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Couples with children with ADHD twice as likely to divorce

Published: Wednesday, 22-Oct-2008

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than parents of a child without the condition.

According to Professor William E. Pelham, Jr., from Buffalo University, having a child with ADHD makes it twice as likely your marriage will end in divorce by the time the child is 8 years old.

Dr. Pelham, a professor of psychology and pediatrics at the University and the director of UB's Center for Children and Families, known internationally for his ADHD treatment and research, conducted a study to examine the issue - he and colleague Dr. Brian T. Wymbs

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found that among couples in the study who were divorced, marriages involving children with ADHD ended sooner than marriages with no ADHD-diagnosed children.

The study also found that characteristics within the family contribute individually to the risk of divorce: - age of the child when diagnosed - race and ethnicity of the parents - severity of coexisting disorders in children with ADHD, such as oppositional-defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD) - education levels of the parents - and a father's antisocial behavior. (trouble with the law.)

Dr. Pelham says this is the first study to find that both parent and child factors individually predict the rate and time of divorce and to also show that the severity of the child's disruptive behavior, specifically those with ODD or CD, increases the risk of divorce.

Dr. Pelham says the suggestion is not that having a child with ADHD is the only reason these marriages end in divorce, but that disruptive child behavior over time, with other existing stress in the family, sparks conflict in a marriage and ultimately, divorce.

Dr. Wymbs says when parents interact with an ADHD child, they are more distressed, argue with one another more and view one another as less supportive, compared to when they interact with a child without ADHD.

Data used for the study came from a larger investigation called the Pittsburgh ADHD Longitudinal Study (PALS), which involved 282 adolescents and young adults who had been diagnosed with the disorder in childhood.

Their parents completed a series of questionnaires and diagnostic tests, along with individual interviews and the child's birth date was used as the starting point of the time to divorce.

These results were compared with those from 206 demographically similar PALS participants without ADHD and their parents.

The results showed that 22.7 percent of parents of children with ADHD had divorced by the time the child was 8 years old, compared to 12.6 percent of parents in the control group but the divorce rates of parents with and without children with ADHD were not significantly different after children passed the 8-year mark.

Dr. Pelham says families that 'survive' through that age, perhaps because they are low on all of the risk factors, apparently will make it through the rest of the child's childhood.

The researchers say of the characteristics that may contribute to risk of divorce, a father's antisocial behavior proved to be the largest factor and the rate of divorce also increased when mothers had substantially less education than fathers.

Wymbs and Pelham say those who treat children with ADHD and disruptive behavior problems should take note if parents are having marriage problems and try to intervene to prevent the children from going through the trauma of divorce.

However, they also suggest that for some couples who may have serious and frequent marital conflict and are raising difficult-to-manage children, divorce may be the best option for the children.

The study is published in the current issue of the [Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology](#).



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