DIVORCE AND CO-PARENTING DURING COVID-19: IMPACT ON CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

KAYLI WORTHEY & KATHLEEN O'ROURKE, PH.D. - EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON FAMILY RELATIONS

MARCH 25, 2022

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

- Families are built like a motor, with each family member being a unique part and function.
  - When family structure shifts as in divorce, every person is impacted and there is a risk for various types of harm.
  - The stress of COVID-19 adds to the impacts on families and increases the likelihood of harmful experiences or consequences.
  - Divorce requires the family system to navigate the structural reorganization of the remaining family subsystems.
- Each individual in the family is impacted by divorce differently.

(McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

DIVORCE & COVID-19

Photo: Istock Photos; Thiago Santos, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/green-concept-of-divorce-in-quarantine-due-to-the-2019-coronavirus-pandemic-focus-gm1266661142-371386373

- External stressors (i.e., COVID-19), combined with existing vulnerabilities, may challenge relationships (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020).
- COVID-19 has forced individuals closely together for long periods, while still working and parenting, which could increase individual and relationship stress (Lebow, 2020).
- Job losses, safety arguments, and differing views are among the stressors intensifying the strain of the pandemic (Chaker, 2020).
- However, couples who sought a divorce during the pandemic likely already had marital issues (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020).

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DIVORCE (LEBOW, 2020)

- More conflict when quarantining together and problems physically separating homes
- Stalled divorce processes due to backed-up and/or closed legal system
- Financial issues like unemployment and division of money
- Lack of in-person social support
- Quarantine & closed borders impacting children's visits to parent without physical custody

COVID-19 & CO-PARENTING

Photo: Istock Photos; People Images, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/so-excited-to-see-daddy-gm483619041-253347111

- The COVID-19 pandemic often increased communication between co-parents and possibly changes communication methods.
- Co-parents may also have decreased contact in child exchanges or minimized child exchanges altogether.
- Co-parental arguments may have increased due to the renegotiation of boundaries and rules.
- Co-parental cohesion mediates the impact of the stress of parenting, work demands, and financial stress on family cohesion.

(Goldberg, Allen, & Smith, 2021; Peltz, Crasta, Daks, & Rogge, 2021)

CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Co-parental conflict and divorce can be associated with negative child outcomes including:

- Lower academic success (Aditti & Keith (1993)
- Poorer psychological well-being (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019)
- Increased depression and anxiety (Strohschein, 2005)

CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Photo: Istock Photos; Fam Veld, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/mother-and-child-with-face-mask-and-hand-sanitizer-gm1215892007-354318463

- Children represent a small percentage of COVID-19 cases (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021)
- Overall, there has been a significant decline in mental well-being across all age groups (APA, 2022).
- Poorer behavioral and social issues have arisen for children and adolescents (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).
- There has been an increase in food insecurities (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).

COVID-19 & DIVORCED/CO-PARENTING FAMILY WELL-BEING

- Possible spike in parental separation and divorce
- A decline in parent, child, and family mental health
- Greater breakdown in family relationships (i.e., parent-child, siblings, couples)
- Decrease in health & well-being overall, mainly due to COVID-19
- Increased struggles in parenting quality & communication

(Feinberg, Mogle, Lee, Tornello, Hostetler, Cifelli, Bai, and Hotez, 2022; Peltz, Crasta, Daks, & Rogge, 2021)

RESOURCE EXAMPLES FOR DIVORCING FAMILIES DURING COVID-19

(LEBOW, 2020)

Therapy
- Helps individuals create personal space and process issues/feelings
- Support for co-parental communication and functioning
- Teaching of coping strategies

Support Groups (Online & In-Person)
- Validation and affirmation
- Connection with others who have similar struggles

Divorce Education Classes
- Required by some courts (Illinois requires classes if you have a child under the age of 18 together)
- Instructs on matters of division of finances, co-parenting, self-care, and other topics important to the couple

FUTURE PRACTICES FOR FAMILY PROFESSIONALS

Photo: Istock Photos; NoSystems Images, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/family-on-a-mental-health-therapy-session-gm1271480782-374051435

- Use systematic family-based preventive and intervention activities focusing on family strengths.
- Inquire about family stress levels and how parents and children manage stress.
- Provide best (& current) research-based guidelines to adequately deal with the impact of stressful events on families.
  - Offer parent-specific, child-specific, and whole-family strategies.
- Promote family cohesion in every family subsystem, including co-parents.