

Divorce impacts felt into adulthood

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Divorce can have a multitude of short-term negative effects on children, including anxiety, anger, shock and disbelief. New Penn State research indicates parental divorce can have long-lasting impacts and even influence the health of adult children.

According to Jason Thomas, assistant professor of sociology and demography, decades of research shows that parental divorce can negatively impact outcomes from early childhood. However, little study has been done on the timing of parental divorce and its effects on adult health.

"I've always been interested in health and longevity and how early adversities or advantages changes pathways to adult [health outcomes](#). Divorce is just another early experience for us to examine," Thomas explained.

Thomas and his research team used data from the National Child Development Study, which follows the lives of 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1958. Also known as the 1958 Birth Cohort Study, it collected information such as physical and educational development, economic circumstances, employment, family life, health and wellbeing through the age of 50.

He found that individuals in the study who experienced a parental divorce before age seven had poorer health at age 50. "I had assumed younger children would have more adverse health affects as adults, but earlier research was mixed," said Thomas.

The evidence suggests that a decline in the family's socioeconomic status post-divorce was the most significant change influencing negative outcomes. Thomas also found a correlation with smoking, suggesting it may be a behavior adopted by children dealing with psychological and emotional stresses associated with parental divorce.

"This indicates [child development](#) is the result of a cumulative process where early experiences with disadvantages associated with parental divorce leads to less desirable outcomes.

"It's fascinating, health inequities among groups seem to be getting wider, which leads us to question how much early exposures to risks and opportunities affect [health](#) and longevity. I'd like to think studies such as this one are making progress in helping us find the answers," said Thomas.

In the future, Thomas would like to incorporate measurements of [parental involvement](#) and the effects of [parental divorce](#) on different racial and ethnic groups. "Ideally, we'd like to use American subjects to see what similarities or differences might be revealed," Thomas said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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