

# Positive Outcomes of Divorce: A Multi-Method Study on the Effects of Parental Divorce on Children

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**ABSTRACT:** Previous literature on parental divorce focuses on the negative effects it has on children and young adults in terms of relationships (romantic and familial) and academic standing. The implications of such research are that parental divorce brings harm to families and, consequentially, should be avoided for the sake of the children's wellbeing. What is often missing from this research is a focus on the potential positive outcomes of parental divorce. The current study explores the effects of parental divorce on young adults' ability to form and maintain romantic relationships, exploring the possibility for positive outcomes of parental divorce on young adults. Specifically, it asks whether or not young adults can actually benefit from their parents' divorce. Using a multi-method research design, survey data from 233 college students from divorced and intact families and face to face interviews with 10 respondents from divorced families, findings show that many young adults do experience positive outcomes after the divorce and that these outcomes are dependent on a variety of familial and social factors that shape the divorce experience.

**KEYWORDS:** parental divorce, positive outcomes

## INTRODUCTION

Divorce rates in the United States have experienced highs and lows, peaking in the 1970s and declining throughout the 1980s (National Center for Health Statistics 1999) and finally stabilizing at about 3.7 per 1,000 total population (National Vital Statistics System 2000-2001). During the periods of rising divorce rates, scholars focused not only on the underlying causes of divorce but also on the implications and effects divorce has on children. Some, such as Wallerstein (1991), believed that all cases of divorce affected children negatively—primarily in regards to such factors as post-divorce parent-child relationships, children's living arrangements, and parental relocation—and that there were no instances in which children or adolescents could benefit from their parents' divorce. This perspective was later criticized by researchers who argued that the absolutist approach failed to take into account the nature of relationships before and after the divorce, suggesting that conflict between family members was more important than the occurrence of divorce in determining the children's wellbeing (Fabricius 2003; Amato, Kane, and James 2011). Research shows that removing children from high-conflict households provides children with the opportunity to develop in an environment with fewer stressors, mitigating poor academic performance and behavioral and psychological problems (Amato et al. 2011). Nonetheless, most research on children of divorce continue to explore the negative effects rather than any positive outcomes.

The purpose of this multi-method study is to contribute to the growing body of literature on divorce by examining the outcomes and consequences of parental divorce on young adults. Since the subjects of previous research findings focus on negative outcomes of divorce, this study will explore whether having experienced parental divorce has any significant positive impact on how young adults form and maintain romantic relationships.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Effects of Parental Divorce on Relationship Formation and Maintenance*

Most research on parental divorce focuses on the negative effects of divorce on children, teenagers, and young adults. Previous research has shown that children of divorce often experience a change in their views towards intimate relationships (boyfriend, girlfriend, romantic

partner, etc.), which in turn may cause them to become either more nervous or wary of these relationships and unsure of their ability to successfully manage one (Cartwright 2008). Previous research has found that children of divorce experience pessimistic outlooks/feelings (towards themselves and future intimate relationships) and low reports of self-esteem as well as outcomes on areas such as academic performance, familial relationships, and performance in everyday functioning (Carlson 2006; Cartwright 2008; Scabini and Cigoli 2008; Sever, Guttman, and Lazar 2008). Qualitative studies have depicted children of divorce as experiencing painful emotional states (i.e. anger, suspicion, jealousy, etc.) as well as observing significant decreases in their levels of self-worth, trust, and communication with their peers (Cartwright 2008; Scabini and Cigoli 2008). Scabini and Cigoli (2008), for example, found that males from divorced families would often develop a fear of being unable to maintain a healthy relationship with their spouse and future children. Likewise, in Cartwright's (2008) study, the majority of her 40 participants, young adults from New Zealand aged 19-29, reported having negative beliefs about themselves and their outlook on life:

Some of the potentially negative beliefs they expressed were: no one stays around forever; you are on your own in life; relationships are short-lived; everyone goes their own way sooner or later; no one is going to be there for you; relationships are a struggle; men only want sex; no one loves me; I'm going to end up divorced; I am not up to scratch; I've got problems; I am too emotional; I get sick of guys easily; I don't want to start something if it's going to be a waste of time; I'm like my father (who was abusive); I wouldn't be able to sustain being nice (Cartwright 2008:140).

Despite these findings, however, some studies report positive outcomes as well. Sever et al. (2008), in their study of 158 Israeli young adults whose parents divorced while they were adolescents, explored the possibility of post-divorce growth by examining separate aspects of divorce (family atmosphere before the divorce, the divorce process) via interviews and questionnaires in order to search for possible positive outcomes of parental divorce among Israeli young adults and organize them based on the type and strength of their relationships amongst each other. Their findings indicated that while many of the participants experienced negative outcomes,

nearly half reported that their method of coping with their parents' divorce resulted in more positive than negative outcomes. Of the coping styles used by the participants, reciprocal support, or the act of establishing a two-way support system between offspring and parents, yielded the best results in terms of positive long-term outcomes. By implementing a give-and-take structure, the participants were able to communicate their needs and insecurities properly, as well as effectively determine reliable sources of support while at the same time becoming more aware of the needs of others (not just including their parents) and obtain the skills necessary to provide such support. This support coping style was found to be strongly correlated to three factors, each representing a central theme of positive outcomes: empowerment (defined as a subjective sense of growth, strength, and maturity), empathy (an increased feeling of compassion for the pain of others), and relationship-savviness (acknowledging the complexity of intimate relationships and having realistic expectations of them). Participants who reported primarily using the support coping style experienced a greater sense of responsibility, maturity, self-confidence, and inner strength, as well as a higher acceptance of their parents' choices, weaknesses, and strengths. These ultimately contributed to the participants' understanding of intimate relationships, helping them to make peace with their parents' divorce as well as giving them an increased sense of commitment for their own relationships (Sever et al. 2008).

Many instances of previous parental divorce research based their findings of negative effects on crude correlations between the parents' marital status (divorced versus married) and indicators of children's wellbeing (i.e. self-esteem, academic performance, etc.). However, researchers have examined these relationships using new methods and have found that variation in such indicators exists independent of the parents' marital status (Bernstein 2012). In Bernstein's survey of 45 university students, she reports that there is no causal relationship between parental divorce and attachment insecurity, depression, or low self-esteem; rather, the problematic beliefs surrounding parental divorce, particularly fear of abandonment, had a higher likelihood of increasing risk for insecure romantic attachment in children of divorce. This finding suggests that it is the individual's experience and interpretation of the divorce, rather than the divorce itself, that influences outcomes with regards to romantic attachment. Additionally, Bernstein (2012) also found that young adults of divorce possess more sympathy (possibly as part of a supportive coping

mechanism), enthusiasm (believed to be a result of motivation encouraged by the stressful experience of the divorce), awe (experiencing a greater sense of gratitude and appreciation towards relationships), and perspective taking than did young adults with continuously married parents.

#### *Additional Factors Affecting Outcomes*

In 2003, Kim Leon published an extensive review of the existing literature on parental divorce and early childhood development in order to determine how parental divorce affects young children's developmental outcomes, risk and protective factors influencing adaptation, and how early parental divorce affects later adjustment. Upon examining the methods and results of several articles, Leon concluded that these findings were not grounded in adequate interpretations:

Although several studies report negative long-term effects of parental divorce on children, the results should be interpreted cautiously for several reasons. First, the role of other family factors such as parenting quality has not been examined in much of the research on the long-term effects of parental divorce. Second, it is possible that the children whose parents divorced would have experienced the same negative outcomes, or more problems, had their parents remained married. Although many of the studies reviewed here are longitudinal studies, they rely on correlational methods rather than experimental methods, so it is not possible to infer a causal relationship between early parental divorce and later outcomes (Leon 2003:267).

In other words, the effects of divorce depend on factors external to the divorce itself. In addition to coping styles and attitude, mentioned earlier, studies on the effects of parental divorce on children report that young adults may experience and internalize their parents' divorce differently depending on their gender (Scabini and Cigoli 2008). For instance, young men tended to view an absent father as an absent role model while females perceived him more as the absent partner of their mother. This, in turn, developed in the male mind as a fear of turning into their father, which could mean becoming abusive or negligent towards their spouses and children. Males identified with the parent of the same gender and, without a proper role model, became fearful that such

undesirable traits were innate. Young women, on the other hand, were more likely to focus on the importance of finding a reliable partner. For them, the excessive maternal presence reinforced the need for stability and unity in a familial setting (Scabini and Cigoli 2008).

Amato et al. (2011) found that young adults and children displayed the fewest behavioral problems as well as the closest relationship with their fathers, who usually are the nonresidential parent, when their parents maintained a cooperative relationship following the divorce. Using data on the relationship between children and their biological fathers from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Carlson (2006) revealed several findings pertaining to paternal involvement. First, father involvement, independent of other examined mediating factors (such as maternal involvement and mental health, number of siblings, and economic status), reduced the size and significance of family structure effects (i.e. single parents, children born outside the marriage) on adolescent behavioral outcomes. Second, despite the implications of gender socialization theory, which suggest that a father's involvement would have a greater impact on the son's life than the daughter's, the benefits of high-quality father involvement mentioned above apply equally to both boys and girls. Third, while continual nonresidential father involvement is important and beneficial, it is more important that the residential father (in the event that the mother remarries, cohabits, etc.) be actively involved in the children's lives as it promotes the social capital of the family necessary to maintaining a safe and nurturing environment. Granted, this last point only applies to a select group of divorced families, as does the success of nonresidential father involvement, since only about 10-18 percent of nonresident fathers devote a significant amount of time to their children (Carlson 2006).

In sum, phenomena surrounding the effects of parental divorce on children are complex and have been obscured or overloaded by those who see this issue only in black and white terms. The current study answers the call of recent researchers who argue that the studies of parental divorce and its effects on children ought to be reevaluated in order to examine it from different angles (Sever et al. 2008). Amato and colleagues (2011) believe that a reevaluation of divorce studies using more current data (most studies use data from the 1990s) would provide more evidence in favor of the positive outcomes on children, given that divorce has become increasingly stigmatized. The present study uses current data (2013) to explore how young adults perceive the effects of their

parents' divorces, taking into account factors such as gender and parental relationships.

## METHOD

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of parental divorce on young adults' ability to form and maintain romantic relationships using surveys and face-to-face interviews. Surveys were distributed through social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Reddit, and Webcourses) and emailed to hundreds of students currently attending the University of Central Florida (UCF), as well as to their professors with the request that they distribute the surveys to their students. Included in these surveys was a section for students whose parents divorced to leave their contact information if they were willing to meet on the main campus for a face-to-face interview to discuss the specifics of their personal experience with parental divorce.

### *Sample*

The sample for the survey consists of 233 students attending UCF, including 67 men and 166 women. Their ages ranged from 18-29 years old; the average respondent was 22 years old. Of these respondents, 45.5 percent of the total sample reported having experienced at least one parental divorce (33 men and 73 women). Most were White/Caucasian (64 percent), followed by 21 percent who identified as Latin/Hispanic, 14 percent African-Americans, and 8 percent Pacific Islanders (percentage does not equal 100 given approximately 7 percent who identified as multiracial and were included here in multiple categories).

### *Quantitative Data*

## Dependent Variables

For the quantitative portion of the study, several aspects of romantic relationship formation and maintenance, including attitudes towards relationships, number of relationships and average duration, were analyzed in this study. In order to accurately measure a respondent's attitude towards romantic relationships (the first dependent variable), a numerical scale was developed consisting of 10 five-point Likert scale statements ("I am wary of getting involved with people romantically"; "At times I think I am not a good partner"; "I am confident in my ability to maintain a relationship"; "I am able to communicate effectively with my partner"; "I feel that

relationships are short-lived”; “I am motivated to make my relationship work”; “I am better at being in a relationship than most other people”; “I am sometimes afraid I will cause my relationship to end”; “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am not fit for being in a relationship”; “I take a positive attitude toward relationships”). Depending on how the statement was phrased, answer choices would be coded to ensure that the overall direction of the score was uniform; for positive statements, the items were coded (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree, while negative statements were coded inversely (i.e., (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither, (4) disagree, and (5) strongly disagree) (see Appendix). The final scale ranges from 10-50 points, with a higher score denoting a more positive overall attitude towards relationships. For the second dependent variable, in order to measure the amount of difficulty respondents from the divorced sample experienced in maintaining a romantic relationship, the survey included two questions on the number of relationships the respondent had had following the divorce and how long on average these relationships had lasted.

### Independent Variables

I measured *presence of parental divorce* with the question: “During your childhood and adolescence, how many times did your parents divorce (if at all)?” Answers were recoded into a new variable, with the value 0 representing respondents whose parents never divorced and the value 1 representing those respondents who had experienced at least one parental divorce. This variable was also analyzed as a continuous variable, with the values 0-4 (0 representing respondents whose parents never divorced and values 1-4 for the number of parental divorces respondents experienced respectively) in separate analyses to determine whether multiple divorces impacted outcomes. *Gender* was coded 0 if male and 1 if female. Respondents’ *age* at the time of their parent’s divorce was coded with the following values: 1 representing the 0-2 years old response, 2 representing the 3-5 years old response, 3 representing the 6-8 years old response, 4 representing the 9-11 years old response, 5 representing the 12-14 years old response, 6 representing the 15-17 years old response, 7 representing the 18 years or older response, and 9 representing the missing data.

### Qualitative Data

The use of qualitative methodology is necessary to understand the lived experiences of children of divorce as

well as to uncover possible new outcomes that cannot be measured by fixed quantitative processes. Ten respondents from the Divorced sample agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of 7 core questions and allowing respondents to delve into any aspects of their experience with which they were most comfortable. Respondents were informed prior to the beginning of the session that their contact information will remain confidential and that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for quality data analysis purposes. For purposes of confidentiality, gender-neutral pseudonyms are used, as are terms such as “partner.” Further, gendered pronouns do not necessarily denote the respondent’s gender.

The majority of these participants experienced one parental divorce; only one experienced a second. Three participants reported that their parents had gone through multiple divorces (one in particular, Jordan, reported that her mother had been divorced twice and her father five times). The majority (n=6) of these participants reported that their fathers remarried following their most recent divorce while only one reported the mother remarrying. Eight participants reported conflict between their parents during or after the divorce and the remaining two reported no conflict.

### Analytic Strategies

In order to test whether respondents from intact families have more positive outcomes with relationship formation than those from divorced families, I ran an independent samples t-test on the “romantic relationship formation difficulty” scale, comparing those whose parents had divorced with those whose parents never divorced. To test whether gender affects relationship formation, I ran independent samples t-tests, using gender as the independent variable and “number of intimate relationships (i.e. boyfriends/girlfriends)” and “length of intimate relationships” as the dependent variables for respondents who experienced at least one parental divorce. To determine whether age at time of parental divorce affects relationships, I ran an analysis of variance, using age at time of parental divorce as the independent variable and “number of intimate relationships” and “length of relationships” as the dependent variables for respondents who experienced at least one parental divorce. To determine whether higher frequencies of parental divorces has a more negative effect on relationship formation than lower frequencies, I ran another analysis of variance, using question: “During your childhood and

adolescence, how many times did your parents divorce (if at all)?" and the 10 Likert scale (attitude towards relationships), using only the respondents who answered to having experienced at least one parental divorce.

For the qualitative analysis, I coded for common themes in the responses, such as family structure and duration of relationships. Participants were then sorted by these categories and compared to reveal trends and similarities between individual cases.

## FINDINGS

### *General Effects of Divorce*

Forty-six percent of the total sample population reported having experienced at least one parental divorce. Of those respondents, thirty-three were male and seventy-three were female. Twenty-eight were between the ages of 3-5 years old at the time their parents divorced, followed by twenty-one between the ages of 6-8 years old and fifteen between the ages of 0-2 years old. Fourteen respondents fell within the 15-17 age range, along with ten in the 9-11 years category and eight each in the 12-14 years and 18 years or older categories. Two respondents did not answer this question (see Table 1).

Respondents from the divorce sample reported a mean score of 32.69 in terms of their attitudes towards relationships, with a median and mode score of 32, a minimum score of 20, and a maximum score of 41. These respondents also reported having been in, on average, 2-3 romantic relationships since their parents divorced, with a median of 2 relationships, a minimum of 0, and a maximum/mode of 5. These relationships lasted on average between 4-7 months and 8-11 months, leaning more towards the latter (actual mean score=2.75 on a scale of 1-4, where 1=0-3 months, 2=4-7 months, 3=8-11 months, and 4=12 months or more), with a median score of 3, a minimum of 0 and a maximum/mode of 4. Table 2 demonstrates the frequencies of these results.

When relaying their feelings at the time of their parents' divorce, an overwhelming majority of the respondents reported having experienced negative emotions. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported feeling sad, stressed, worried, or anxious. A small percentage (roughly 5 percent) reported feeling scared, confused, hatred, indifference, or apathy, the latter being due to the fact that they were too young at the time to remember or form any lasting attachment to both parents.

The remaining 14 percent of the respondents reported feeling relieved, relaxed, or happy at the time of their parents' divorce. While it is a minority, it is worth mentioning that these respondents all reported that they were either in the 6-8 years old category or higher at the time of their parents' divorce with a majority (n=7) in the 18 years or older category.

### *Effects of Parental Divorce on Relationships*

#### Quantitative Analysis

Thirty-six percent of the respondents from intact families reported having romantic relationships that lasted for at least a year, while thirty-five percent reported having relationships that lasted only 0-3 months. Fifteen percent reported relationships lasting 4-7 months and fourteen percent had relationships lasting 8-11 months. Interestingly, the respondents from the Divorce sample performed marginally better in relationship longevity than those from the Never Divorced sample.

Statistical analyses show that respondents whose parents never divorced had a mean score of 32.48 in regards towards their attitudes towards relationships, once again keeping fairly similar results to respondents from the Divorced sample who had a mean score of 32.69.

In order to analyze the impact of parental divorce on a respondent's attitudes towards relationships, I ran an independent samples t-test to examine the relationship between the presence of parental divorce in the respondent's life (whether or not they'd experienced it, as opposed to how many they'd experienced) and their overall attitude towards relationships. The test revealed no significant relationship between the two variables (see Table 3). These findings suggest that parental divorce has no impact on young adults' attitudes towards relationships; respondents formed their own opinions on romantic relationships and their ability to form/maintain them independent of their parents' marital status.

In terms of the effect of gender on difficulty in maintaining successful romantic relationships, an independent samples t-test revealed that while the difference between male and female respondents' average number of intimate relationships is not significant, there is a significant difference in the duration of these relationships between men and women ( $t=-2.168$ ;  $p<.05$ ). The results demonstrate that male adult children

of divorce tend to have relationships that last 4-7 months whereas women reported having intimate relationships that lasted, on average, 8-11 months. Further, there were more female respondents that reported having intimate relationships lasting 12 months or more (35 vs. 6) than males. Figure 1 illustrates the difference.

In terms of the timing of parental divorce, a one-way analysis of variance revealed that there was no significant relationship between the age of respondents at the time of their parents' divorce and the number/duration of their romantic relationships (see Table 4). It is worth mentioning that respondents in the 12-14 age range when their parents divorced reported the highest average duration of intimate relationships ( $\bar{Y}=3.25$ ) of roughly 8-11 months.

In terms of the frequency of parental divorces, of the respondents whose parents divorced, only 19 reported experiencing multiple parental divorces. Perhaps due to this constraint, the data showed no significant relationships between the number of divorces experienced and respondents' overall attitudes towards romantic relationships. In light of this, I ran a bivariate correlation using the data on the entire sample's responses to question one (how many parental divorces experienced, ranging from 0-4) and the sum of their attitude scores. Despite this, the correlation still proved to be insignificant.

### Qualitative Analysis

An analysis of qualitative data reveals common themes in the participants' responses that complement the survey data. Half the participants reported that they felt their parents' divorce had had a positive impact on their ability to maintain a relationship in some way, while three felt it had neither a positive nor negative impact.

The most common response to the question of impact was that the participant would strive to perform better than their parents in their own relationships by learning from their parents' mistakes rather than repeat them:

I think when I was younger it did [have an impact on me], but growing up and getting into my second and third relationships it was more of, um, I guess like I saw what they had and what they did wrong and I didn't wanna do that. So then, you know, I looked at it more as like a positive effect, I would guess, on my relationship and I wanted it to last longer so I

kept communicating. (Dakota)

My parents never really worked at [their relationship]. My dad was never around, he was always working, and I try to maintain— like I work a lot and I go to school, and I'm learning a little bit that I need to do more activities and stuff for the relationship, not just be there, you know? (Alex)

Similar instances occurred with other participants. Casey, whose parents divorced because they married too early in their relationship, uses the divorce as a reminder to take intimate relationships slow and to really get to know his partner:

If anything I can use my parents' divorce as a way to not jump into a truly committed, like married, relationship too soon, because that's what my parents always told me, it was like "Don't get married too soon, wait as long as you can, make sure you know the other person because a divorce sucks for everybody."

Alex, whose parents failed to communicate properly, reported that open communication and making time for one another is important in maintaining a relationship:

A lot of open communication [is important], try to want the same things in life because my parents didn't want the same things in life... I try to make more time, we do activities together, because when my parents were married, like I remember to the point when they got divorced, when the whole divorce situation and everything went on, but when they got divorced my dad never did anything with us. My mom was always taking us out to the beach and trips and stuff like that. My father was never around, he was like "I'm too busy working, I'm too busy working."

In some cases, experiencing parental divorce provided insight to what the participant was looking for in his or her own relationship. Robin and Alex, whose parents divorced when they were 13 and 6 respectively, were two such cases:

At a young age it made me notice what I wanted...Like "Oh my gosh, [dating] is so important!" I wanted someone I could count on,

I wanted someone who would be there when no one else would, I wanted to feel like I had a voice and to feel loved and appreciated, you know? I wanted someone that I could talk to that would understand, and it helped me realize what I wanted at a young age so then when I went out...it helped me narrow down what I was looking for. (Robin)

The main reason my parents got divorced was my mom cheated on my father, so I know that now myself I don't wanna be like that, I don't wanna cheat on somebody, I don't wanna pretend that everything is hunky-dory... [I would think] "What's the use of being in a relationship if you're just going in and out of all of them and there's no commitment there?"... and so I was like "I'm not gonna be with somebody, if that's the way it is out there then I'm not gonna do it." (Alex)

Another common finding was regarding the duration of romantic relationships. Seven participants reported having at least one serious relationship since their parents divorced that lasted over 12 months, four of which reporting relationships that lasted for over 2 years. Dakota in particular, who emphasized the importance of communication in her interview, reported being currently in a relationship that has lasted for seven and a half years: "Communication is key, and that's why [my partner] and I have lasted this long. We talk all the time."

A prevalent theme amongst the interviews was the type of family structure participants grew up with following their parents' divorce. Seven participants reported living primarily with their mother, usually due to custody stipulations (or lack thereof), or at least preferring not to stay with their biological father. This may have inadvertently led to the overall bias against men for female participants:

I'm very against marriage... Not so much [partners] anymore, because not all men or women cheat and there are good men and women out there, but I think my only relationship that was serious did fail because I had trust issues. That's a fact. (Bailey)

The reason my parents divorced was because, even though they loved each other so much my dad was not there for my mother, like she was in

a really bad car accident and she had to like go to rehab... and my father was just like "You're useless to me, I don't want nothing to do with you" and I had so much hatred toward my father after the divorce, because he never bothered to communicate with us, so, like I figured and I thought about it as if like, I never wanted to put myself out there and to bother with a relationship because I was like "If my own father can't even call me and spend time with me or even love me how can I expect somebody else to love me?" (Alex)

My father at one point had called me and my brother downstairs and asked which parent that we wanted to stay with, which, obviously, we would have chosen our mother, but with my father's temper, how it was, we knew better than to say anything. (Robin)

I would stay in a relationship with [someone] for years but I don't think I would ever get married, so technically my parents' divorce has affected me towards lasting relationships, just in the marriage sense. I could have a long-lasting relationship, just never marry them—unless they were very persistent...I could be perfectly fine being a [partner] to someone for 10 years and have 3 kids, I just never wanna get married. (Jamie)

Further, due to the relatively young age of many of the participants, some participants had not left home long enough to create their own impressions of how a relationship ought to be. Alex, for example, claimed to have biased views towards relationships due to family, yet they were the primary influence because Alex had spent the majority of her life surrounded by her mother, siblings, and cousins:

I never wanted to get in, like, a committed relationship, I just wanted to, like, have fun, do my own thing. Because my sister is like my mom, she was always in a relationship, always in a relationship, and like I saw all the drama and the B.S. that came from them, and I didn't want it, like I was younger when my sister got married, she was like 27, and I was like probably, what, like 19-20, and they had like so much issues and so many problems and I was like "I'm not dealing with that, I don't want to



even bother to be like told how to live my life” and I didn’t want anything to hold me down... And growing up everybody was like “Why bother with a relationship? Have fun, do your thing.” And I kinda saw that too because a lot of my cousins that I hung out with would always cheat on their significant others and so I was like “I’m not gonna be with somebody, if that’s the way it is out there then I’m not gonna do it.”

## DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that in many ways parental divorce does not have an impact on young adults’ ability to form and maintain romantic relationships. While divorce may not necessarily influence their attitudes towards relationships in general, it can cause the child to be more cautious and unsure of their own ability to form a healthy relationship. However, there are still cases in which children of divorce may experience positive outcomes. The results show that the age of the child at the time of the divorce does not determine the amount of difficulty they will have maintaining relationships. They also show that the presence of parental divorce is not a significant predictor of how positive or negative the respondents’ romantic relationships would turn out, as respondents from both samples reported fairly similar outcomes in the frequency and duration of their relationships as well as similar attitudes.

Interview findings were similar to those in Scabini and Cigoli’s (2008) study, where females were more likely to interpret the absence of a father figure (not necessarily the biological father) as men being unreliable, which would either deter them from participating in long-term romantic relationships or at the very least emphasize the importance of finding a partner who would be stable enough to meet their standards. Further, the results of this study aligned with the notion that males from divorced families had a higher chance of becoming unsure of their ability to have a healthy relationship with their partners, primarily because they were not sure how a healthy relationship was supposed to turn out.

While the majority of participants reported conflict between their parents, those who reported a post-divorce relationship that was amicable (or at the very least lacked conflict) were among those who displayed longer-lasting relationships. Consequently, these participants’ relationships with their biological fathers were not as affected as participants whose parents had a conflicting

post-divorce relationship. This finding ties in with the work of Amato et al. (2011), who linked close father-child relationships with lower adolescent behavioral problems.

In terms of positive outcomes the interviews were the most revealing by far, illustrating the desire of the interviewees to learn from their parents’ relationships and navigate their own without making the same mistakes. This emphasis to perform better than their parents in areas such as communication and pacing of the relationship may have some connection with the fact that seven out of ten interviewees reported living primarily with their mother; in other words, there may be an association with the emphasis of these aspects of romantic relationships and a primarily maternal influence on children of parental divorce. However, this possibility would require further examination in a future study. Either way, using the qualitative data gathered from the interviews, it can still be argued that while a person’s personal experience with parental divorce may vary in detail, there is a general desire among children of divorce to have a more amicable and stable romantic relationship than their parents.

### *Limitations*

Due to time constraints and lack of incentives, only 233 people responded to the survey. Further, only ten of those respondents participated in face-to-face interviews. A larger sample size may have yielded more significant results. Respondent age may have also contributed to the lack of significance in the data set. Due to the respondents’ relatively young age ( $\bar{Y}=21.55$ ), it could be argued that many of them were not old enough to have experienced a serious relationship or to have had enough life experiences to shape their opinions and attitudes towards romantic relationships.

The methods used to measure the amount of difficulty experienced with romantic relationships may not have been sufficient. Perhaps attitudes towards relationships, frequency of relationships and average duration were not enough to gauge a respondent’s proficiency with romantic relationship formation and maintenance, as illustrated by the interview data. Other factors, such as how serious the relationships were, reasons for the relationship ending, whether the respondent was responsible for the termination of the relationship, and level of communication would have provided a more accurate depiction of how well respondents were able to

manage their relationships.

If this research were to be repeated, a broader age spectrum would allow for a more accurate representation of how parental divorce affects young adults. Likewise, a more racially diverse sample would provide a better idea of how parental divorce and romantic relationships differ (or liken) across cultures, as the majority of respondents fell into the White/Caucasian category. Given the personal nature of the topic, some form of incentive may be useful in obtaining respondents for a more adequate sample size.

In order to prevent survey fatigue among my sample, which was comprised of young adult college students, I had to keep the survey relatively brief. This brevity prevented me from including too many variables in the survey, such as those included in other cited literature (i.e., familial relationships, views on marriage).

Despite the limitations of this study, it can still be argued that there are instances in which parental divorce has a positive impact on young adults' abilities to form and maintain romantic relationships. While the survey data can only reflect specific aspects of one's experience with parental divorce (i.e., optimism/pessimism, self-esteem, etc.), the interviews depict the personal experiences and potential for a bright future children of parental divorce can attain. Being able to recognize the pitfalls of romantic relationships and how to avoid or properly remedy them as a result of having experiences parental divorce reveals a silver lining that one can expect from such a scenario.

**APPENDIX A**

**Table 1. Frequencies of Age at Time of Parental Divorce**

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
0-2 years old	15	14%
3-5 years old	28	27%
6-8 years old	21	20%
9-11 years old	10	10%
12-14 years old	8	8%
15-17 years old	14	13%
18 years or older	8	8%

**Table 2. Frequencies of Dependent Variables from Divorce Sample**

Respondent's Attitudes Towards Relationships (divorced only)		
Score (10-50)	Frequency	Valid Percent
20	1	1.0
24	1	1.0
25	2	1.9
27	2	1.9
28	3	2.9
29	7	6.7
30	9	8.7
31	11	10.6
32	18	17.3
33	10	9.6
34	7	6.7
35	10	9.6
36	10	9.6
37	5	4.8
38	2	1.9
39	2	1.9
40	3	2.9
41	1	1.0
TOTAL	104	100.0
Number of Relationships (divorced)		
Score (0-5)	Frequency	Valid Percent
0	14	13.3
1	20	19.0
2	19	18.1
3	14	13.3
4	11	10.5
5	27	25.7
TOTAL	105	100.0
Duration of Relationships (divorced)		
Scores (1-4)	Frequency	Valid Percent
1	23	22.1
2	21	20.2
3	19	18.3
4	41	39.4
TOTAL	104	100.0

**Table 3. Independent Samples T-test- Young Adults from Divorced vs. Intact Parents Attitudes towards Romantic Relationships**

Measure*	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Respondents whose parents never divorced	32.4836	2.96044	-.480	224	.632
Respondents who experienced at least one parental divorce	32.6923	3.58009			

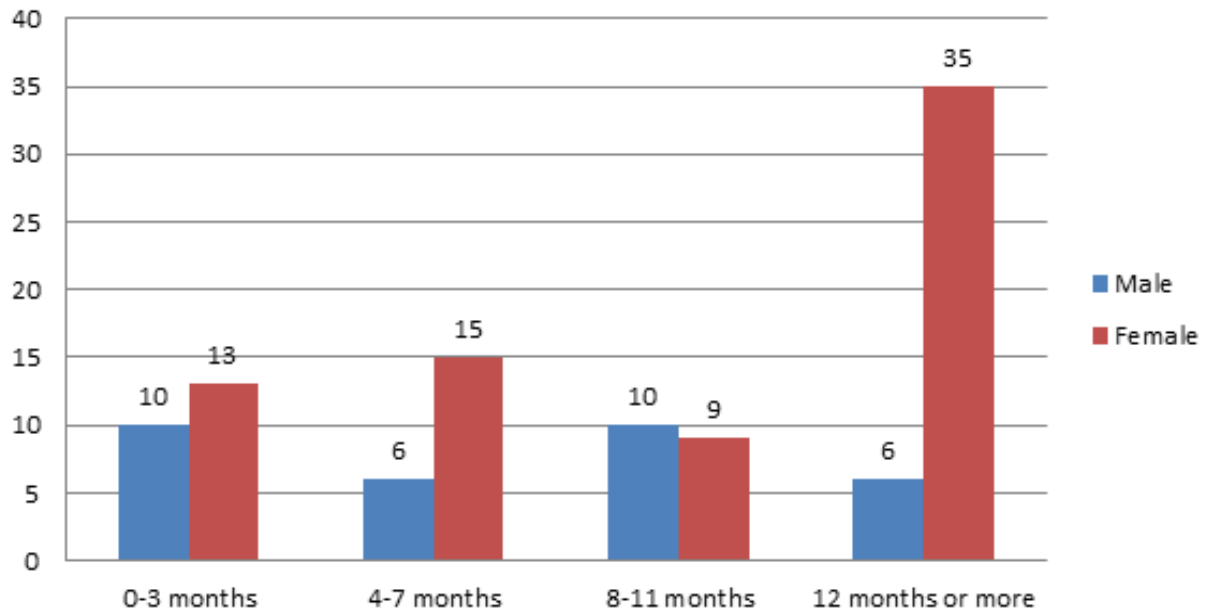
\*Note: Measured on a scale of 10-50, with a higher score denoting a more positive overall attitude towards relationships.

**Table 4. Analysis of Variance for Age at Divorce, Number of Romantic Relationships, and Average Duration of Relationships**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
<b>Number of Relationships</b>					
Between	26.271	6	4.378	1.389	.227
Within	302.506	96	3.151		
Total	328.777	102			
<b>Duration of Relationships</b>					
Between	9.827	6	1.638	1.144	.343
Within	136.026	95	1.432		
Total	145.853	101			

## APPENDIX B

Figure 1. Duration of Intimate Relationships



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