

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Divorce rates have increased in the past three decades. Much research has focused on the effects of divorce on children and adolescents' emotional adjustment. Measures of self-esteem are one way to determine emotional development. Less attention has been devoted to understanding the effect divorce has on another very important developmental stage, early adolescence. The purpose of this study was to examine the effect divorce has on early adolescents' self-esteem. It was proposed that the number of life events and divorce-related events would mediate the effect that divorce has on early adolescents' self-esteem.

It was found that early adolescents from divorced families had lower self-esteem than early adolescents from intact families. There was no evidence that life events or divorce-related events mediated this effect. No significant relationship was found between life events and self-esteem

for either the intact or divorce group independently. However, when the two groups were combined, a significant relationship was found between life events and self-esteem. The quality, "good" vs. "bad", of the reported events made no difference in these analysis.

**The Effects of Divorce and Related Stressors on  
Early Adolescents' Self-Esteem**

**by**

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# THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE AND RELATED STRESSORS ON EARLY ADOLESCENTS' SELF-ESTEEM

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Divorce rates in the United States have increased at a rapid rate over the last 30 years. Goetting (1981) estimated that divorce would affect as many as one-third of all children in the U.S. in the next few decades. As the incidence of divorce has increased, so has the amount of research exploring its effects on children. Studies have examined a variety of outcomes for children, including behavioral, academic and emotional adjustment. The results of these studies are mixed. While some studies have found that children from divorced families have more problems than children from intact families, others have found no differences. The intent of this study was to add to this growing body of literature by examining the effect of divorce on the emotional adjustment of early adolescents, measured by self-esteem scores, and the relationship between self-esteem and divorce-related stressors.

Self-esteem is one important indicator of children's emotional adjustment. Studies analyzing differences in levels of self-esteem between children from divorced and intact

families have yielded mixed results. Some studies have found that children from divorced families have lower self-esteem than those from intact families (e.g., Beer, 1989; Parish & Taylor, 1979). Other studies have found no differences in self-esteem (e.g., Amato & Ochiltree, 1987; Raschke & Raschke, 1979). Many of these studies have also assessed the relationship between family conflict and self-esteem (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Raschke & Raschke, 1979; Slater & Haber, 1984). Although there is some evidence of a significant relationship between conflict and self-esteem, most of these studies are marred by weak and inconsistent measures of family conflict. For example, many of the measures were conceived by the researchers and were not checked for reliability or validity.

Family conflict is just one of many stressors related to divorce. In examining the impact divorce has on children's emotional well-being, it is important to consider that divorce is not a single experience or event, but rather a series of events (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982; Wertlieb, 1988). Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, & Fogas, (1986) asserted that divorce involves a series of transitions, including changes in parent-child relationships, their environment, and economic conditions. Therefore, they proposed that in order to understand the divorce process and its effect on children's well-being fully, it is essential to consider the series of

stressors related to divorce. This is in line with Rutter's (1983) idea of cumulative stress. He proposes that a single stressor has little effect on an individual. However, multiple stressors increase adverse effects.

Many studies have found evidence that children are significantly affected by divorce-related events and that a higher occurrence of events is related to more adverse effects on children (e.g., Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1986; Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, & Fogas, 1991). When studying the effects life changes have on children's emotional well-being, it is important to remember that each divorce is unique and presents different combinations of events and experiences for children. It is this combination that ultimately has an effect on children's well being.

Much of the research on the effects of divorce has focused on school-aged children. Lesser attention has been devoted to early adolescents. Yet, there is reason to believe that early adolescents may be especially vulnerable to the negative impact of divorce. During this developmental period, individuals encounter many normative changes that may be stressful in and of themselves. For example, early adolescents experience physical changes due to puberty. They also suffer emotional changes as they individuate from their parents and turn to their peers in search of identity. It has been shown that self-esteem drops during this period, especially for girls

(Nottelmann, 1987; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1983). The added stressors often associated with divorce may negatively effect children's psychological adjustment, specifically self-esteem. According to Rutter's (1983) cumulative stress theory, the greater the number of stressors faced by early adolescents from divorced families, the greater the adverse effects. However, more information about the effects of divorce and the ensuing life changes on early adolescents' self-esteem is needed before any conclusive statements can be drawn. This study attempts to shed new light on this topic.

As the amount of literature focusing on the effects of divorce on children expands, so does our knowledge of this complicated subject. The mixed results of studies assessing children's emotional adjustment to divorce may be due to unidentified confounding variables, unrepresentative samples, and variability in the effects. This study attempted to control for third variables by measuring socio-economic status (SES) and using a control group.

This study examined the effect that multiple divorce-related life events have on early adolescents' self-esteem. It was expected that the increased of life changes related to divorce would have a negative effect on early adolescents' self-esteem. It was also predicted that early adolescents from divorced families would experience more life events than

early adolescents from intact families. Finally, early adolescence is typically a very stressful age period due to the many social, physical and emotional changes faced by the individual. Therefore, utilizing Rutter's (1983) theory of cumulative stress, it was expected that overall self-esteem would be lower for early adolescents from divorced families.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Effects of Divorce on Children's and Adolescent's Self-Esteem

The psychological effects of divorce on children and adolescents has been a much studied topic. Although this outcome has been measured in a variety of ways, this review will cover studies using self-esteem or self-concept as indicators of emotional well-being. Research on the effects of divorce on self-esteem are mixed. While some studies have found significant differences in self-esteem between children from intact and divorced families, others have found no differences.

Studies that found a significant relationship between self-esteem and divorce

In a longitudinal study of divorced families, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) found evidence of behavioral problems, depression, and low self-

esteem for both children and adolescents from divorced homes. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data from both children and adults, this study followed a group of 60 divorced families from Northern California over a 10 year period. The children in the original study ranged in age from 2 1/2 to 18 years. Although the longitudinal design was a strength, this study failed to use a control group, rendering it impossible to conclude that this sample differs from children and adolescents from intact families.

Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1986) also utilized a longitudinal design. The Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage had 144 parents and their children in the original sample. This group was studied 2 months, 1 year, 2 years, and 6 years following the divorce. The divorced parents and their children were from a white middle-class area in Virginia. The non-divorced families were selected by matching each child in the divorce group with a child of the same sex, age, and birth order attending the same nursery school. A number of measures were used in this study, including interviews, parental diaries, observations of parent-child interactions at home and school, peer nomination, and teacher ratings. In addition, measures of the child's sex-role typing, cognitive performance, and social development were obtained.

Hetherington (1989) found that psychological, emotional, and behavior problems experienced by children and parents were most pronounced during the first two years following the divorce. Although a direct measure of self-esteem was not mentioned, there was evidence of poor emotional adjustment.

Parish and Taylor (1979) studied the impact of divorce on children's and adolescents' self-concept. Measures of self-esteem and self-concept were used as indicators of psychological well-being. The self-concept of a sample of 406 grade school and junior high school students was assessed using a measure developed by the authors. They found that children and adolescents from divorced families had significantly lower self-concepts than subjects from intact families.

Beer (1989) examined the relation of divorce to self-esteem. The sample consisted of 58 children in grades 5 and 6, 21 children from divorced homes, and 37 from nondivorced homes. Children from divorced homes scored significantly lower on measures of both self-esteem and self-concept than did children from intact families. However, scores for both groups fell within the average range.

Young and Parish (1977) found that college students whose parents had divorced had significantly lower self-esteem than did students whose parents had not divorced. However, they did not control for possible confounding

variables. For example, socio-economic status (SES) was not controlled and could have affected the students' self-esteem.

Slater, Stewart, and Linn (1983) studied the effects of family disruption on adolescent males and females. The sample consisted of 217 adolescents from New Orleans public high schools. Of those students, 58% came from intact families and 36% came from divorced families. The two groups were further divided by gender. They found that "females whose parents were still married had better self-concepts than their counterparts in disrupted families" (p. 940). The opposite was true for males.

Guidubaldi, Perry, Cleminshaw, and Mcloughlin (1983), compared 342 children from divorced families and 358 from intact families. Although self-esteem was not directly measured, they did find that children from intact families had higher social and academic adjustment scores than did children from divorced families.

In a longitudinal study of the impact of parental divorce, adolescents were asked to evaluate themselves and their parents at two time intervals, 1979 and again in 1982 (Parish & Wigle, 1985). The subjects were 639 students from Kansas. They found that children from intact families consistently evaluated themselves and their parents more positively than did children who had experienced parental divorce.

Studies that found no significant relationship between self-esteem and divorce

Hofmann and Zippco (1986) compared 17 children between the ages of 10 and 21 years from divorced families to 60 children from intact families. Self-esteem was measured with the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory. No difference in self-esteem was found between the two groups.

Similarly, Bishop and Ingersoll (1989) studied the effects of family structure on the self-concepts of pre- and early adolescents. The sample consisted of 16 mother-youth pairs from intact parent families, and 17 mother-youth pairs from separated families from a Midwestern state. They found no difference in self-concept between the two groups.

Hammond (1979) utilized a sample of 165 elementary school children, 82 from divorced families and 83 from intact families. No differences were found between the two groups on self-esteem. In fact, they found that children from divorced families responded more positively and realistically to divorce than did the children from intact families.

In their study of intact, one-parent, and step-families, Amato and Ochiltree utilized a sample from Australia (1987). This study was carefully designed, taking into consideration limitations of past research. The subjects came from third

and tenth grade classes. The sample consisted of 201 two-parent intact families, 55 step-families, and 89 one-parent families. The researchers conducted one-hour interviews with each child answering 165 questions on different aspects of family life, including self-esteem. They found that children and adolescents in one-parent families were similar to those in two-parent families. However, they found that children in step-families had lower self-esteem than children in the other types of families.

Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, and Pedro-Carroll (1985) studied the effects of divorce on latency-aged children's self-esteem. Their subjects were 268 predominantly white 9-12 year-olds from suburban New York. Ninety-eight of the children were from divorced families and were compared to 170 demographically similar children from intact families. Findings showed no difference between the two groups self-esteem as measured by the Harter Perceived Competence Scale for Children.

In their study of children from divorced, intact-rejected, and intact-accepted families, Berg and Kelly (1979) found no group differences in self-esteem. In this study, intact-rejected families were defined as intact but unhappy homes; intact-accepted families were happy homes. Their sample consisted of 57 children ranging in age from 9-15, randomly selected from those participating in a related research

project. There were 19 subjects in each of the three groups. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was used to measure self-esteem.

Similarly Johnson and Hutchinson (1989) found no correlation between family structure and children's self-concept. The Personal Attribute Inventory for Children was used to measure self-concept. The subjects were 199 students in grades 7 through 12 from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Of these students, 143 were from intact families, 23 from stepfamilies, and 32 from single-parent families.

Reese and Roosa (1991) divided early adolescents into risk groups, including parental divorce and no risk. They used the Harter Self Perception Profile for Children to assess global self-concept. Results indicated no differences in self-concept between the children in the divorce and no risk groups.

Slater and Haber (1984) studied the effect of familial conflict on adolescent adjustment. Their sample consisted of 217 adolescents from three public high schools. Fifty adolescents were from divorced homes. Using the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale as their measure of adjustment, they found no difference between the divorced and intact groups. Using a reliable measure of family conflict completed by children in the study, they found a significant positive relationship between conflict in the family and self-esteem.

In her study of the effects of divorce on the self-esteem of daughters, Long (1986) surveyed 199 female undergraduates. In this sample, 150 girls were from intact families and 49 were from divorced families. They found no significant relationship between self-esteem and family structure. However, similar to the findings reported by Slater and Haber (1984), they did find that marital happiness of the parents was significantly related to higher self-esteem. The one item measure of marital happiness was completed by the daughter, with no verification from the parent. The fact that parental marital happiness was assessed by the daughter may explain the relationship between the daughter's self-esteem and parental marital happiness. A daughter who has high self-esteem may view her parents' marriage as happy even if the parents are not happy. The opposite may also be true: Girls who perceived the marriage as unhappy may have low self-esteem.

Raschke and Raschke (1979), in their study of family structure, family conflict, and the effects on self-esteem, found similar results. Their sample consisted of 289 third, sixth, and eighth grade children. They found no relationship between children's self-concept and family structure. They found a significant negative relationship between children's self-concept and level of family conflict. However, this study also utilized a measure of family conflict completed by the

child. Again, the relationship may actually be between the child's self-concept and their perception of the level of family conflict, not actual conflict.

In a longitudinal study of a heterogeneous community sample, Mechanic and Hansell (1989) assessed the effects of divorce and family conflict on the well-being of adolescents. Their sample consisted of 1,067 seventh, ninth, and eleventh graders from 19 inner-city and suburban public schools in five communities. These students were followed over three years. The results showed that family conflict had more negative effects on student's well-being than family structure. Family conflict was a single-item measure, reported by the subjects. Subjects were asked if there was any fighting in their residence in the past year. Parents' fights were not differentiated from sibling or parent-child conflict.

Garber (1991) studied 324 college students in both intact and divorced families. He collected data using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Social Self-Concept Scale, and the Schwarz Inter-Parental Conflict Scale in addition to demographic information. The results indicated that, although family structure (intact vs. divorced) was not significantly related to self-esteem, level of interparental conflict was.

### Divorce-Related Life Events

Researchers have concluded that it is important to view divorce as a series of events. Some aspects of divorce may affect children's adjustment more than others. The number of life changes after a divorce is one aspect of divorce that may affect the child's self-esteem. Whether or not children from divorced families experience more life events in general than children from intact families is another interesting question.

Age may influence the number of life changes an individual encounters following a divorce, as well as how these changes will affect them. While most researchers have focused their attention on children, less information is available about early adolescents. Hetherington (1989) states that the timing of divorce-related events can be critical to the long-term adjustment of the child. Since early adolescence can be full of changes, it is possible that additional life changes brought about by divorce will be related to lowered self-esteem.

In their longitudinal study, described above, Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) found several areas of change and stress experienced by children following their parents' divorce. They explained the importance of viewing divorce not as a single event occurring at a single point in

time, but as an extended transition in the lives of parents and children. Changes experienced by children related to practical problems out of their control, including moving to a new residence, economic and occupational problems of the parents, and increased problems of parents in running a household. They also found that children were affected by parental emotional distress. Finally, they found stress due to changes in interpersonal relationships, both between parents and children and between parents themselves. Some of the changes between the children and their parents included parents making fewer maturity demands of their children, communicating less well with their children, being less affectionate toward the children, being inconsistent in discipline, and having less control of their children. They found this decrease in parenting skills resulted in more negative behavior exhibited by the children, especially boys. Family roles also changed. Most of the families in their study had adjusted to their changed environment by 2-3 years following the divorce, if not compounded by continued or additional adversity.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) also used a longitudinal design to study the effects of divorce on children, and, as did Hetherington et. al.(1982), they found a change in parenting after divorce. There was evidence among their sample of "decreased availability of the parent, a sharp decline in

emotional sensitivity and emotional support for the child, decreased pleasure in the relationship, decreased attentiveness to the child's needs and wishes, less talk, less play, less interaction altogether, and a steep escalation in the inappropriate expression of anger"( p 117). They found that, because of these changes, children become burdened with more than just the immediate impact of divorce. They also experience a series of divorce-related changes in daily living. These burdens add additional stress to the normative changes of growing up, especially during early adolescence. Children from divorced families expressed feeling that no one was in charge at their house, that they were responsible for their own care and the care of their parent.

In their ten year follow up of children who were early adolescents at the time of the divorce, Wallerstein and Kelly, (1974) found that divorce-related events shortened the normally available time span for the accomplishment of early adolescent tasks, including individuating from the parents. They found that there was either temporary interference with entry into adolescence, parents keeping their children dependent on them, or accelerated entrance into heterosexual activity. Children at this age typically faced loyalty issues and changes in their perceptions of their parent, not as a parent but as a sexual object. Even though the researchers viewed divorce-related events as time limited stressors, they

described this time as a painful experience marked by an acceleration and telescoping of normal developmental difficulties and conflicts.

Utilizing the qualitative data in her report of the ten-year follow up study, Wallerstein (1985) found that subjects who were preadolescents at the time of divorce felt they had been required to take on more responsibility at an earlier age and that they had missed out on some of their childhood, suggesting that some psychological effects of divorce are long lasting.

MaGrab (1978) also considers divorce a significant event in children's lives. He stated that children may face substantial stress due to the many new adjustments in their lives in addition to the fact of divorce, including changes in relationships with parents, school, and peer groups. MaGrab found adolescents had concerns about money and loyalty conflicts. When there is a divorce, the difficulties of adolescence become exacerbated.

In a review of literature on children's adjustment to their parents divorce, Kurdek (1981) found that the kind and degree of changes experienced after the divorce were related to its effects on children. He discovered that changes following a divorce were not only environmental, but included marked changes in the parent's personal functioning and the relationship between the parents and their children. He stated

that it is especially difficult if these changes are beyond the control of the child, such as economic status or moving to a new house or neighborhood.

Kurdek's literature review concluded that studies measuring the effects of divorce on adolescent development are mixed. While some studies found that the adolescent's cognitive ability to understand the divorce resulted in minimal effect on their personality development, others found that the longer exposure to parental conflict has a maximum effect. He pointed out that many studies utilized only the parent's perception of the child's adjustment that may be colored by their emotional state. Assessment of the child's perspective and attitudes about divorce is essential to understanding more clearly their adjustment to it.

### Impact of Life Events on Children's Adjustment

#### Studies utilizing samples of divorced families

In 1991, Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, and Fogas examined the stability and quality of life events and the effect they had on children from divorced families. They used two groups of children between the ages of 8-15 in separate studies. There were 142 subjects in the first study and 64 in the second. Both studies used the Divorce Events Schedule for Children

(DESC) to measure the stability and quality of life events. To measure the children's self-reported adjustment, the first study used the Child Depression Inventory and the Child Manifest Anxiety Scale. The second study used the Youth Self-Report version of the Child Behavior Checklist. They found that an increased occurrence of negative events was related to children's self-rated maladjustment, but that consistent negative events were not related to children's self-rated maladjustment.

Kurdek and Blisk (1981) found that children who experienced high levels of change following their parents' divorce had low levels of social and psychological adjustment. The changes they examined included number of people living in the home, hours each parent spends with the child, monthly income, monthly rent or mortgage, and waking hours each parent spends in the home where the child lives.

Using a path analysis of factors predicting children's divorce adjustment, Stolberg and Bush (1985) found that higher frequencies of children's life change events correlated with lower prosocial skills and greater externalized psychopathology. Their subjects consisted of 82 mothers and their 7 to 13-year-old children. They used the Life Experiences Survey to measure environmental change events, and the Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale and the Child Behavior Checklist to measure child's adjustment. They also found that

younger children reported a greater number of life change events.

### Studies utilizing samples of intact and divorced families

Stolberg and Anker (1983) compared behavioral and cognitive changes in children from divorced and intact families resulting from divorce and the environmental changes which ensued. Their sample consisted of 39 children from divorced families and 40 children from intact families. The children's mothers filled out the Environmental Change Questionnaire, Recent Life Changes Questionnaire, and the Child Behavior Checklist/Child Behavior Profile. The children completed Osgood's Semantic Differential. Results showed that the greatest overt behavior pathology was significantly associated with the greatest number of environmental changes for the divorce group. They found the inverse to be true for the intact group, with more environmental changes being related to lower behavior pathology. They suggested that this may have to do with the types of change experienced by each group. One problem with this study is that the number of environmental changes was supplied by the mothers. Although

the information may be accurate, the child's perception of the number of changes could lead to different results.

Hodges, London, and Colwell (1990) compared children from intact and divorced families on levels of parent-oriented and child-oriented stressful events and their effects on the child's adjustment. Parents filled out a demographic questionnaire, the Child's Social Readjustment Rating Scale, Parent's Life Events Inventory, and the Achenbach and Edelbrock Child Behavior Checklist for Ages 4-16. Forty families with children in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades, 20 from intact and 20 from divorced families participated. They found that the stressful life events of the parent were more highly correlated with the child's adjustment than the stressful life events of the child. In addition, they found that children of divorce have more adjustment problems than children of intact families.

#### Impact of Life Events on the Self-Esteem of Children from Divorced Families

Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, and Wells (1987), proposed that environmental change caused by divorce impacts children in two ways. First, the child who is already frustrated by the

loss of one parent is further burdened by increased life events, such as moving or loss of income. Second, children may have to acquire new skills to cope with their changed environment. For example, they may need new ways to express the higher levels of anger and frustration that the changes bring. In their comparison study of mothers and children from divorced and intact families, they assessed the impact of life change events on children's self-concept. The children in their study were between 7 and 13 years old. There were 82 subjects in the divorced group, and 47 in the intact group. The Children's Recent Life Events Questionnaire, Life Experiences Survey, and the Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale were used. They concluded that, after a divorce, a child's life changes are the most significant indicator of their maladjustment, especially when the life changes are negative.

Hodges, Tierney, and Buchsbaum (1984) studied the cumulative effect of stress on preschool children from both intact and divorced families. Their sample consisted of 30 divorced mothers and 60 married mothers. Each mother filled out a questionnaire that included a parent information section, a child behavior checklist, the Child's Life Events Inventory, Parent's Life Events Inventory, and, when appropriate, a divorced parent questionnaire. The children's preschool teachers filled out the Teacher's Checklist. Their results indicated four ways for stress to affect children. First, the

divorce itself may negatively affect children's behavior. Second, divorce may increase the chances of certain changes occurring in children's lives that will have a negative effect on behavior, such as moving or loss of financial stability. Third, there may be an additive effect of the parent stressors onto the stress of the child after divorce. Finally, inadequate income may cause depression and anxiety in the children.

### Summary

Many studies have examined the relationship between divorce and children's self-esteem, with mixed results. Some studies have found that children from divorced families have lower self-esteem than children from intact families, while others have found no differences in self-esteem between the two groups. In an attempt to explain the mixed results, some researchers have considered other variables that may confound the results.

One variable that has been identified as effecting children's self-esteem is family conflict. Studies have consistently found that high levels of family conflict are related to low levels of self-esteem regardless of family structure (e.g., Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Raschke & Raschke, 1979; and Slater & Haber, 1984).

Family conflict is only one effect of divorce or life event typically experienced by children from divorced families. Although family conflict is important, it is beyond the scope of this study to include it in analysis. However, family conflict is one of many life events included in the life events scale used. Researchers have come to understand divorce as a process, a multitude of changes, or a series of life events. Some studies suggest that it is not divorce itself, but the

changes or stressors associated with divorce that cause some children's self-esteem to decrease (e.g., McGrab, 1978; Stolberg & Anker, 1983; and Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Rutter (1980) suggested that there is a cumulative effect of stress. As the number of stressors increases, the level of adjustment decreases. This cumulative effect has been shown to exist with children from divorced families (Stolberg et al., 1987).

Another consideration of researchers is the age of the child when the divorce occurs. Much research has been conducted on children, with less attention devoted to early adolescents. Yet, early adolescence is a time of many normative changes and developmental stressors. These developmental life events, in addition to the life events associated with divorce, may cause a significant decrease in psychological adjustment for early adolescents from divorced families.

There have been few studies that have examined the effect that cumulative number of life events they experience has on self-esteem,. This study attempted to fill this gap in the literature by adding to the existing research on the effects of divorce on early adolescents. This study utilized a control group to examine the effect general life events have on early adolescents self-esteem from intact families compared to

early adolescents from divorced families. Based on these studies, the following hypotheses were examined.

### Hypotheses

Hypothesis One. Early adolescents from divorced families will have lower self-esteem than those from intact families.

Hypothesis Two. Early adolescents from divorced families will report more life events than those from intact families.

Hypothesis Three. Early adolescents from divorced families who report a high level of divorce related events will also report more life events in general.

Hypothesis Four. Early adolescents from divorced families who have a greater number of life events and divorce events will have lower self-esteem than early adolescents from divorced families with a lower number of life events and divorce events.

Hypothesis Five. Early adolescents from divorced families with high levels of reported life events will have lower self-esteem than early adolescents from intact families with high levels of reported life events.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

### Subjects

The subjects were 66 early adolescents ranging in age from 9-14 years from the Salem, Oregon area. Most of the subjects were from white middle class backgrounds. The socio-economic status (SES) was determined by a prestige rating scale based on parents' job. Out of the total sample, 32 early adolescents (11 boys and 21 girls), with a mean age of 11.58 years, came from divorced families. Most had recently experienced divorce. These subjects were recruited from the community for a divorce recovery support group held at a local church. The early adolescents filled out the questionnaire for this study in the first week. During the following seven weeks they broke into small groups to process their experiences surrounding divorce. This support group coincided with an adult divorce recovery workshop. However, not all the children's parents attended this group.

The remaining 34 subjects (11 boys and 23 girls), with a mean age of 12.0, were from intact families. These early adolescents were recruited from a weekly family gathering

held at the same local church. Subjects in this group were all from families whose parents had never been divorced.

### Instruments

A questionnaire was given to each subject. Demographic information was assessed including age, gender, grade in school, height, weight, mother's name and occupation, and father's name and occupation. Although several different measures were included in the questionnaire, only the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory, the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale, and the Divorce Events Schedule for Children will be used in this study.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI), found in Appendix A, is designed to measure global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). It is a self-report measure in which respondents rate their agreement with 10 statements that describe what they are like. For example, one of the questions reads, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." The responses are measured on a Likert scale, and the subject chooses one of four possible answers: "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

The Rosenberg SEI was designed for adolescents and was originally administered to 5,024 high school juniors and seniors in New York (Johnson, 1976). The SEI was found to have internal reliability, the reproducibility was 92% and the scalability 72%. In a study by Silber and Tippet (1965), the test-retest reliability for 40 college students was .85. Although no coefficients were given, Johnson (1976) reported high construct validity based on a high correlation between the SEI and a scale of depressive affect.

The Adolescent Perceived Events Scale. The version of the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES) for young adolescents ages 12-14 years was used (see appendix B). This measure assesses the major and daily stressful events during adolescence. The subjects rate each life event as occurring or not within the past three months and then identify the desirability of the event. The APES is scored by summing the number of events checked in each of the three categories.

The APES was created and tested for reliability and validity over four test periods (Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987). The first study generated a pool of daily stressors. Study two identified the cognitive appraisal scales on which the events would be assessed. Test-retest reliability was assessed in the third study and found to be .89. In the last study validity was measured. Results indicated that the corroboration with a peer report was .82, and the

significant correlations with emotional adjustment ranged from .27 to .60 (Williams & Uchiyama, 1989).

The Divorce Events Schedule for Children. The Divorce Events Schedule for Children (DESC) assesses divorce-related life events and changes (Sandler, Wolchik, Braver & Fogas, 1986). The scale consists of 62 events the subject checks if each has occurred within the last three months. If the event has occurred the subject then checks whether the event was positive, negative, or neutral. The events on the scale are generally the type of transactions that could occur repeatedly during the course of a year, rather than major changes that occur infrequently. For example, "Dad does extra nice things for you, that you like." or " Mom asks you questions about Dad's private life." The DESC is scored by summing the number of items checked in each category.

Test-retest reliability for the positive event scores was  $r=.65$ , and for the negative event scores was  $r=.85$ . Although no validity score is available, a significant correlation between negative event scores and measures of children's psychological symptomatology was found, providing evidence of construct validity (Sandler, Wolchik and Braver, 1985).

### Procedure

The questionnaires were given to the early adolescents from divorced families on the first day of the support group. They were allowed to take them home to complete and were requested to return them by the last session. The subjects from intact families received their questionnaires from their parents. The study was briefly explained to the parents at one of the weekly meetings, and the questionnaires handed out to anyone who was not divorced or separated with children between the ages of 9-14. The parents were responsible for turning in the completed questionnaire to a researcher affiliated with the church.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

### Testing the Hypothesis

#### Hypothesis One

Hypothesis one stated that early adolescents from divorced families will have lower self-esteem than those from intact families. This hypothesis was investigated by a least square means procedure controlling for age of adolescents and socioeconomic status of parents. As shown in Table 1, adolescents from divorced homes had significantly lower self-esteem than early adolescents from intact families.

#### Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two stated that early adolescents from divorced families will report more life events than those from intact families. This hypothesis was also investigated by a least square means procedure controlling for age of adolescents and socioeconomic status of their parents. The results did not support this hypothesis. Early adolescents from intact families did not report more life events than early adolescents from divorced families (see Table 1).

#### Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three stated that early adolescents from divorced families who report a high level of divorce-related

events will also report more life events in general. This hypothesis was investigated by correlating divorce events and life events for early adolescents from divorced families. The correlation between divorce-related events and life events reported by early adolescents from divorced families was high ( $r=.79$ ), but not significant.

#### Hypothesis Four

Hypothesis four stated that early adolescents from divorced families who have a greater number of life events and divorce events will have lower self-esteem than early adolescents from divorced families with a lower number of life events and divorce events. This hypothesis was investigated by running a regression. Both life events and divorce events were regressed on self-esteem for early adolescents from divorced families (see Table 2). The results of the analysis did not support the hypothesis; self-esteem was not affected by divorce and life events for early adolescents from divorced families.

In order to further investigate this finding, divorce events were singled out into a separate variable and regressed onto self-esteem for early adolescents from divorced families. The result of this analysis was non-significant. Early adolescents from divorced families who reported a high number of divorce related events did not have low self-esteem. The divorce events scale was then broken down into reported

"good" events and "bad" events and each was individually regressed onto self-esteem in an attempt to understand if the quality of the event had a significant effect on early adolescent's self-esteem. Neither variable was found to be significantly related to self-esteem.

After running an analysis on the early adolescents from the divorce group and finding non-significant results, the question arose whether the intact group differs from the divorce group. In order to answer this question, another regression was run on the intact group. The variable of life events was regressed on self-esteem for early adolescents from intact families. As before, the results indicated no significant relationship between life events and self-esteem. Finally, all subjects were grouped together and a regression was run to see if reported life events are related to self-esteem for early adolescents in general (see Table 3). This analysis did have a significant result. Early adolescents who reported a high number of life events had lower self-esteem ( $p=.044$ ).

#### Hypothesis Five

Hypothesis five stated that early adolescents from divorced families with high levels of reported life events will have lower self-esteem than early adolescents from intact families with high levels of reported life events. This hypothesis was investigated by a regression model in which

life events, a dichotomous variable of intact versus divorced status, and the interaction of these two variables was regressed onto self-esteem. The results of this analysis did not support this hypothesis. Early adolescents from divorced families with a high level of reported life events did not have significantly lower self-esteem than early adolescents from intact families who reported high levels of life events (see Table 4).

In order to investigate if the way the subject perceived the event , either "good" or "bad", affected their self-esteem, the reported life events variable was broken down into these two categories and each was regressed on self-esteem. Neither of the results were significant.

TABLE ONE

Least Square Means for Self-Esteem and Life Events: Divorce and Intact Groups

Variable	Intact Group		Divorce Group		LSM Sig.
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	
Self-Esteem	23.75	.38	22.49	.39	.025
Life-Events	10.77	1.53	13.96	1.7	NS

TABLE TWO

Regression Analysis: The Effect of Life Events and Divorce  
Events on Self-Esteem

Independent Variable	Beta	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	P
Life Events	-.01	.004	NS
Divorce Events	-.01	-.008	NS

TABLE THREE

Regression Analysis: The Effect of Life Events on Early  
Adolescents Self-Esteem

Independent Variable	Beta	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	P
Life Events	-.02	.05	.044

TABLE FOUR

Regression Analysis: The Effects of Life Events, Intact Versus Divorced Status , and the Interaction of Life Events and Status on Self-Esteem

Independent Variable	Beta	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	P
Life Events	.04	.05	NS
Status	-.03	.05	NS
Interaction	-1.0	.05	NS

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Early adolescents from divorced families had lower self-esteem than early adolescents from intact families, but only after controlling for socio-economic status and age. These results are consistent with some studies that also examined the effects of divorce on self-esteem (e.g., Hetherington, 1989; Parish & Taylor, 1979; Slater et al., 1983). The many changes and stressors often associated with divorce may be one reason that divorce negatively affects self-esteem. Early adolescents in particular may be affected because they are faced with a number of physical, emotional, and social changes that are normative to their developmental stage. One task is to individuate from their parents. After a divorce, the early adolescent is faced with the task of reconstructing their idea of "family" while trying to individuate from that unit. This is just one of the developmental tasks of early adolescents that may be complicated by divorce-related events. However, the findings in this study are weak, and there may be third variables that explain the differences in self-esteem.

The prediction that early adolescents from divorced families who report more life events would also report more divorce-related events was not supported. Although the

correlation was high it was not significant. One explanation of this result is the small sample size. However, it is important to keep in mind that divorce creates an environment in which a series of changes typically occur. These divorce-related changes often create additional changes or life events for the individuals involved. For example, a divorce may cause a decrease in the parent's income which may instigate them moving to a new neighborhood with lower housing costs. In turn, this change may cause a series of related events for the early adolescent including changing schools, that would in turn affect their access to established peer groups. The divorce seems to create a domino effect of changes that spill over into many areas of the early adolescent's life. However, this study did not find substantive evidence that these changes effect early adolescent's self-esteem in a negative way.

The reported number of life and divorce events did not affect the self-esteem of early adolescents from divorced families. Even when the reported divorce-related events were broken down into perceived quality, "good" and "bad" events, self-esteem was not related to the number or quality of events reported. When this same analysis was performed on the intact group, again no significant relationship was found. These findings may be due to the small number of subjects in each group. When the two groups were combined and their reported life events were regressed onto their self-esteem

score, a significant relationship was found. Early adolescents who reported a high number of life events had lower self-esteem than those who reported a low number of events. This finding supports Rutter's (1983) theory of cumulative stress. As an early adolescent experiences more life events they may become overwhelmed and less able to cope successfully with the changes that ensue. As a result, self-esteem is negatively impacted. The results indicate that it is not divorce-related changes or events, but rather events of early adolescence that may negatively impact self-esteem.

The perceived quality, either "good" or "bad," of the reported life events similarly had no significant relationship to self-esteem. These results may have been influenced by the small sample size. In addition, the impact life events have on self-esteem may not be related to the quality of the event. "Good" and "bad" events may impact individuals similarly.

This study has a few limitations that must be considered when examining the results. One limitation to this study is that it is a quasi-experimental design. Although an attempt was made to control for confounding factors, there may be additional third variables that were not controlled for. For example, length of time since the divorce occurred, custody arrangements, and visitation of non-custodial parents.

Another limitation is the small number of subjects in the study compared to the wide age range covered. Even though age

was controlled in the analysis, the difference between the number and degree of changes experienced by the different age levels may have impacted the results. Future studies should use a larger sample size covering a similar age range, 9-14 years old. By using a larger sample size researchers could examine the number of changes experienced by the different age levels related to self-esteem.

There are several possible explanations for the lack of significant results in this study. As the amount of literature on divorce and its effects on early adolescents increases, there is more evidence that divorce does not negatively effect self-esteem. In addition, it is increasingly evident that comparing intact and divorce groups is not sufficient. There are other factors common to both groups that are important to examine if we are to understand early adolescents nad their self-esteem. For example, family conflict may be one factor that negatively impacts self-esteem. Family conflict is typically related to divorce but is also present in intact families. Abuse is another factor that may be affecting early adolescent's self-esteem and is unrelated to divorce.

Another explanation for the modest results of this study is that the parents of early adolescents in the divorce group indicated that they were supportive by taking the time to bring the early adolescents to the group. They may even have participated in a support group themselves. Therefore, the

parents were probably aware of the possible effects of divorce and were making an effort to help their children effectively adjust to the changes.

Future research is needed to understand fully if divorce effects early adolescents' self-esteem. More information about the impact of divorce-related stress on early adolescents is important if this period of development is to be understood more completely. In addition, it is important to examine variables unrelated to divorce that may act as mediators to the relationship between divorce and self-esteem, or that directly effect self-esteem themselves.

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## APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A**  
**THE ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE**

## Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

(Rosenberg, 1965)

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on a n equal plane with others.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
9. I certainly feel useless at times.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree
10. At times I think I am no good at all.  
 1. ☐ Strongly Agree                      2. ☐ Agree  
 2. ☐ Disagree                              4. ☐ Strongly Disagree

**APPENDIX B**

**THE ADOLESCENT PERCEIVED EVENTS SCALE**

**(APES)**

**The Adolescent Perceived Events Scale**  
**(Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987)**

1. A new brother or sister was born in my family
2. I was suspended from school
3. I broke up with my girlfriend/boyfriend
4. I made a new friend
5. I broke up with a close friend
6. A close friend of mine died
7. I received academic honors
8. I began to date
9. I was seriously ill or injured
10. My mother or father was seriously ill or injured
11. I changed schools
12. I began drinking alcohol or taking drugs
13. A new person joined our household
14. I was accepted into an important activity
16. My mother or father lost a job
17. My favorite pet died
18. I ran away from home
19. I flunked a grade
20. My brother or sister had serious trouble
21. I started wearing braces or glasses
22. I was assaulted, robbed, or a victim of another crime
23. A family member of mine was a victim of violence

24. I received outstanding personal achievement
25. A close family member of mine died
26. I argue more with my parents
27. I argue less with my parents
28. My family had serious financial troubles
29. My brother or sister left our household
30. Because of a job change or other reason, my father and mother spent much more time away from home
31. My family moved to another house
32. My parents argue much more with each other
33. I became a member of a church or religious group
34. I was arrested or had serious trouble with the law
35. My mother or father was arrested or had serious trouble with the law
36. I had braces removed

**APPENDIX C**  
**THE DIVORCE EVENTS SCHEDULE FOR CHILDREN**  
**(DESC)**

**The Divorce Events Schedule for Children  
(Sandler, Wolchik, Braver & Fogas, 1986)**

1. Mom and Dad differ in how they want you to be (activities they want you to do or your ideas about things)
2. People in your neighborhood say bad things to you about your parents
3. You have chores to do around the house (like making meals or cleaning your room)
4. Dad is unhappy
5. Your friends tease you or are mean to you
6. Dad does extra nice things for you, that you like
7. Mom tells you that she doesn't like you spending time with Dad
8. Mom is strict
9. You do fun things with Dad
10. You have to watch out for, or take care of, your brothers and sisters
11. Dad takes care of the things that need to get done for you (like giving you a ride or making your meals)
12. Mom asks you questions about Dad's private life
13. Dad says bad things about Mom
14. Dad is strict
15. Mom says bad things about Dad
16. You have free time to do things you like (playing, relaxing)
17. Mom gets mad at you or tells you that you are bad
18. Mom and Dad argue in front of you
19. Your relatives say bad things to you about your parents
20. Dad asks you question about Mom's private life
21. You spend time with your Father's family

22. Your parent \_\_\_\_ misses scheduled visits
23. Mom does extra nice things for you, that you like
24. Household routines get done smoothly (like dinner on time, regular bedtime, your clothes get washed, you get ready for school on time)
25. You do fun things with Mom
26. You get toys, clothes, and other things you like.
27. Dad tells you not to tell some things to your Mom
28. Dad tells you that he doesn't like you spending time with Mom
29. Dad gets mad at you or tells you that you are bad
30. Mom takes care of the things that need to get done for you (like giving you a ride or making you meals)
31. Mom tells you not to tell some things to your Dad
32. You spend time with Mom
33. You spend time with your Mother's family
34. You get to see your old friends
35. Dad tells you about things in his life, like problems, or his feelings about things.
36. Mom is unhappy
37. You are making new friends
38. You spend time with Dad
39. You spend time alone, by yourself
40. You have to give up pets or other things that you like
41. Mom tells you about things in her life, like problems or her feelings about things
42. Mom or Dad told to you about why they got divorced
43. Mom or Dad talk to you about which parent you want to live with
44. Mom and Dad make you follow different rules while you are at their house

45. The parent you live with works
46. Your mother's boyfriend or husband tells you to do things
47. Your parents hit each other or physically hurt each other
48. Your father's girlfriend or wife tells you to do things
49. Dad starts to go out on dates
50. Dad remarries or has a girlfriend come live with him
51. Dad or Mom told you the divorce was because of you
52. You change schools
53. Mom remarries or has a boyfriend come live with her
54. Dad gets a steady girlfriend
55. Mom gets a steady boyfriend
56. Mom starts to go out on dates
57. Your parent \_\_\_\_ moves out of town
58. Your brothers and sisters live in a different house than you
59. You move to a new house
60. You change which parent you live with
61. You have to talk to a lawyer or judge
62. New kids move into your house