroded. Studies have shown that children who have been in an environment of parental quarrels for a long time are prone to self-abasement or violent rebellion and are full of anxiety about their future life. This state makes them more likely to collapse in the face of parental divorce.

In terms of economic factors, some families have poor economic conditions or face economic crises before divorce, which may lead to children's long-term material deprivation and difficult quality of life guarantees. Parents have no time to consider the emotional needs of their children due to economic pressure, parent-child interaction is reduced, and children lack sufficient care and support in the process of growing up. Once the parents divorce, the financial situation may deteriorate further, and the negative impact on children will intensify.

In addition, long-term intense conflict between parents, whether verbal arguments or cold violence, is an invisible killer of children's mental health. In such a family environment, children are always in a tense, fearful mood and have misperceptions of interpersonal relationships, which makes it easy to form sensitive, suspicious, and isolated personalities. For example, Yang, director of the Child Development Research Center of Wuhan University, pointed out that the harm caused by parents' continuous quarrels cannot be ignored for children. Children will feel helpless and uneasy and lack the courage to explore the outside world because of fear of family fragmentation and fear of losing parental care [6]. These factors, which existed before the parents divorced, greatly increased the susceptibility of children to psychological problems, making them more likely to go to the abyss of depression and anxiety in the face of family changes.

3.2. Predisposing factors: family relationships prior to divorce

Most families are going through months or even years of friction before their parents split up. The family environment has been in a depressed environment for a long time, the rigid family relationship has dropped to freezing point, and the emotional conflict between the husband and wife inevitably affects the children, constituting the potential basis for risk accumulation. Studies have shown that if parents manage issues peacefully during divorce, resulting in fewer conflicts, the negative impact on children is correspondingly reduced [7]. The child's own psychological traits (such as high emotional responsiveness) and inherited

psychological vulnerabilities form inherent vulnerabilities that quietly erode the child's psychological foundation and pave the risk path before divorce occurs.

3.3. Perpetuating factors: parenting styles

In divorced families, parents' emotional breakdown inevitably affects their children's education. According to research, there are three common bad parenting styles: severe, laissez-faire, and spoiled [1]. Among them, a strict parenting style is extremely unfavorable to the development of adolescent mental health, which often makes children's outlook on life and values more distorted.

In addition, children of divorced families are prone to hidden exclusion in school due to changes in family structure and social pressure brought about by the label of "single parent," and as they grow older, children's deep concern for the future stability of the family hangs over their hearts like clouds, which continue to consume their hearts.

3.4. Protective factors: good parent-child communication after parental divorce

Effective communication and cooperative parenting patterns maintained between parents after divorce re-establish a predictable and safe framework for children, and continued warm parent-child relationships become critical emotional havens. At the same time, the emotional regulation ability gradually developed by children themselves forms psychological resilience (also known as psychological elasticity and psychological resilience), which refers to the ability or trait of individuals to show good adaptability when encountering adversity such as life pressure, frustration, and threat, so that they can learn self-anchoring and emotional counseling when emotional fluctuations occur [8]. This inner strength resonates with the external support system: the inclusive environment created by the school dispels the sense of isolation, the sincere acceptance of peers provides the experience of belonging, and the timely intervention of professional psychological services (such as psychological counseling in schools) gives scientific coping tools to potential psychological dangers.

4. Resources and treatments

Support systems for children of divorced families are currently being developed in the country. As an important front support position, school psychological counseling provides daily counseling and group counseling activities. At the professional intervention level, family therapy has been shown to be effective in improving parent-child communication, resolving family conflicts, assisting in adjusting to new family structures (such as stepfamily integration), and effectively reducing children's emotional and behavioral problems. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has a solid evidence base for individual symptoms and is especially suitable for relieving depression and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents by helping them identify and change negative thinking patterns and learn coping skills to achieve intervention goals.

Mindfulness group counseling activities can also bring psychological intervention effects to children from urban divorced families. Through research, it is known that mindfulness group counseling can help children from urban divorced families alleviate negative emotions such as anxiety and depression and can also improve their emotional control ability and psychological resilience. Mindfulness training will urge people to focus on the present, to detect their own thoughts and emotions, and then learn to use a more peaceful, In mindfulness group counseling, members communicate with each other and share their feelings, and they gain understanding and support from others. This helps them reduce psychological burdens and increase confidence in overcoming difficulties. For example, if a group member talks about how to reduce anxiety through mindfulness practice, other members can learn useful methods and put them into practice [9].

For young children or children with expression difficulties, expressive art therapy (such as painting and music) provides nonverbal emotional catharsis and understanding channels. Research shows that through Receptive Music Therapy (RMT technology), the service object listens to specific music under the guidance of music therapists, causing them to resonate physiologically and psychologically, affecting physiological indicators such as respiration, heartbeat, and blood pressure. This physiological response helps to relax the body and mind, and relieve tension and anxiety. It makes it easier for the therapist to get rid of depression while stimulating the brain to release certain chemicals, such as dopamine and endorphins, that help boost mood and reduce depression symptoms. According to the analysis of data obtained from the Child Depression Inventory (CDI), the score of the post-test ($31.125 \pm 2.03 = 24.00 \pm 2.39$) was significantly lower than that of the pre-test ($M \pm SD = 31.125 \pm 2.03$) [10]. However, uneven distribution of resources (especially in rural areas), shortage of professionals, stigma among parents, and localization of some interventions remain major challenges.

5. Conclusion

The mental health of children from divorced families is shaped by a range of interrelated factors, including emotional susceptibility, the cumulative impact of long-term parental conflict, and the persistent influence of negative parenting and social stigma. While these challenges can significantly hinder a child's psychological development, strong protective factors, such as emotional resilience, stable caregiver support, and early intervention, can play a crucial role in mitigating these risks. Addressing this issue requires coordinated action across three key levels: family, school, and society. At the family level, parents should strive to reduce conflicts, practice cooperative parenting, and provide children with consistent emotional support to foster a secure environment. Within schools, it is essential to promote mental health education, cultivate inclusive and supportive atmospheres, and implement timely psychological assessments and interventions to identify and address potential problems at an early stage. At the societal and policy level, expanding the coverage and accessibility of community mental health services is vital, as is improving social welfare policies such as parental education programs tailored to divorced families and increasing professional training for mental health practitioners. These integrated efforts are critical to forming a protective network around children navigating the challenges of family separation. In the future, research must further investigate the diverse psychological responses of children from divorced families across different age groups, genders, geographic regions, and cultural backgrounds. Such insights will enable the development of more targeted, sensitive, and effective intervention strategies to ensure the long-term well-being of this increasingly common and vulnerable population.

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