

# Parental Divorce, Family Conflict and Adolescent Depression and Anxiety

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# Foreword

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BSc Psychology degree, Reykjavik University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

#### **Abstract - English**

Both parental divorce and family conflict can be stressful life events in adolescents' lives. Today, parental divorce is more common than in the past and more than one million children experience parental divorce every year. Researches have shown that adolescents' of divorced parents and those who experience family conflict have more psychological problems than other adoloscents. In this research we look at how parental divorce and family conflict can affect children's depression and anxiety and how effects of parental divorce on adolescent depression and anxiety are mediated through family conflict. This study was a population-based, cross-sectional survey entitled *Youth in Iceland* and was conducted by the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis at Reykjavik University in February, 2012. The sample was based on 2215 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Using multiple regression models, findings show that family conflict and parental divorce affect adolescents' depression and anxiety.

Key words: parental divorce, family conflict, depression, anxiety

#### **Abstract – Icelandic**

Bæði skilnaður foreldra og fjölskylduágreiningur geta haft mikil áhrif á líf unglinga. Skilnaður er algengari nú til dags heldur en áður fyrr og ástæðan fyrir því gæti verið sú að viðhorf til skilnaða hefur breyst. Rannsóknir hafa sýnt að þeir unglingar sem eiga foreldra sem hafa skilið og þeir sem upplifa fjölskylduágreining glíma við fleiri sálfræðileg vandamál en aðrir unglingar. Í þessari rannsókn verður skoðað hvernig skilnaður foreldra og fjölskylduágreiningur getur haft áhrif á þunglyndi og kvíða unglinga. Einnig hvernig áhrifin af skilnaði á kvíða og þunglyndi unglinga sé miðlað í gegnum fjölskyldu ágreining. Þetta er þversniðsrannsókn sem ber titilinn *Ungt fólk* og var hún framkvæmd af Rannsóknum og greiningu í febrúarmánuði árið 2012. Úrtak rannsóknarinnar er byggt á 2215 8. til 10. bekkjar nemendum í grunnskólum landsins. Línuleg aðhvarfsgreining var notuð í úrvinnslu á niðustöðum rannsóknarinnar og sýna þær niðurstöður að fjölskylduágreiningu og skilnaður foreldra hefur áhrif á kvíða og þunglyndi unglinga.

Lykilhugtök: Skilnaður foreldra, fjölskylduágreiningur, þunglyndi, kvíði

Parental Divorce, Family Conflict And Adolescent Depression And Anxiety **Divorce** 

It has been shown that children of divorced parents have more psychological problems than children raised in intact families with two biological parents (Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Sun, 2001). For children and adolescents, experiencing divorce can have both short-term and long-term effects. Many children of divorced parents report that they have less life satisfaction and do not feel safe in their own environment compared to their peers from intact families (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Sigrun Juliusdottir, 2013).

Strohschein (2005) did a longitudinal study on children aged from four to seven years. The aim of the study was to see how parental divorce affects children's mental health. The results from the study showed that children of parental divorce showed higher levels of depression and anxiety than children whose parents remained married. In this study he also found that children whose parents later got divorced showed higher levels of anxiety and depression before the divorce than children of parents who remained married. Sometimes parental divorce may be a stress reliever for the children because of family conflict (Strohschein, 2005). In this study they did not look at whether family conflict has more effect on adolescent depression and anxiety than parental divorce. The children did claim that they had more mental health problems before the divorce and family conflict might affect that. Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice and Buka (Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003) found that adding parental conflict to family disruption did not change the relation between family disruption and depression. Parental conflict was, however, independently related to a higher lifetime risk of depression.

# **Family conflict**

In this study, family conflict is defined as being involved in serious arguments with parents, witnessing a serious argument or witnessing physical violence in their home where an adult is involved.

There is no relationship between parents which is free from conflicts all children see their parents argue at some point. A higher level of family conflict increases depression and anxiety among adolescents ("How Parental Conflict Hurts Kids | Family Studies," n.d.; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989).

Amato and Afifi (2006) did a study which evaluated the effects of conflicts between parents on adolescents' feelings of being caught in the middle. The results showed that if the parents' relationship was conflicted both before and after divorce, it affected their children. If children witnessed a conflicted relationship between their parents, they were likely to experience distress. They also found that the feeling of being caught between their parents reduced after parental divorce. A limitation is that by using longitudinal data, but only asking at one point about feeling caught, it can be hard to relate the data about feeling caught to other factors. This study contained a wide age range, but it was a strength of the study that they used a national sample.

A study done by Baxter, Weston and Lixia Qu (2011) on children and family structure examined whether they were living with both parents, whether their parents had a conflicted relationship and whether their parents were divorced but had a conflicted relationship or did not have any conflicts. The results from this study showed that children in intact families where their parents had conflicts had poorer emotional well-being than those whose parents did not have conflicts (Baxter, Weston, & Lixia Qu, 2011). It is clear from this study that children whose parents have conflicts in their relationship or are divorced have poorer emotional well-being than those in intact families. In this study, the participants were young

and therefore might not have fully understood the questions and what was being asked.

Another limitation is that only children's mothers were asked, not their father. It would be useful to ask their fathers also, as some children have a stronger relationship with their father.

#### Parental divorce or family conflict

Children are highly sensitive to the quality of interactions between their parents. When young children witness their parents' conflicts, it can have long-term effects on the children's development (Amato, 2000, 2005; MA, 2012). When parents constantly have conflicts they create an environment where their children do not feel safe. Thus, ending a conflicted marriage can sometimes be good for the children's, as well as the parents' well-being (Amato, 2000; Harold & Conger, 1997). In most previous studies, not much attention has been given to whether family conflict has more effect on children than parental divorce. It has been shown that adolescents and children are more likely to develop depression and anxiety when they have divorced parents or live in highly conflicted households. Many studies involve small samples and only investigate parental divorce or family conflict, not how both of these factors affect children. In the present study the aim is to gain a better understanding of how both family conflicts and parental divorce may affect adolescents.

#### **Current Study**

In this study, the aim is to gain a better understanding of how both family conflicts and parental divorce may affect adolescents. Based on existing literature, it is assumed that both of these factors can affect children in many ways and the focus will be on how it affects anxiety and depression and also on whether the effects of parental divorce on anxiety and depression are mediated through family conflict. The hypotheses are: (1) Parental divorce has a positive effect on depression among adolescents, (2) Parental divorce has a positive effect on anxiety among adolescents, (3) Effects of parental divorce on adolescent depression are

mediated through family conflict and (4) Effects of parental divorce on adolescent anxiety are mediated through family conflict.

#### Method

#### **Ethical considerations**

Institutional review board (IRB)/bioethics committee approval for the study was obtained two to three months before the data collection.

### **Participants**

Participants of the study were students in 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade in all Icelandic secondary schools, from age 13 up to 16 years old. This questionnaire is called 2012 *Youth in Iceland* and all students that attended class the day that the questionnaire was scheduled were participants in the study unless their parents objected to their child's participation.

Participants totalled 11.222, 3.698 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, 3.673 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, 3.747 10<sup>th</sup> grade students and 104 students who did not say which class they were in. Respondents in this study represented approximately 85% of all students in Iceland in this age group. This current study is based on a random sample of 2000 students, 1065 (48%) boys, 1119 (51%) girls and 31 (1%) who did not state their gender.

#### Procedure

This study was a population-based, cross-sectional survey and was carried out by Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA) at Reykjavik University in 2012.

All data was collected by ICSRA. Questionnaires were sent to all secondary schools in Iceland in February 2012. Teachers supervised participation of their students in the study and administered the survey in the classroom. Students got clear instructions along with the questionnaire (See appendix A, p: 19). This was an anonymous questionnaire and students were told not to write their name or other identifying information on the questionnaire. When students had completed the questionnaires they were asked to put them in envelopes, seal

them and then return them to their teachers.

#### Measures

In this research, questionnaires were used to collect data. The questionnaire was prepared by ICSRA at Reykjavík University. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 89 questions, but in this study only two questions were utilized (See appendix B, p: 20). The questionnaire was in Icelandic and was also translated into Polish to get the best sample that they could. Four variables were used in this research. Two independent variables, parental divorce and family conflict. And the dependent variables, anxiety and depression.

#### Parental Divorce

To find out whether children had been through parental divorce, the following question was utilized; "Has something happened to you recently? Your parents separated or divorced?".The response categories for the question were: 1 = 'Yes, during the last 30 days', 2 = 'Yes, during the last 12 months', 3 = 'Yes, more than 12 months ago', 4 = 'No' Family Conflict

Family Conflict was assessed by asking if any of the following had happened recently; (1) Have you been involved in a serious argument with your parents? (2) Have you witnessed a serious argument between your parents? and (3) Have you witnessed physical violence in your home where an adult is involved? Answer possibilities were: 1 = 'Yes, during the last 30 days', 2 = 'Yes, during the last 12 months', 3 = 'Yes, more than 12 months ago', 4 = 'No'.

#### Anxiety

Children's anxiety was measured with three questions about the frequency of the following indispositions or discomforts in the past week; "(1) nervousness, (2) sudden fear for no reason, and (3) you were\_uptight? The response format for these questions was: 1 = '(Nearly) Never', 2 = 'Rarely', 3 = 'Sometimes', 4 = 'Often'.

Depression

Depression was measured with scale from Derogatis et al (1973). This used 10 questions headed: "How often were you aware of the following indisposition or discomfort in the past week?" The options were, for example: you were tired/bored or had little interest in doing things, you thought you were lonely, you were depressed or sad, you were not excited to do anything, you thought about suicide. Answer possibilities were: 1 = `(Nearly) Never', 2 = `Rarely', 3 = `Sometimes', 4 = `Often'.

#### Statistical analyses

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS).

Firstly, descriptive statistics were examined for all variables, mean, range and standard deviation. Questions used for depression, 10 questions, were computed into one depression variable and also for an anxiety variable, three questions were computed. Correlations between all variables were calculated and put into a table. Finally, linear regression was used to see if independent variables predicted for the values of the dependent variables. Two models were used, model 1: Parental divorce predicted for the value of depression or anxiety and model 2 to see mediating effects: Parental divorce and family conflict together predicted depression or anxiety.

#### **Results**

As seen in Figure 1 about 20% adolescents had experienced parental divorce or separation and approximately 31% of the sample had experienced family conflict. All participants answered these questions, except for one student who did not answer the questions about family conflict.

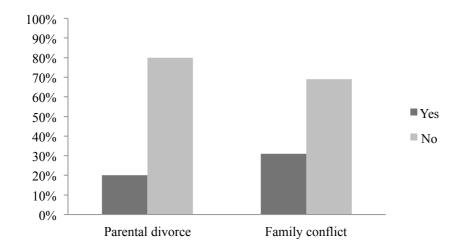


Figure 1. Adolescents who have experienced parental divorce and family conflict.

The descriptive statistics of the study are shown in Table 1. Parental divorce or separation had the mean of 0.99 and standard deviation of 0.24. For all questions that apply to family conflict and was computed into one variable, the mean was 2.96 and standard deviation 0.57. For the anxiety variable, the mean was 4.9 and standard deviation 2.21 and for the depression variable, the mean was 16.34 and standard deviation was 6.85.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Range	M	SD
Have your parents separated or divorced?	0-3	0.99	0.24
Family Conflict	0-9	2.96	0.57
Happened recently: You been involved in a serious argument with your parents	0-3	0.99	0.26
You witnessed a serious argument between your parents	0-3	0.99	0.24
You witnessed physical violence in your home where an adult was involved	0-3	0.98	0.20
Anxiety	0-9	4.9	2.21
How often were you aware of the following in the past week ?:	0-3	1.72	0.91
Nervousness			
Sudden fear for no reason	0-3	1.46	0.81
You were uptight	0-3	1.74	0.91
Depression mood	0-30	16.34	6.85
How often during the last week: were you tired/bored or had little interest in doing things	0-3	1.94	0.98
I had little appetite	0-3	1.79	0.99
I felt lonely	0-3	1.68	0.97
I cried easily or wanted to cry	0-3	1.66	0.98
I had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep	0-3	1.84	1.04
I was depressed or sad	0-3	1.66	0.93
I was not excited to do anything	0-3	1.61	0.88
I was slow or had little strength	0-3	1.55	0.86
I felt hopeless about the future	0-3	1.40	0.81
I thought about suicide	0-3	1.21	0.63

*Note. N*= 2215

The correlation between the independent variables (parental divorce and family conflict) and the dependent variables (anxiety and depression ) was measured. As seen in table 2 the correlation between all variables were significant, p < 0.01. Family conflict had a stronger correlation than divorce with the dependent variables, depression and anxiety.

Table 2

Correlation among variables

		Divorce or		
	Family conflict	separated	Anxiety	Depression
Family Conflict	1.00			
Parental Divorce	0.34**	1.00		
Anxiety	0.28**	0.12**	1.00	
Depression	0.32**	0.16**	0.72**	1.00

<sup>\*\*</sup> p < 0.01 (2-tailed).

# Depression

Linear regression was utilized to examine the relationship between parental divorce and depression. The result indicated that parental divorce explained 2.4% of the variance in depression,  $R^2 = 0.024$  and was a significant predictor of depression. As seen in table 3 the standardized coefficient (beta) between parental divorce and depression was 0.16 and was significant (p < 0.01). Thus, when adolescents experienced parental divorce, the depression scores increased by 0.16 units.

When looking at the result from the regression model in table 3, model 2, where both independent variables are used, parental divorce and family conflicts explain approximately 11% of the variance in depression,  $R^2 = 0.106$ . Standardized beta for parental divorce was 0.06 (p < 0.05) and for family conflict was 0.30 (p < 0.05).

Table 3

Multiple regression model for depression

	В	SE B	R
Model 1	В	SL D	Ρ
Constant	15.83	0.16	
			0.164
Parental Divorce	2.70	0.38	0.16*
Model 2			
Constant	14.8	0.17	
Parental Divorce	1.12	0.38	0.06*
Family Conflict	4.50	0.33	0.30*

Note:  $R^2 = 0.024$  for Model 1,  $R^2 = 0.106$  for Model 2. \* p < .005

#### Anxiety

Parental divorce explained 1.4% of the varience in anxiety,  $R^2 = 0.014$  and was a significant predictor of anxiety. The standardized beta between parental divorce and anxiety was 0.12 and was significant (p<0.01), see table 4. When adolescents experienced parental divorce their anxiety scores increased by 0.12 units.

Looking at the relationship between both independent variables and anxiety, see table 4, model 2, standardized beta for parental divorce is 0.04 and is not significant (p > 0.05) but beta for family conflict is 0.27 (p < 0.05). This tells us that parental divorce becomes non-significant when we add family conflict, and that the effects of divorce on anxiety are mediated through family conflicts. When we look at  $R^2$ , we can make the interpretation that parental divorce and family conflict together explain 8.1% of the variance in anxiety.

Table 4

Multiple regression model for anxiety

	В	SE B	β	
Model 1			-	
Constant	4.78	0.05		
Parental Divorce	0.68	0.12	0.12*	
Model 2				
Constant	4.48	0.06		
Parental Divorce	0.23	0.12	0.04	
Family Conflict	1.31	0.11	0.27*	

Note:  $R^2 = 0.014$  for Model 1,  $R^2 = 0.081$  for Model 2. \* p < .005

#### Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine whether parental divorce and family conflict affect adolescents' anxiety and depression. Also wether effects of parental divorce on anxiety and depression are mediated through family conflict.

The first hypothesis, that parental divorce affects adolescents' depression, was confirmed. The results showed that parental divorce did affect adolescents' depression and

this is also what earlier findings have. Strohschein (2005) found that children of parental divorce showed more depression and anxiety than children whose parents remained married.

The second hypothesis, parental divorce affects adolescents' anxiety, was also confirmed. Those adolescents who had been through parental divorce did show significantly more levels of anxiety than other children. This is also the same as Strohschein (2005) found in his research, that kids who had experienced parental divorce were more likely to have to deal with anxiety than other children.

The third hypothesis, that effects of parental divorce on adolescents' depression are mediated through family conflict, was not confirmed. The results showed that when both family conflict and parental divorce are put in a linear regression model, both of these variables become significant. The predictive strength of parental divorce decreased when family conflicts were added in to the model, parental divorce still remained a significant predictor of depression. This means that family conflict did not fully mediate the effects of divorce on depression.

The fourth hypothesis, effects of parental divorce on adolescent anxiety are mediated through family conflict, was confirmed. The results showed that when we put both independent variables in a linear regression model, parental divorce becomes non-significant. Since parental divorce was significantly predictive of anxiety by itself but not together with conflict, this means that the actual predictiveness of parental divorce was mediated by family conflict. Divorce is only predictive of depression when it involves family conflict. Earlier studies have shown that family conflict affects adolescents' well-being. A study made by Amato and Afifi (2006) showed that those children who experienced conflicts in the relationship between their parents, before and after divorce, were likely to experience distress. Earlier findings have shown that when children experience conflicts between their

parents, or just in their homes, they are always likely to experience some kind of stress, anxiety or something that affects their well-being (Baxter et al., 2011).

These situations, family conflict and divorce, can have both long-term and short-term effects. It is important that, even though children do not show any symptoms of anxiety or depression shortly after these experiences, they can affect them later in life (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). As shown in a previous study, parental divorce can be a good experience both for parents and children and ending a conflicted marriage can have good effects on childrens' well-being (Amato, 2000). When parents have conflicts in their relationships or some other family issues, the solution can often be divorce. If children do not feel safe in their own home or environment, divorce can be the best thing that can happen to them at that time. Improvements in well-being and feeling safer are more important than the parents staying together (Amato, 2005).

In the current study, 20% of the sample had been through parental divorce and 31% experienced family conflicts in their lives. The results gave a clear indication that going through these experiences has effects on adolescents' mental health. Both of the independent variables explained increases in the dependent variables. If adolescents had been through parental divorce, their anxiety increased, also if they had experienced family conflicts. We can say the same thing about parental divorce, family conflict and depression. If adolescents had been through parental divorce and/or experienced family conflict, the chances of depression increased. A noteworthy finding is that the results from the linear regression model showed that parental divorce was not fully mediated through family conflict when looking at adolescents' depression. However looking at anxiety, parental divorce was mediated through family conflict.

In future studies, it would be interesting to investigate whether age and gender can make any differences and also to investigate whether there are any other factors that conflict

and divorce can affect, for example, self-esteem and happiness. As earlier studies have shown (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995) it could be interesting to make a longitudinal research and see if children experience any symptoms later in life.

The present study is not without limitations. One limitation of this study is that we cannot tell what causes the results to be non-significant when we look at both family conflict and parental divorce and how these variables together could affect anxiety. With further and more extensive research in this area, we might be able to see what can cause this and why it just affects anxiety but not depression. Another limitation is that 10 questions were used to make a depression variable but only 3 to make an anxiety variable. It would be preferable to have more questions about anxiety to prevent errors. Another limitation is that in this study we used a random sample of 2215 participants but the results could have told us more if we had used the whole, larger sample. This study also has some strengths. The variable about depression contained 10 questions from the questionnaire and all of the questions referred to symptoms associated with depression. Another strength in this study is that the gender proportion was equal. Even though we did not investigate the difference between genders, this was good for the main results.

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#### **Appendices**

#### Appendix A

#### Til nemenda

Í þessu hefti eru spurningar sem þú ert beðin(n) að svara. Við vonum að þú svarir þeim af samviskusemi því svör þín skipta miklu máli. Þetta er ekki próf. Það eina sem skiptir máli er að þú segir satt og rétt frá.

Við flestum spurningunum eru nokkrir svarmöguleikar. Stundum þarf að velja einn og stundum má velja fleiri eins og fram kemur í leiðbeiningum við hverja spurningu. Settu kross í reitinn við það svar sem þú hefur valið ☒. Ef þér finnst enginn svarmöguleiki í einhverri spurningu eiga nákvæmlega við um þig merktu þá við þann svarmöguleika sem þér finnst komast næst. Vinsamlega notaðu penna. Ef þú skiptir um skoðun og vilt breyta svari við einhverri spurningu er best að fylla reitinn alveg út þannig að ekkert hvítt sjáist ☒. Þannig útfylltur reitur táknar "ógilt". Á fáeinum stöðum eru ekki gefin svör og þar ertu beðin(n) að skrifa þitt eigið svar. Þar þarftu að skrifa mjög greinilega og helst nota prentstafi. Þú ræður því hvort þú svarar einstökum spurningum en við biðjum þig að svara þeim öllum eftir bestu getu.

Svör þín eru trúnaðarmál, það er að segja, enginn sem þekkir þig, hvorki kennarar þínir né foreldrar, kunningjar eða vinir, munu nokkurn tíma fá að sjá svör þín eða fá að vita hvernig þú svaraðir. Gættu þess því að skrifa hvorki nafn þitt né kennitölu á spurningalistann eða umslagið sem honum fylgir. Þegar þú hefur lokið við að svara öllum spurningunum, settu þá listann í umslagið, límdu vel fyrir og skilaðu til kennara.

Ef þú hefur einhverjar spurningar um spurningalistann, lokaðu þá listanum þínum og réttu upp hönd. Starfsmaður eða kennari kemur þá með óútfyllt eintak af spurningalistanum til að aðstoða þig án þess að sjá þín svör.

Með kærri þökk fyrir þátttökuna,

Starfsfólk Rannsókna & greiningar

# Appendix B

<ol> <li>Hversu oft varðst þú var/vör við eftirfarandi vanl (Merktu í EINN reit í hverjum lið)</li> </ol>	íðan eða óþæ	gindi <u>síðastlið</u>	ona viku?		
	(Nær) aldrei	Sjaldan	Stundum	Oft	
a) Taugaóstyrk					
b) Skyndilega hræðslu án nokkurrar ástæðu					
c) Þú varst uppspennt/ur					
d) Þú varst leið/ur eða hafðir lítinn áhuga á að gera hle	uti 🗆				
e) Þú hafðir litla matarlyst					
f) Þér fannst þú einmana					
g) Þú grést auðveldlega eða langaði til að gráta					
h) Þú áttir erfitt með að sofna eða halda þér sofandi					
i) Þú varst niðurdregin(n) eða dapur/döpur					
j) Þú varst ekki spenntur fyrir að gera nokkurn hlut					
k) Þér fannst þú vera hægfara eða hafa lítinn mátt					
l) Þér fannst framtíðin vonlaus					
m) Þú hugsaðir um að stytta þér aldur					
35. Hefur eitthvað af eftirfarandi komið fyrir þig? (	(Merktu í EII	NN reit <u>eða F</u>	<u>LEIRI</u> eftir	því sem við	ð á)
3	Já, á síðustu 60 dögum	Já, á síðustu 12 mánuðum	Já, fyri meira en mánuðu	12	i
c) Foreldrar þínir skilið eða slitið sambúð					
d) Þú rifist alvarlega við foreldra þína					
e) Þú orðið <u>vitni að</u> alvarlegu rifrildi foreldra þinna					
f) Þú orðið <u>vitni að</u> líkamlegu ofbeldi á heimilinu þar sem fullorðinn átti hlut að máli					