

## CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

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### SUMMARY

*Divorce is a life event with a high level of stress for the entire family. Research shows that the number of divorces is on a steady rise. Family is very important for development of the children and changes within the family, after the divorce, could make consequences on them.*

*Children are dependent on parents and disadvantaged during divorce because it is out of their control. They cannot predict how long will it take and what will be the outcome of divorce which includes separation from close family members, school change, change of home, change of life style and so on.*

*Children often lack information and skills to overcome the challenges that the divorce carries. Conflicting relationships between parents make up the biggest obstacle that makes it difficult for a child to successfully deal with changes in the family. Even though parents deal with heavy feelings, it is desirable to put them the child and his interests in the first place. In order to stabilize the family system it is needed 2 up to 4 years.*

*Children differ from one another in the reactions to the divorce, but there are some emotional reactions that are characteristic for most children of divorced parents, and the most often children reactions are of depressive symptoms, anxiety, anger, lower self-esteem and so on.*

*The emotional reactions of children during the divorce can vary relative to the gender and age of the child. However, the divorce of a parent does not necessarily have to be so negative for children, especially if parents behave in an adequate way and they endeavor to act in such a way to make this process as painless as possible for children.*

**Key words:** *divorce – children - emotional reactions - risky behavior*

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### INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a mass phenomenon, especially in economically developed countries and highly urbanized environments, and has a tendency to grow regardless of the presence of children in marriage (Kolesar et al. 1991). Research shows that 55% of the surveyed partners say that most of their strength was used before the divorce decision was made, while 70% of the respondents were afraid that by divorcing they would have ruined their children's lives (Lüpkes 2010).

Many studies sought to determine the effects of divorce on children in various developmental stages. Father's abandonment of children in the earliest stage of childhood increases the probability of psychological problems in the child, however problems are reduced if both parents are involved in the children's development and jointly set rules, define boundaries, respect the feelings of their children and share authority (Warshak 2008).

Children are not happy with what they see and hear, but they try to find out the details of their parents' conflicts and collect information in order to make a clear picture of what is happening, and what hurts them the most is the attempt to turn a child against another parent as the means to alienate a child which is considered as one of the forms of emotional abuse and the child needs to be protected from that (Warshak 2008).

During most of the divorces, parents are focused at themselves, and for this reason they do not protect children, do not try to find methods to give children the answers to their questions, and often neglect their responsibilities towards them. For this reason, children are making a great effort to regain their former family balance and thus take on certain roles (such as the savior or protector of a mother because of her helplessness). Permanent internal combat enhances their sense of insecurity. If a child is younger, the consequences of separation can be bigger because the child should not only satisfy his/her physical but also the emotional needs that are necessary for survival, because in the case of their absence, the child may suffer from anxiety (Rodriguez 2007).

Other research claims that divorce has equally adverse effects on children independent of their chronological ages (Amato 2001).

The process of divorce itself causes different emotions from fury, aggression, sorrow, fear, worry, defiance, anger and many others. In pre-school children, forgetting or suppressing is present, while adolescents have a long-lasting effect with a sense of sadness, dissatisfaction, fear of the future (Wallerstein 1985).

If the maladjusted behavior of children and adolescents lasts for short period of time and does not become chronic, there is no reason for concern or the alienation of one of the parents (Warshak 2008).

If the parents' quarrels last for long, the child will be directly exposed to the development of insecurity, increased feelings of sadness, fear and anger, reduced ability to overcome negative feelings, which can damage the child in the long run.

As a consequence of the conflict, the child's increased sensitivity can arise on every form of behavior as a potential start of a new conflict that can lead the child to aggressive and maladjusted behavior in all developmental phases (Brajša-Žganec et al. 2014).

Children of divorcing parents have poorer results in almost all psychosocial adjustments and knowledge exams for up to three years before and three years after divorce, as opposed to children from complete families (Sun & Li 2002).

The fact is that the consequences of the divorce of parents do not affect all children equally, thus one can say that sometimes the divorce of parents has a positive psychophysical influence on the development of children, but also a negative if it is full of conflict which often has effects on physical health as well (Hetherington 1999).

Most problems last for a short period and disappear after a certain time, but some problems can remain and continue even in adulthood, especially in adolescents (Amato 2000).

Situations representing stress and loss for a child, such as divorce, death of a close family member, illness or abuse, affect the child's safety and general functioning in an already familiar environment. Such crisis situations represent a loss for the child in which he/she will react with externalization, internalization or in both directions of behavior (Čudina Obradović & Obradović 2006).

Many studies have shown that children who suffer in the family of divorced parents often have a very unstable and bad image of themselves and have a lower self-esteem unlike children living with both parents (Amato 2001).

Anger can sometimes slow down the child's development, as the main reaction to a divorce, whether directed at one or both parents (sometimes children are so angry that they deliberately exclude themselves from all social, educational and psychological achievements and activities) (Wallerstein & Blakeslee 2006).

It is considered today that the divorce affects more unfavorably the boys than the girls, but also depending on their age at the time of divorce (Amato 2011). The loss of control that children encounter lasts for a short period of time, and they do not really know it, and therefore they are terrified by changes in parents' behaviour thinking that this change is a new state that will last forever (Wallerstein & Blakeslee 2006). Because of the changes that occurred, they cannot keep up with other children starting to be unmotivated and less concentrated and are less likely to make friends. They start to develop the feeling of tension and concern for the future of their parent and their own (Wallerstein & Blakeslee 2006).

It is clear today that externalized problems (anger, aggression, hostility, theft, lying) of children appear before the parents are separated and divorced. There is an increased risk for development of externalized disorders with children who are exposed to long-term and serious conflicts between their parents during childhood because the environment becomes less structured, safe and predictable, and there is a significant increase in problematic behaviour, especially among boys.

The goal of the research was to determine whether there are changes in the number of stressful events, the length of time they spend with parents, the concern for parents, the level of satisfaction with life and school, the feeling of loneliness and becoming suicidal ideas, behavior change, in the school age children from incomplete or families of divorced parents, and to compare the percentage of risk behaviors in children from complete and incomplete families.

## SUBJECTS AND METHODS

### Subjects

The sample consists of 590 respondents, aged 14 to 18, of which 348 (59%) are female and 242 (41%) are male. The group of respondents who live in a complete family consists of 529 respondents (89.7%), while the group of respondents living in the incomplete family is 61 (10.3%).

### Method

The research used the Risk Behavior Questionnaire by K. Berg-Kelly (Q-2000). Respondents were divided into a group of incomplete families (divorced) and a group of complete families, and the data were compared, statistically processed and qualitatively analyzed.

## RESULTS

The survey included a sample of 590 respondents, age 14 to 18, of which 348 (59%) are female and 242 (41%) are male. The group of respondents who live in a complete family is 529 respondents (89.7%), while the group of respondents living in an incomplete family is 61 (10.3%) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Structure of the family

Structure of the family	N	%
Complete family	529	89.7
Incomplete family	61	10.3
Total	590	100.0

A significantly higher percentage of respondents from incomplete families are expressing concern about one of their parents compared to respondents from complete families is noted (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the duration of the time spent together with family members of the respondents from both groups. The largest percentage of respondents spend with the family more than three hours a day, 17.6% of the respondents from complete families and 11.5% of the respondents from incomplete families spend with the family 2-3 hours a day, and 11.2% of the respondents from complete families and 19.7% of the respondents from incomplete families spend 1-2 hours a day together.

Table 4 shows the assessment of mood in the family of respondents from both groups. It is noted that respondents from complete families assess the mood in their families somewhat better than respondents from incomplete families, but these differences are not statistically significant.

Table 5 gives an overview of the frequency of important events in the life of the respondents. A life event that is characteristic only for respondents from incomplete families is a divorce of parents, which was experienced by 24.6% of these respondents.

Table 6 shows the frequency of various health problems experienced by respondents over the past seven days. It is noted that, in percentage, these occurrences are somewhat more frequent among respondents who grow up in incomplete families than those from complete families.

Table 7 gives an overview of the frequency of feeling of loneliness and sadness in respondents, and Table 8 shows the level of expression of these feelings. The above feelings are equally expressed in both groups of respondents.

**Table 2.** Concerns of respondents for parent(s)

Respondent is...	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
concerned for one of their parents	82	15.5	26	42.6

**Table 3.** Family time in relation to family structure

Respondent daily spends with family members...	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
Less than 1 hour	16	3.0	2	3.3
1-2 hours	59	11.2	12	19.7
2-3 hours	93	17.6	7	11.5
More than 3 hours	345	65.2	39	63.9
The respondent does not live with adults	16	3.0	1	1.6

**Table 4.** Assessment of mood in family in relation to family structure

	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Assessment of mood in the family	7.49	2.43	7.20	1.97	0.913	588	0.362

**Table 5.** Important events in the life of the respondents

Important events in the life of the respondents	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
Death of parents	3	0.6	8	13.1
Death of a brother or sister	11	2.1	0	0.0
Death of a close person	171	32.3	12	19.7
Divorce of parents	4	0.8	15	24.6
Occurrence of ocular/step-mother	2	0.4	5	8.2
Moving to another city	58	11.0	18	29.5
Relocation to the neighbourhood	27	5.1	4	6.6
Family member was out of work	78	14.7	11	18.0
A new teacher I cannot stand	151	28.5	23	37.7
A new student I cannot stand	21	4.0	5	8.2
Loss of the best friend	44	8.3	6	9.8
Breakup with a partner	100	18.9	12	19.7

**Table 6.** The health problems of the respondents over the past seven days

In past seven days the respondent...	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
feels too fat	106	20.0	14	23.0
feels too skinny	44	8.3	5	8.2
feels too short	71	13.4	8	13.1
feels too high	25	4.7	4	6.6
feels drowsiness	355	67.1	46	75.4
feels tired	339	64.1	42	68.9
feels headaches	195	36.9	23	37.7
has sports injuries	78	14.7	7	11.5
has acne	159	30.1	21	34.4
has abdominal pain	144	27.2	14	23.0
has a painful period	115	21.7	17	27.9
has allergies or asthma	54	10.2	3	4.9
has unspecified pain	183	34.6	26	42.6
feels depressed	129	24.4	20	32.8
has anorexia or bulimia	3	0.6	0	0

**Table 7.** Mood of respondents

The respondent feels lonely and sad	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
Almost never	176	33.3	22	36.1
Sometimes	305	57.7	32	52.5
Often	39	7.4	6	9.8
Every day	9	1.7	1	1.6

**Table 8.** Mood of the respondents in relation to the structure of the family

	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Feeling of loneliness and sadness	1.78	0.65	1.77	0.69	0.051	588	0.959

**Table 9.** Suicidal thoughts of the respondents and supporters

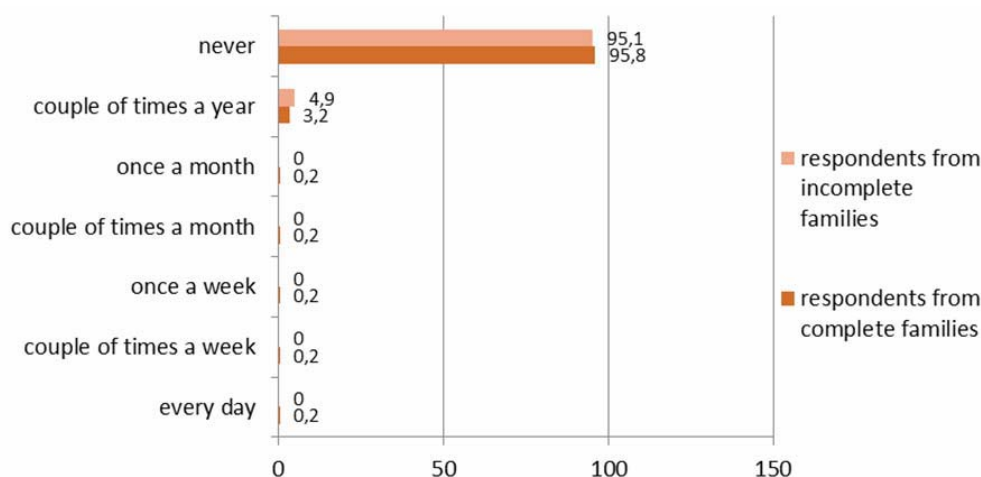
Respondent...	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
was thinking about suicide	123	23.3	15	24.6
has an adult with whom he/she can talk about problems	437	82.6	55	90.2
has a close person with whom he/she can talk about problems	497	94.0	59	96.7

**Table 10.** Participation in fights in the past two years

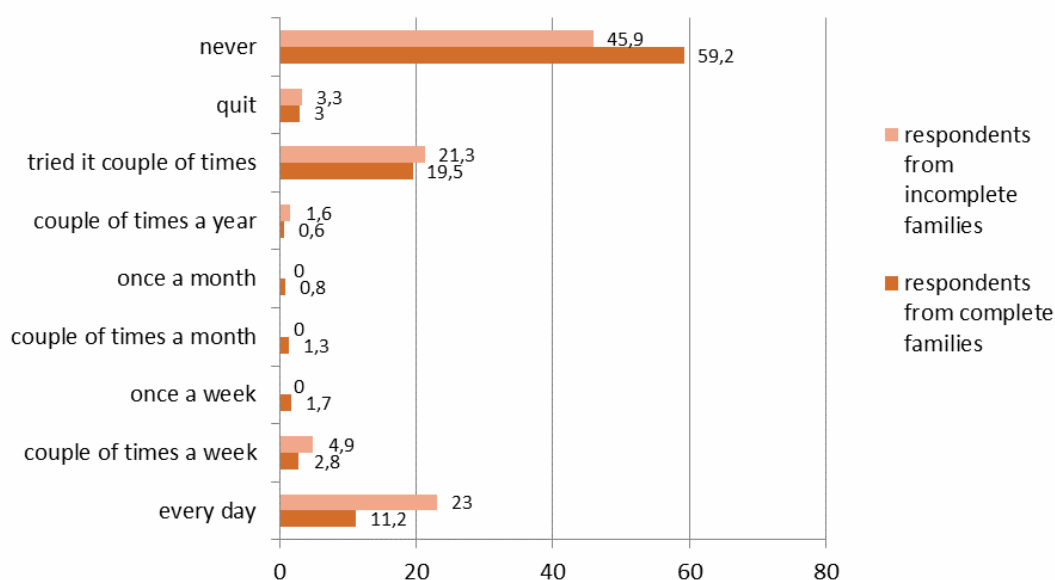
The respondent has been fighting in the past two years	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families	
	N	%	N	%
Once	21	4.0	1	1.6
Twice	97	18.3	10	16.4
Three or more times	64	12.1	12	19.7
Never	347	65.6	38	62.3

**Table 11.** The level of satisfaction of respondents with school in relation to the structure of the family

	Respondents from complete families		Respondents from incomplete families		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Level of satisfaction of respondents with school	5.99	2.51	6.08	2.49	-0.275	588	0.78



**Figure 1.** Frequency of consuming marijuana in relation to the family structure



**Figure 2.** Frequency of cigarettes consumption in relation to the structure of the family

From Table 9 we can see that 23.3% of respondents from complete families and 24.6% of respondents from incomplete families were thinking about suicide. A somewhat higher percentage of respondents from incomplete families said that they had suicidal thoughts, but also a higher proportion of them said they had close and supporting people around them.

Table 10 gives an overview of the frequency of participation in fights. A larger percentage of respondents from incomplete families had this experience three or more times.

Table 11 shows that respondents from incomplete families express somewhat higher levels of satisfaction with school than respondents from complete families.

Figure 1 shows that the highest percentage of respondents have never consumed marijuana, and 3.2% of respondents from complete families and 4.9% of respondents from incomplete families consume it couple of times a year.

Figure 2 shows that a higher percentage of respondents from complete families have never consumed cigarettes, while at the same time a higher percentage of respondents from incomplete families consumes cigarettes every day.

## DISCUSSION

In this survey more than half of participants were females (59%) and there were almost 90% adolescents who live in a complete family. A significantly higher percentage of respondents from incomplete families are expressing concern about one of their parents (42.6%) compared to respondents from complete families (15.5%) is noted, and it is in line with research suggesting that children try to establish a previous family balance by taking the role of savior or a guardian of one of the parents, mostly mothers.

Children from incomplete families spend less time with their parents in percentage, and research shows that the financial situation of mothers after a divorce is considerably worse, and in some cases their income is reduced even up to 50% (Amato & Keith 1991).

Likewise, mothers find themselves in a situation where they have to work a lot more in order to support their children, and their free time for socializing with their children is minimized. They cannot control their children and their behavior, which can lead to the development of various problems (abuse of psychoactive substances, aggressive behavior) in children from single-parent families, which is shown in Table 10, Figure 1 and 2, and more frequent is the expression of aggressive behavior, misuse of marijuana and cigarettes in children from incomplete families, but without statistically significant value. Crisis situations in the child represent a loss to which the child will react in behavioral changes (Čudina Obradović & Obradović 2006).

In both groups of respondents there were crisis situations, in different percentage, but without a statistically significant difference. The frequency of health problems among respondents, and it is noted that, in percentage, these occurrences are more frequent in respondents who grow up in incomplete families than those from complete families, and these children feel less healthy compared to those in complete families. Children respond to the divorce of parents in different ways that can vary depending on the age of the child, in mental and physical health. Feelings of loneliness, sadness and suicidal ideas are present in both groups, with no statistically significant values. Also, there is a trusted person in both groups to whom children can talk to alleviate difficulties. By divorce of parents, children often lose one trusted person because one parent moved away, which can increase the sense of loneliness and abandonment, but normalization of parental relationships also stabilizes the relationship with the child.

In this research the adolescents from incomplete families express a somewhat higher level of satisfaction with school than respondents from complete families, and the success at school is assessed equally as good in both groups although research suggests that children are sometimes so angry that they deliberately exclude themselves from all social, educational and psychological achievements and activities (Wallerstein & Blakeslee 2006). As a consequence of the conflict, the child's increased sensitivity to every form of behavior can arise and it can be the potential start of a new conflict that leads the child to aggressive and maladjusted behaviour in developmental stages (Brajša-Žganec et al. 2014), or to more frequent abuse of psychoactive substances and increased aggression manifested in fights as well as more frequent participation in

thefts compared to respondents from complete families. Parents of children who are exposed to open hostility show behavior models, so children will learn that expressing negative emotions is the way they can overcome conflicts, and the developed anger among children will lead to a change in behavior. Such children, especially boys, show anger and aggression towards their parents and other children (Oatley & Jenkins 2003).

## CONCLUSION

The divorce crisis also affects children in various ways, which is conditioned by the intensity of conflicts and their duration. Most children successfully overcome the divorce of parents and grow into successful people. Comparing life circumstances, stressful events and risky behavior of adolescents from complete and incomplete families, we conclude that there are differences, but not statistically significant. Continuation of satisfactory life of parents after divorce and continuing contact with a father who participates positively, significantly reduces tension in children.

Also, the support of wider families, grandparents, as well as teachers and peers contributes to a faster adaptation to change, with girls getting more support at school because their internalized behavior is more acceptable than boys' externalized behavior, thus the support of professionals shall be adapted for children in the process of divorce.

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