The Effect of Divorce on Sons’ Aggression

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Forty-eight boys (ages 13–15 years) with divorced parents were given paper-and-pencil mazes to solve. Mazes in two pretest trials were readily solvable, whereas mazes in a frustration condition were impossible to solve. Ratings of the anger displayed by the boys were made by the researchers on a 10-point scale, and self-ratings were obtained as well. The observed anger ratings were significantly greater when attempting the unsolvable mazes. The research clearly demonstrates that divorce increases sons’ aggression.

The divorce rate has dramatically and progressively increased in recent years (Morton & Blatchford, 1993; Twilley, 1994). Many authorities have cited the varied effects of divorce on offspring. Of particular import are affective (Israel, 1987) and behavioral (Canasta & Bridges, 1981) disturbances. Boys, especially, have been observed to be prone to anger (Affertide & Stone, 1989; Miller & Metaluma, 1990). Albright and Tindelty (1988) have posited that the increase of conduct disorders and juvenile delinquency can be attributed, in part, to the increasing divorce rate. In their study of 185 juvenile delinquent boys, King and Arthur (1975) noted a divorce rate among parents that was significantly higher than in a non-delinquent group of comparable age and socioeconomic status. Truancy and referrals for disciplinary action were more frequent in a sample of Chicago junior high school youths whose parents were divorced than in a sample of students from intact families.

Clinical theorists have presented a compelling rationale for these findings. Waverly (1987) has pointed out that the breakdown of the nuclear family and, as is typical, the departure of the father from the household, leads to anger stemming from the change in family status, disruption of secure routines, economic stresses, blame casting, and “splitting.” Boys, who are apt to be more closely identified with the father, are more likely to display anger in the form of aggressive acting-out behavior (Bingham & Newman, 1986; Ellsworth & Kripke, 1985).

It is important that these clinical observations and theoretical formulations be subjected to more rigorous scientific appraisal. The purpose of this study is to test the hypothesis that boys of divorced parents are prone to anger, thereby providing research support for existing theoretical formulations. This investigation aims to offer experimental confirmation of the idea that anger is a distinguishing characteristic of boys of divorced parents.

Method

Participants

Forty-five male, middle class, Caucasian, junior high school students, ages 13–15 years, participated in the study. They were recruited from three junior high schools in neighboring suburban communities. All of the participants were children of divorces in which the father had been out of the home from 1 to 5 years. None of the mothers had remarried, and no adult males were living in the household. All of the boys were volunteers, and their mothers signed an informed consent form.

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NOTE: This is a fictional article to be used only for purposes of research education.
Procedure

Participants were seen individually, and each of the authors served as the experimenter for approximately one half of the boys. The boys were given a series of two paper-and-pencil mazes of moderate difficulty. The mazes were selected to be comparable in difficulty to mazes for that age level in the Heathrow (1990) revision of the Porteus Maze series. The boys were told that most boys in their grade could solve the maze puzzles without too much difficulty. They were then given a second series of two mazes that had been altered to seal off the one escape path, thereby turning it into a cul-de-sac. They were told that they would be given two mazes for practice and that they would receive a $3 prize if they did above average on the two mazes that would follow. The aim, unbeknownst to the participants, was to frustrate them and to observe consequent signs of aggressive behavior.

All of the boys successfully completed the first two mazes and were praised for their effort. As arranged, they were unable to find their way out of the second set of mazes. When they indicated that they were ready to give up on the first unsolvable maze, they were encouraged to try the next one. They were told that even though they did not complete the maze, they were still in the running for a prize.

Upon completion, each boy was debriefed about the purpose of the study and the reason for the deception created by unsolvable mazes. They were reassured about their true ability on the basis of their performance on the two solvable mazes. All were given the $3 reward and were thanked for their participation. Nobody left the session in an angry mood.

Criterion Measures

Aggressive behavior was assessed on a 10-point visual analog scale completed by the experimenter. The rater took into account facial expressions, direct verbal expressions of anger, expletives, broken pencils, hitting of the table, and other signs of emotional distress. The anchor values of the scale were 1 (no apparent signs of anger) and 10 (extremely angry).

Ratings were done for boys’ performance on each of the four mazes. Thus, there were two pretest (nonfrustration condition) ratings and two posttest (frustration condition) to compare. Scores of the two pretest ratings were averaged for comparison with the averages of the two posttest ratings.

At the end of the last maze, the boys were asked to make ratings of their own subjective feelings of anger while doing each of the four mazes. This was done from recollection instead of at the time of the task because it was thought unwise to place the focus on anger when the participants were led to believe that the study was about problem solving.

Results and Discussion

There were no differences in the performance of the boys seen by the two different experimenters. Their results were therefore combined for purposes of analysis.

As shown in Table 1, the pretest mean of the objective rating was 2.39, in contrast to a mean of 7.12 at posttest. These two means were compared by a t test for independent groups, yielding $t(88) = 4.76, p < .001$. The comparable means of the self-ratings were 2.00 and 2.15, respectively, $t(88) = .33, ns$ (see Table 2).

The finding that objectively observable signs of anger and overt aggressive behavior nearly doubled under frustration clearly supports the hypothesis that anger is a distinguishing characteristic of boys of divorced parents. Even such a minor frustration as inability to solve a maze puzzle was sufficient to evoke clearly observable anger. Divorce apparently takes its toll on

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<th>Trial No.</th>
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<td>6.56</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>2.39</td>
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<td>$SD$</td>
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adolescent and preadolescent boys who are deprived of the presence of a father in the home at this critical time in their development. The fact that self-ratings did not show a significant difference under the two conditions, even though there was more self-reported anger under frustration, suggests either that the defense of denial is strongly operating or that there is considerable unawareness of their own affective inner states. Each of these explanations has important clinical implications.

Because anger is such a prominent feature of the psychological makeup of sons of divorced parents, thought should be given to the application of early interventions to help manage and control it. More research is needed to help pinpoint those aspects of development that are most severely affected and to determine which thera-

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**Table 2**

*Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Ratings of Anger at Pretest and Posttest*

peutic approaches are most effective in helping boys of divorced parents cope with their anger.

**References**


