

Parents of teenage daughters more likely to divorce, says study

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Seems harmless? Credit: shutterstock.com

Sullen exchanges and broken curfews are part of life for parents of teenagers, but could this period also be a stress-test for parents' marriages?

Our new data analysis finds [parents](#) with daughters are slightly more likely to separate than those with sons, but only during the teenage years. And it's the strained relationship between parents and their daughters that might bring a couple to the breaking point.

[Our working paper](#) studied more than 2 million marriages in The Netherlands over ten years and shows that divorce risks increase with children's ages until they reach adulthood – with parents of teenage daughters at greater risk. However, this risk disappears in cases where the fathers themselves grew up with a sister.

Evidence on daughters and divorce

Previous research examined the link between marital strains and children's gender, but it's always been a challenging area.

[Several studies](#) in the US have found that parents with first-born girls are slightly more likely to divorce than parents with first-born boys. However, [other US studies](#) have challenged this finding, and until now, there was [no evidence](#) from other developed countries showing that daughters strained marriages.

Our research examined registry data from The Netherlands. Compared with datasets used in most previous studies, Dutch records are very comprehensive. They allow us to look at exact dates of weddings, births, and divorces, and delve deeper than previous studies, which relied on self-reports and people's recollections.

More importantly, the data allow us to examine the gender of couples' children, and just how long after their birth the couples separated.

We found that up until the age of 12, there are no differences between the divorce risks faced by parents of boys and girls. However, between the ages 13 and 18, parents of first-born girls divorce more than parents of first-born boys.

The odds of divorce within this period are 10.7% for parents of boys, and 11.3% for parents of girls. In relative terms, this means that parents with teenage daughters face 5% higher risks of divorce than parents with teenage sons.

The effect peaks at age 15, when the risk faced by parents with daughters is almost 10% higher than the risk faced by parents with sons. In the following years, the differences narrow again, and they disappear once the child turns 19. A similar pattern is also found among second-born and subsequent children.

Although no causal link could be established from the Dutch data, the higher divorce rates might be explained by strained relationships between young women and their parents.

The increased odds of divorce from teenage daughters aren't unique to Dutch married couples – we find the same association for Dutch couples in de facto relationships, and for married couples in the US. In fact, we find that both of these groups face considerably higher increases of divorce odds from teenage daughters, compared to Dutch married couples.

Attitudes to gender

Social scientists suggest there are several reasons why daughters might raise divorce risks. One well-established theory says that some parents have [cultural or social preferences for sons](#).

Another theory assumes that boys are more vulnerable and their need of a male role model makes fathers [more committed to the marriage](#). There is also a sex-selection theory which postulates that mothers whose marriages are more stressful may be more likely to [give birth to a baby girl](#).

However, we do not find empirical evidence in support of any of these theories.

Instead, our findings suggest the higher divorce rates are explained by strains in the relationships between some parents and their teenage daughters, possibly stemming from differences in attitudes toward [gender roles](#).

This explanation is backed by the separate analysis of a [large survey of Dutch households](#), which asked families about their relationships and opinions regarding marriage, gender and parenting.

Parents of teenage daughters disagreed more about the way they should raise their children, and expressed more positive attitudes towards divorce. They were also less satisfied with the quality of their family relationships.

Teenage daughters, in turn, reported worse relationships with their fathers, though not with their mothers.

Growing up with a sister

We took our research a step further – we looked at the father's family history to investigate the link between fathers and their daughters. Specifically, we compared the divorce risks faced by fathers who grew up with sisters, and fathers who did not.

Our hypothesis is that the fathers who had more experience relating to [teenage girls](#) (via their sisters) would experience fewer relationship strains with their teenage daughters. This could occur because fathers with sisters may hold more egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles, or because they have a better understanding of teenage girls and their family interactions.

And in line with this reasoning, we found that the fathers who grew up with sisters did not face any increase in divorce risks from teenage daughters – the pattern only appeared among fathers who grew up without sisters.

We also looked at other family characteristics that could indicate differences between the gender-role attitudes held by parents and their daughters, such as the ages or immigration background of the couple. Here, we found that the parents who are likely to hold more traditional attitudes toward gender roles experienced higher increases of divorce odds from teenage daughters.

Destined for divorce?

Despite their relative significance during the teenage years, the difference in the divorce risks faced by families with boys and girls remains modest over the child's lifetime.

By the time their first-born children reached age 25, 311 out of every 1,000 Dutch couples with daughters had divorced compared to 307 of every 1,000 with sons – a difference of only four divorces per 1,000 couples.

And our finding of a null effect among [fathers](#) who grew up with sisters also shows that the association between a child's gender and [divorce](#) risk is not universal.

However, our results do point to serious strains between some parents and their teenage

daughters, and help us understand the factors contributing to family breakdown.

The results also suggest these risks can be reduced if the parents of teenage daughters adopt more egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles and a greater understanding of how conflicts could come up.

Struggles with teenagers will still happen, but better preparation and knowledge of the wants and needs of their teenage [daughters](#) could reduce the strain between partners.

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