

When the kids aren't kids: Adults experiencing the pain of parental divorce

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Divorce at mid-life and beyond is becoming increasingly common. According to the U.S. Census, in 2000, 28.1% of men and 19.5% of women 45 years of age or older were granted divorces. Moreover, 24.8% of women who divorced that year had been in marriages that had lasted 15 years or longer, the highest percentage in history for marriages of this length (Kreider, 2005). The time period in which children leave the home tends to be one of greater risk for divorce as couples are required to shift their relationship away from co-parenting and toward a recommitment to one another (Glenn, 1990).

As more couples divorce at mid-life or beyond, adult children of divorce represent a significant and growing segment of the population. While research and intervention efforts have focused on young children who still live in the family home at the time of their parents' divorce, adult children who experience the pain of their parents' divorce after leaving the family home also experience difficulty. Studies show that adults with divorced parents tend to be less educated, earn less income, feel less connected to their parents, and have more troubled marriages and symptoms of psychological distress (Amato & Cheadle, 2005).

Often, adult children of divorce struggle in ways that sometimes go unnoticed or invalidated. For example, adult children often report that people around them, even their parents, cannot understand how the divorce would

significantly impact them in adulthood. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the growing population of adults who experience parental divorce and distinguish them from those who experienced their parents' divorce at earlier stages of the family life cycle.

Impact of divorce on adult children

Parents who find themselves in distressed relationships sometimes choose to remain married while their children are still in the home, perhaps assuming that the consequences of divorce will be less significant once their children have reached adulthood (Waite, Haggstrom, & Kanouse, 1985). However, adult children, even after having left the home, are not immune to the negative consequences of their parents' decision to divorce. When compared with adults from intact families, adult children of divorce report experiencing more negative emotion, are more likely to be in unmarried cohabitating relationships, experience higher rates of relationship dissolution, and are more likely to receive welfare benefits (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001).

Complicating matters further, because divorce rates tend to spike at the time of a child's launch from the home, adult children may find themselves in their own state of transition at the time of their parents' divorce. This means that while adult children are trying to manage the painful reality of the end of their family as they know it, they are often simultaneously attempting to navigate living away from home for the first time, finding their way at college, establishing a career, embarking upon their own

marriage, or adjusting to the birth of their own children. Due to their own experiences of transition, these adults may have a more difficult time accepting the changes they may experience as a result of the divorce (Alexander, 2007). Moreover, while young adult children might still be dependent on their parents to meet their physical, emotional, and/or financial needs, divorce proceedings often prevent these children from being able to count on their parents to meet these needs.

Impact of divorce on the parent-child relationship

Mid- and later-life divorce often affects the quality of the parent-child relationship. While relationships with both parents can suffer, relationships between fathers and their adult children tend to experience greater distress during and after divorce, particularly relationships between fathers and daughters (Amato & Booth, 1991; Nakonezny, Rodgers, & Nussbaum, 2003). Several potential explanations for this exist. Because mothers tend to act as the primary caretakers and mediators of the relationship, it is possible that fathers lack the relational skills to maintain the relationship independently. Alternatively, perhaps adult children experience greater feelings of solidarity with their mothers pre-divorce, creating a buffer during the divorce process (Nakonezny, Rodgers, & Nussbaum, 2003).

Adult children's relationships with their parents may also change due to parental boundaries and expectations of involvement in the divorce process. While parents might be more inclined to protect young children from the messy details of divorce, adult children are often drawn into conflict between divorcing parents. Adult children might find themselves exposed to upsetting information regarding infidelity, financial strain, and emotional distress. Radina, Hennon, and Gibbons (2003) report that adult children may feel compelled to take sides and, as a result, may experience estrangement with one or both parents.

Adult children's caretaking of their aging parents is another facet of the parent-child relationship that may

be impacted by parents' divorce. Later-life divorce may negatively impact adult children's sense of filial obligation towards care of their aging parents (Shapiro, 2003), and strained relationships also make it less likely that an adult child will assist his or her aging parents in their later life care (Cain, 1988). This results in a disproportionate caregiving burden shifted to a smaller number of adult children, most commonly adult daughters, who experience the heightened psychological, financial, and social strain experienced by caregivers (Shapiro, 2003). When adult parents remarry, adult children are less likely to care for older stepparents if they do not consider them family (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Du Feng, & Bengtson, 2006). All of these conditions can contribute to weakened parent-child relationships, as well as an increased sense of burden in those adult children who maintain relationships with their parents.

Impact of parents' remarriage

Another complicating event for adult children of divorce and their families is the decision for one or both parents to begin dating or remarry. A parent's decision to remarry represents a major life stressor for children (Corrie, 2002), and integrating a new stepparent into the family represents a major emotional task for adult children of divorce.

While children must accept the permanence of their parents' divorce, as well as the loss of the idealized family life (Visher, 1985), the arrival of a stepparent can complicate this process (Corrie, 2002). The age at which stepparents enter the lives of children impacts whether these children ultimately accept their stepparents as parents or family; the older a child is at the time of the marriage, the less likely this acceptance is to occur (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Du Feng, & Bengtson, 2006).

When navigating the divorce process, parents and children have to work hard to establish independent relationships with one another, and the arrival of a stepparent can disrupt these sometimes tenuous relationships. With the addition of a stepparent, adult

children of divorce report experiencing feelings of competition, jealousy, anger, and diminished feelings of self-esteem and security (Corrie, 2002).

By nature, stepfamilies tend to experience ambiguity around role definition and boundaries, an experience which is often exacerbated in mature stepfamilies. Adult children may interpret their parents' assumption that they can accept new family configurations with little parental support as a sign of lack of concern or care. This can feed into adult children's sense of diminished self-esteem, if they assume that this need for support indicates some level of personal inadequacy or weakness.

On the other hand, adult children may interpret a parent's efforts to compensate for disruption of the family configuration through elevated levels of care as intrusive (Corrie, 2002). Some experts recommend that stepfamilies maintain a high level of cohesion during early stages of the reconfiguration process (Pasley, 1987). However, establishing this cohesion is often impossible in mature stepfamilies which are composed of multiple adult families living apart from one another.

Divorce is a difficult decision that no couple takes lightly. Due to its impact on children of all ages, however, the consequences of divorce must be acknowledged and attended to. Individual or family therapy might be one valuable treatment option for adult children and their families who are navigating their parents' divorce.

Recommended strategies for adults coping with parental divorce:

- Find an outlet for grief and anger. Adult children of divorce deserve the opportunity to mourn the painful loss of the family structure as they know it. Family, friends, or a therapist who can provide support are essential to this process.
- Establish appropriate boundaries with parents and other family members. When creating independent relationships with their parents, adult children of divorce often report that parents sometimes expect inappropriate levels of emotional support and financial aid. Parents also may be tempted to share details of the divorce that are not suitable for children, regardless of age. Stay removed from parents' conflict, and negotiate a relationship with each parent that feels comfortable and fair.
- Work toward forgiveness. While anger at one or both parents is understandable, it often negatively impacts the parent-child relationship, at least initially. With support, these emotional injuries (and the underlying anger associated with them) can heal.
- Establish new family rituals and activities. Adult children of divorce often mourn the end of established holiday celebrations and traditions. New family groupings will need to work together to create fun and enjoyable holiday experiences and traditions tailored to the needs of the new family.
- Establish good self-care habits. Adult children of divorce often report feeling burdened by the task of taking care of their parents and siblings in addition to their own everyday responsibilities. Taking good care of oneself is particularly important during this time.

Recommended readings for adult children of divorce:

- *The Way They Were: Dealing with Your Parents' Divorce After a Lifetime of Marriage* (2006) by Brooke Lea Foster
- *A Grief Out of Season: When Your Parents Divorce in Your Adult Years* (1991) by Noelle Fintushel and Nancy Hillard, PhD
- *Generation Ex: Adult Children of Divorce and the Healing of Our Pain* (2006) by Jen Abbas

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The Family Institute at Northwestern University is committed to strengthening and healing families from all walks of life through clinical service, education and research. The Family Institute is a center for direct care, academic learning and new discovery. For more information on The Family Institute, visit www.family-institute.org or call 847-733-4300.