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Couples with children with ADHD at risk of higher divorce rates, shorter marriages

6 Nov 2008

Parents of a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are nearly twice as likely to divorce by the time the child is 8 years old than parents of children without ADHD, the first study to look at this issue in depth has shown.

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

Additional findings from a subset of divorced couples with children with ADHD showed that several 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.)

"We believe this is the first study to find that both parent and child factors individually predict the rate and time of divorce," said Professor William Pelham, Professor of Psychology and Pediatrics at the University at Buffalo and director of UB's Center for Children and Families.

"Moreover, this is the only study to demonstrate that the severity of the child's disruptive behavior, specifically those with ODD or CD, increases the risk of divorce.

"Certainly we are not suggesting that having a child with ADHD is the only reason these marriages end in divorce," noted Pelham.

"Disruptive child behavior likely interacts over time with other existing stress in the family to spark conflict in a marriage and, ultimately, divorce." 'Wombs' research documents that 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 for the study was gathered from a subset of participants in a larger investigation called the Pittsburgh ADHD Longitudinal Study (PALS), which is funded by grants from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) to Pelham and Brooke Molina, Ph.D., from the University of Pittsburgh.

Some 282 adolescents and young adults who had been diagnosed with the disorder in childhood and their parents completed a series of questionnaires and diagnostic instruments, along with individual interviews. 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.

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. Divorce rates of parents with and without children with ADHD were not significantly different after children passed the 8-year mark.

"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," Pelham said.

Of the characteristics that may contribute to risk of divorce, a father's antisocial behavior proved to be the largest factor. The rate of divorce also increased when mothers had substantially less education than fathers; children were diagnosed with ADHD at a younger age; families had racial or ethnic minority children and children had serious ODD or CD behavior problems.


"With these findings in mind," Pelham said, "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 pointed out 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.

Results of the study appear in the October issue of the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology.

(Source: University at Buffalo: Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology: October 2008.)

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