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Monitoring the Impact of Divorce and Remarriage on Families

IMPORTANT NEW FINDINGS

In 1991, my master's program in marriage and family therapy at Abilene Christian University required me to take a course in non-traditional family therapy. The focus of the course was therapy with single parents and stepfamilies, which at the time was generally referred to as "nontraditional families." Another course in our program suggested that divorce and remarriage was a "major variation" in the typical stages of the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Today, many family professionals assume divorce and remarriage to be normative to the life cycle of families and researchers talk about "nontraditional stepfamilies" (i.e., those formed after non-marital birth and same-sexed stepfamily couples) (Stewart, 2007). Truly, many things have changed in the last two decades.

Divorce and subsequent stepfamily relationships are now quite common in our culture. A 2011 Pew Research Center report confirmed that 42% of adult Americans (95.5 million adults) have a steprelationship—either a stepparent, a step or half sibling, or a stepchild (Parker, 2011). There are 35 million Americans who are currently remarried (U.S. Census, 2007), and I estimate that 30% of all weddings form stepfamilies, whether preceded by death, divorce, or non-marital birth (Deal, 2011a). The overall divorce rate is 43-46%, but when we factor in those that end in permanent separation, the voluntary dissolution rate is still half of all marriages (Amato, 2010). The remarriage divorce rate is at least 60% and the stepcouple divorce rate approximately two-thirds (Deal & Olson, 2010), making redi-orce a demographic category unto itself. In 2008, one-third of all people experiencing divorce were actually redi-oring, that is, going through a second or subsequent divorce (Manning, 2010), and it is predicted that a full 16% of people born after 1970 will marry, divorce, remarry, and redi-orce (Cherlin, 2009).

The Impact

A great deal of research on the impact of divorce and remarriage on the well-being of parents and children has been conducted. A thorough summary of these findings is beyond the scope of this article, but here are a few noteworthy findings from the last decade.

■ **For children, multiple transitions in and out of family contexts have a cumulative negative emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual impact.** Divorce opens the door to serial family transitions. According to sociologist, Andrew Cherlin, 10% of women in the U.S. have had three or more marriages, divorces, or cohabiting partners by age 35; by age 15, 29% of children have experienced two or more mother partnerships (2009). In addition to sharing lower levels of economic, academic, and emotional well-being with children of single divorce, children of multiple parental

relational transitions (including cohabitation, marriage and divorce) are more likely to have sex at an earlier age, have their first child out of wedlock, and have a lower confidence in the institution of marriage (expressed in increasingly higher levels of cohabitation, delayed marriage, and quick divorce when they do marry). A cumulative impact with each transition seems clear. However, what about the spiritual development of children; what impact do serial marital transitions have on faith formation?

While research in this area is lacking, I argue that serial family transitions short-circuit the passage of faith in the home. Being exposed to multiple value sets dilutes a coherent gospel message (Deal, 2011b). For example, a mother's liberal values, a father's fundamental beliefs, a stepmom's church preference, a cohabiting stepfather's agnostic leanings, and a second stepfather's charismatic expressions can leave a child confused, at best, and, at worse, trying to make peace with each faith perspective. Children in modern society are growing up learning to accept multiple value sets, which contributes to a natural resistance to the notion of one single truth. This, I believe, is fueling post-modernism throughout our culture.¹ Therefore, primary prevention of first-marriage divorce and secondary prevention of stepfamily redi-orce should be a priority of therapists and church ministers. If we are to mediate the emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual consequences of divorce and facilitate the passage of biblical faith from one generation to the next, we must equip families and stepfamilies for healthy living and, in so doing, break the generational cycle of divorce and redi-orce.

■ **Continuing family emotional processes.** Despite what a leaving partner may believe, divorce does not end family life, it just reorganizes it, particularly when children are involved. Divorce represents a significant change in the legal and social lives of couples and families, but the emotional attachments and relational processes continue after the divorce is final. For example, our culture suggests to unhappy spouses that divorce is the way to independence and personal happiness, but since there are no ex-parents, only ex-spouses, couples are forever connected—bickering, posturing and parenting—despite the divorce. In addition, children are repetitively caught in (or taking advantage of) the polarization of their parents (Sweeney, 2010; Deal, 2002).

■ **Divorce is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children, adolescents and adults.** Numerous studies report that compared to children from intact biological homes, children of divorce, on average, score lower on a variety of emotional, behavioral, social and academic outcomes (Amato, 2010). One long-term study found that emotional problems actually increased as individuals who experienced childhood parental divorce reached young and middle adulthood (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998). In addition, even when clinical levels of

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depression or anxiety are not found, researchers point out that children often deal with subclinical levels of pain, stress, and a lack of emotional safety (see Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Marquardt, 2005). Negative outcomes are not necessarily *caused* by the divorce itself but, to a degree, are casualties of the process of marital dissolution (which extends over time) and the reformulation of the family system (i.e., a multi-household family) after divorce (see Amato, 2010).

■ **Divorced adults have more negative symptoms than married individuals.** Studies over the past two decades show that divorced men and women have lower levels of physical and mental health, more symptoms of depression and anxiety, increased levels of substance use, and a greater risk of mortality (see summary of research in Amato, 2010).

■ **Remarriage relationships differ from first-marriages in some significant ways.** A national study by Deal and Olson (2010) found that healthy remarriages and first-marriages share some key strengths, including effective communication skills, managing conflict, and couple flexibility. However, these unique dynamics of remarriage can have significant negative impact on couple satisfaction: negative behavior in partners (e.g., temper, overly critical), the absence of shared leisure time, and the presence of jealousy and fear of another breakup. Furthermore, couple satisfaction prior to remarriage is primarily related to dyadic factors but, after the wedding, is increasingly related to stepfamily dynamics and stepparenting satisfaction. It is much harder to be a family than it is to be a couple, which is why pre-stepfamily counseling must equip couples for stepfamily living as much as for marriage.

■ **Remarriage and stepfamily living offers mixed outcomes to children.** When compared to children living with two married biological parents, children with stepparents tend not to fare as well on measures of education, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. When compared to children living with single parents, outcomes are mixed: children with stepparents have poorer well-being regarding emotional outcomes, but better well-being with respect to health and some behavioral outcomes (see summary of findings in Sweeney, 2010).

Redemptive Living

Lifelong marriage that procreates children and raises them in a strong, stable emotional context is God's design for child and adult development, as well as spiritual maturation. Divorce and remarriage brings consequences, some positive and some negative. However, in the hands of the Redeemer, every family can be a tool of redemption (Deal, 2007). We cannot ignore the impact of divorce and remarriage, but we should never cast aside those who experience it. Like Jesus, for the woman at the well (John 4), let us be pathways of living water. ✚



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Endnote

¹ To be clear, I am not blaming post-modernism on divorce, but I am suggesting that divorce, remarriage, and redi-orce provides a vehicle for post-modern thinking to be transmitted throughout society.

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