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Characteristics of families that separate which help account for long-term outcomes in the children:
The Australian PATH Through Life Project

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Background (1)

- In developed countries, children from divorced families show long-term disadvantages across a range of psychological, social and family outcomes.
- There is circumstantial evidence that these disadvantages are not due to family separation per se.
- There is very little direct evidence as to what other types of childhood adversity help account for this disadvantage.



Background (2)

- Parental divorce is not a random event; it is associated with a range of factors (existing before divorce) that are known to influence child development.
- Divorce can lead to other adversity (eg financial hardship).
- Conflict and financial hardship associated with divorce have been studied extensively but other adversities have not.
- No individual study has attempted to cover a comprehensive range of other adversities.



Aims

- To quantify differences between adults from divorced families of origin and those from intact families across a broader range of psychological, social and family outcomes than covered in previous studies.
- To identify what aspects of childhood adversity and abuse contribute to such differences and determine whether parental separation has any residual (i.e. "direct") effect.



PATH Through Life Project

- Three cohorts aged 20-24, 40-44, 60-64 yrs
- Sampled from the electoral rolls for Canberra (ACT) and Queanbeyan (NSW)
- First interviewed in 1999, 2000 & 2001 respectively
- N = 2,404 (20+), 2,530 (40+) & 2,551 (60+)
- Parental divorce reported by 21.5%, 12.0% & 10.1%

Adult outcome measures

Mental health: depression, anxiety*, suicidal ideation.

Education: completion of 2° education, completion of 3° education or currently studying*.

Drug use: current heavy alcohol use, current smoker, ever used marijuana.

Life transitions: first intercourse <16yrs, left parental home <17yrs*, first partner <20yrs, first child <20yrs.

*Excluded because of cohort*divorce interaction terms

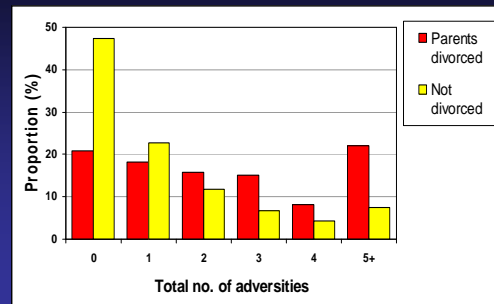
PATH survey: childhood adversities

- 6 items on lack of affection, depression, and drinking or other drug use in father and mother figures
- 1 item each on household conflict
- 1 item on financial hardship
- 8 items on the experience of: neglect; a strict upbringing; humiliation; verbal, physical and sexual abuse from parent figures; receiving too much physical punishment; witnessing physical or sexual abuse in the family.

Prevalence of other childhood adversities

	%		%
mother had depression	23.6	verbally abused by parent	6.5
father drinking/drug problem	17.6	humiliated/ridiculed/bullied	5.9
a lot of household conflict	17.2	mother had drinking/drug problem	5.6
father had depression	17.0	witnessed phys/sex abuse	5.5
strict/authoritarian upbringing	16.0	physically abused	5.2
poverty or financial hardship	11.6	mother not affectionate	2.7
too much physical punishment	8.2	neglected	1.6
father not affectionate	7.8	sexually abused	1.1

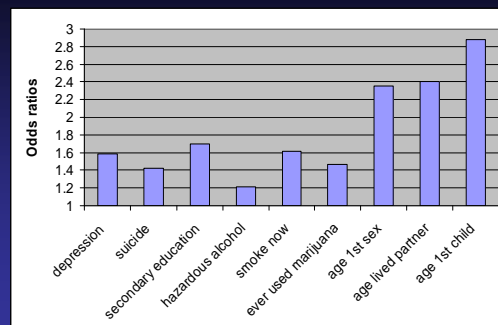
Parental divorce and number of other childhood adversities



Statistical analysis

- Logistic regression provided odds ratios (ORs) for the association between parental separation and each binary outcome, adjusted for gender and cohort.
- Backward stepwise models determined which other adversities contributed significantly to the prediction of each outcome.
- These other adversities were added to the initial model for each outcome in the order that produced the largest reduction in the OR for parental divorce.

Associations with parental divorce



Depression and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	1.59	
+ household conflict	1.17 (N.S.)	67%
+ mother's depression	1.11	78%
+ father not affectionate	1.09	82%

*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Suicidal ideation and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	1.42	
+ household conflict	1.07 (N.S.)	80%
+ mother's depression	1.00	99%

*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Secondary education and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	1.70	
+ father's drink/drugs	1.59	13%
+ poverty	1.51	22%
+ mother's drink/drugs	1.48	26%
+ physical punishment	1.46	28%

*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Smoking and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	1.62	
+ father's drink/drugs	1.53	13%
+ mother's drink/drugs	1.46	22%
+ mother's depression	1.43	26%
+ father not affectionate	1.41	29%

*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Marijuana and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	1.46	
+ household conflict	1.25	41%
+ mother's drink/drugs	1.21	49%
+ mother's depression	1.19	53%
+ physical punishment	1.19	55%
+ strict upbringing	1.18	55%

*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Sexual intercourse <16 yrs and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	2.35	
+ father's drink/drugs	2.19	8%
+ mother's drink/drugs	2.08	14%
+ neglect	2.00	19%
+ witnessed abuse	1.95	22%
+ physical punishment	1.93	23%

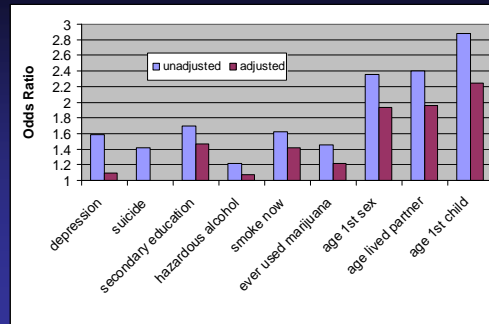
*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Child born <20 yrs and parental divorce

Model	OR*	% explained
Parental divorce only	2.88	
+ father's drink/drugs	2.54	12%
+ witnessed abuse	2.40	17%
+ mother's drink/drugs	2.30	21%
+ physical punishment	2.24	24%

*Odds ratio for parental divorce

Associations with parental divorce: unadjusted and adjusted



Limitations and strengths

- Retrospective assessment of childhood adversity.
- No information on the timing of adversity in relation to the time of parental separation.
- Omission of adversities outside of the family.
- General population sample.
- Wide range of (i) childhood adversities and (ii) adult outcome measures.

Conclusions (1)

- Adults report many childhood adversities other than parental divorce and a proportion report multiple adversity (e.g. >10% for 5+ adversities).
- Those who experienced parental divorce are more likely to report other childhood adversities than those whose parents did not separate (e.g. OR = 4.0 for 5+ other adversities).

Conclusions (2)

- Expected odds ratios of 1.5 – 2.0 for parental divorce across adult outcomes, but higher for life transitions.
- Reduction of odds ratios when adjusted for other measured adversities but less so for life transitions and completion of secondary education where significant “direct” effects remained.
- Importance of conflict, mother's depression and father's drink drug problems. Conflict was especially implicated for mental health outcomes.