

Patterns of Adolescent Adjustment Following Parent Marital Transition¹

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Abstract

The present study examines whether individuals in different family structures show different patterns and mean levels of adjustment through adolescence. Data are from the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT), an 8 – wave longitudinal study of 2,451 adolescents. Adolescents from always married families, families who experience divorce prior to 7th grade, and families who experience parental divorce between 7th and 12th grade are compared on measures of depressed mood, financial worries, school absences, and math and English grades. Results indicate that experiencing divorce during adolescence is associated with increases in both depressed mood and school absences, but that these increases are only temporary. In contrast, financial worries increase most rapidly and remain high through 12th grade for individuals who experienced parental divorce during adolescence. Adolescents from transition families, however, do not differ from adolescents in always married homes in academic achievement. On the other hand, adolescents from previously divorced homes show the poorest adjustment at all time points, for virtually all outcomes. This research suggests that children who experience parental divorce during adolescence may have greater resources (cognitive, emotional, and social) that allow them to cope with this transition more effectively.

Sample & Methods

Data are taken from the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (MSALT – Principal Investigators: Jacquelynne S. Eccles & Bonnie L. Barber). MSALT is an 8 – wave longitudinal study; begun in 1983, consisting of 2,451 adolescents. The sample is predominantly Caucasian, from lower to middle class families. Data for the present study are from waves 4 (Spring, 7th grade), 5 (Spring, 10th grade), & 6 (Spring, 12th grade). Data were collected from adolescent self-reports, parent reports, & school record information.

Family Structure Groups. Using parent and adolescent reports, adolescents were divided into three mutually exclusive groups: the Always Married (AM) Group (N = 1477; 60.3 % of total sample), consisting of adolescents whose parents were married in 7th grade and remained married by 12th grade; the Early Divorce (ED) Group (N = 216; 8.8 % of total sample), consisting of adolescents whose parents had divorced prior to 7th grade and remained divorced in 12th grade; and the Transition to Divorce (TD) Group (N = 98; 4.0 % of total sample), consisting of adolescents whose parents were married in 7th grade and had divorced by 12th grade. Excluded from the present analyses were adolescents whose long-term family structures were unknown (N = 273; 11.1%), adolescents whose parent was widowed (N = 98; 4.0 %), adolescents whose parents were never married (N = 25; 1.0 %), and adolescents whose parents were remarried prior to, or at any point during the study (N = 263; 10.7 %).

Adolescent Outcome Variables. Five indicators of adolescent adjustment were obtained at each of the three time points: adolescent self-report of *Depressed Mood*, a 3 item scale (alpha = .65 - .69), with score ranging from 0 to 100 % of total scale score; adolescent self-report of *Financial Worries*, a single item assessing how often the adolescent worried that his/her family would not have enough money, with scores ranging from 0 to 100 % of total scale score; *School Absences*, taken from school record data, with the score representing the actual number of absences per semester; *Math Grades*, taken from school record data [Range = 1 (F) - 16 (A+)]; and *English Grades*, taken from school record data [Range = 1 (F) - 16 (A+)].

Results

Depressed Mood. (See Figure 1). In 7th grade, no mean level differences were found between the three groups. In 10th grade, the AM group was significantly less depressed than either the ED & TD groups; no difference in depressed mood was found between the ED & TD groups. In 12th grade, the AM group was significantly less depressed than the ED group; the TD group did not differ from either the AM or ED groups. Concerning differences in patterns of adjustment, compared to the AM group, rates of depressed mood increased more quickly between 7th and 10th grade for adolescents in the ED group. Compared to the AM group, rates of depressed mood decreased more rapidly between 10th and 12th grade for adolescents in the TD group.

Financial Worries. (See Figure 2). In 7th & 10th grades, the ED group reported more worries than the AM group; the TD group did not differ from either the AM or TD groups. In 12th grade, adolescents in both the ED and TD groups reported significantly more worries than adolescents in the AM group. No mean level differences between the ED and TD groups were found in 12th grade. Concerning patterns of adjustment, whereas rates of financial worries decreased between 7th and 10th grade for the AM and ED groups, they increased for the TD group. Moreover, the decrease in financial worries between 7th and 10th grade was greater for adolescents in the ED group than for adolescents in the AM group. No differences in pattern were found between 10th and 12th grade.

School Absences. (See Figure 3). In 7th grade, the AM group had fewer absences than the ED group; the TD group did not differ from either the AM or ED groups. In 10th grade, adolescents in the AM group had fewer absences than adolescents in either the ED or TD groups; no differences in absences between ED & TD groups. In 12th grade, no differences between groups were found. Regarding differences in patterns of adjustment, compared to the AM group, absences increased more rapidly between 7th and 10th grade for adolescents in the TD group. No differences in pattern were found between the three groups from 10th and 12th grade.

Math Grades. (See Figure 4). In both 7th and 10th grades, adolescents in the AM group received higher math grades than adolescents in the ED group; adolescents in the TD group did not differ from adolescents in either the AM or ED groups. In 12th grade, no differences between groups were found. No differences in patterns of adjustment were found.

English Grades. (See Figure 5). At all three time points, adolescents in the AM group received higher English grades than adolescents in the ED group; adolescents in the TD group did not differ from adolescents in either the AM or ED groups. No differences in patterns of adjustment were found.

Discussion

Results from the present study suggest that experiencing parental divorce during adolescence may be less harmful for long-term adjustment than experiencing parental divorce prior to adolescence. Although experiencing divorce is related to higher depressed mood and more school absences when compared to adolescents from always married homes, these differences are temporary, disappearing by 12th grade. Moreover, no differences between these two groups were found for either mean level or pattern of academic achievement. The only significant and lasting difference occurs for financial worries. Prior to divorce, adolescents in the transition group do not differ from adolescents in the always married group. After divorce, however, adolescents in the transition group report greater worries, and these worries persist through 12th grade.

In contrast, this study provides evidence that experiencing divorce prior to adolescence is associated with poorer adjustment throughout adolescence. Although few differences in pattern were found, on average, adolescents from early divorced families are more depressed, have greater financial worries, miss school more often, and receive lower math and English grades at almost every time point compared to adolescents in always married homes.

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Figure 1. Depressed Mood

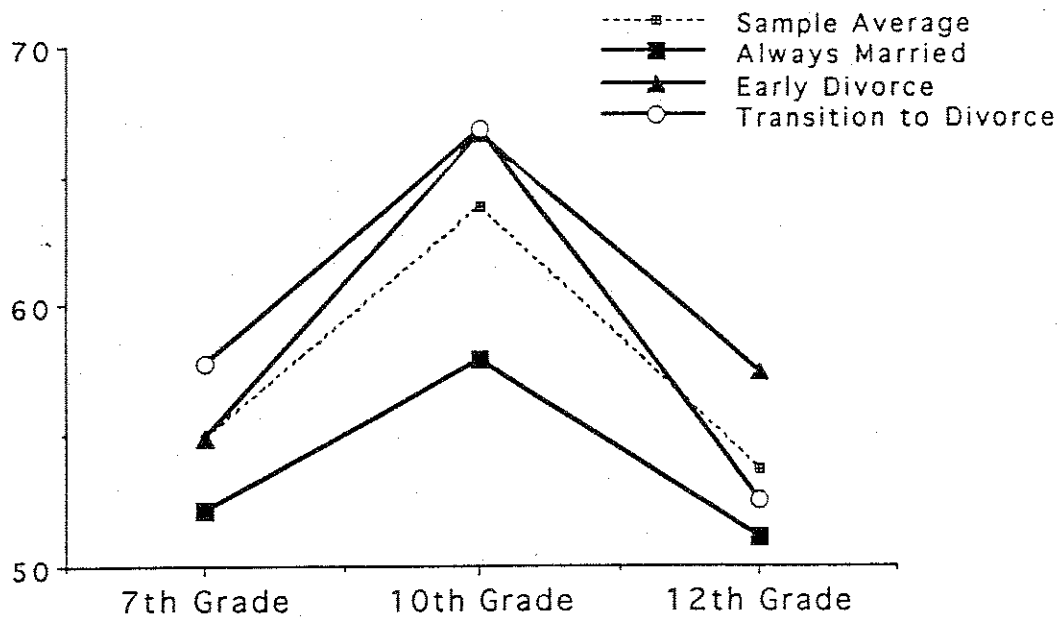


Figure 2. Financial Worries

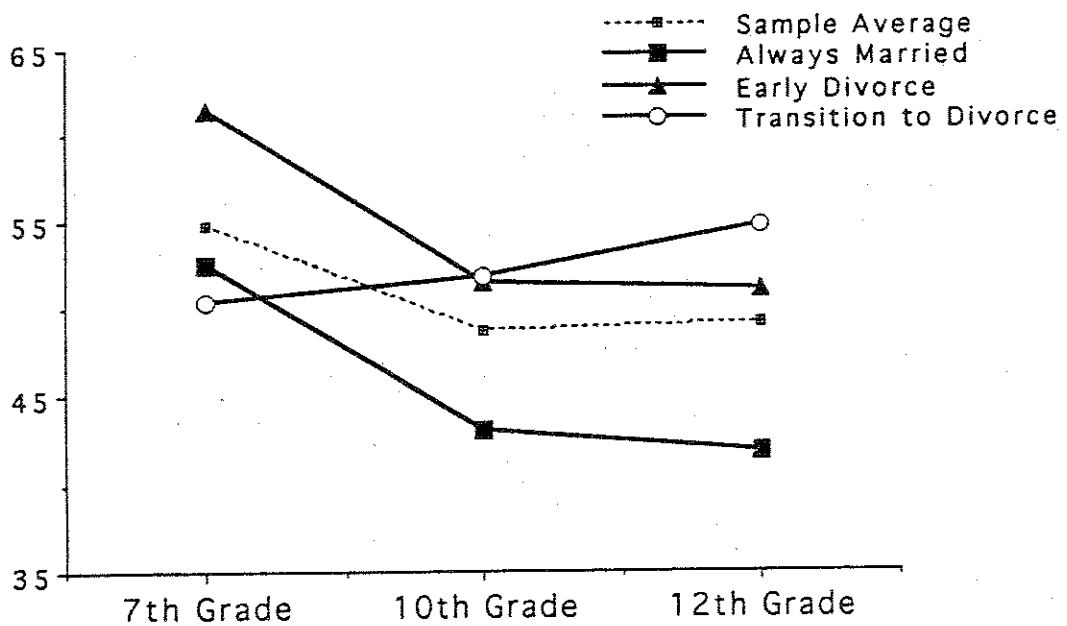


Figure 3. School Absences

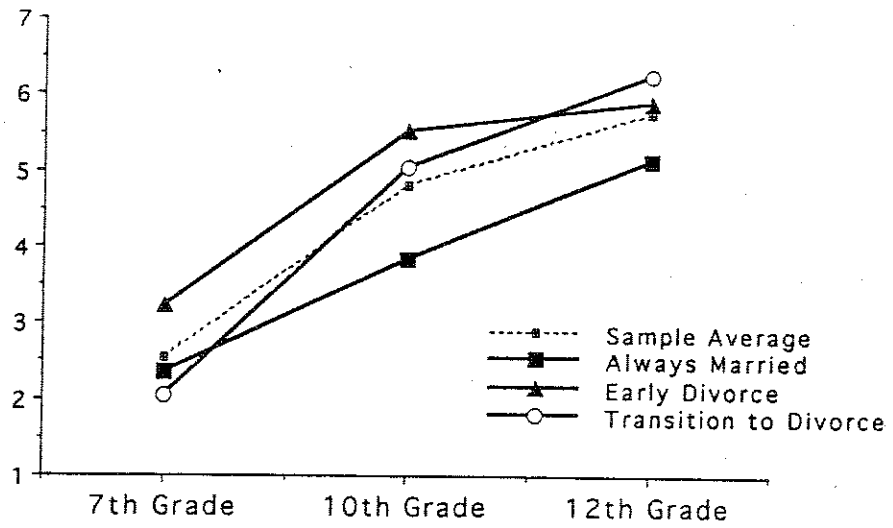


Figure 4. Math Grades

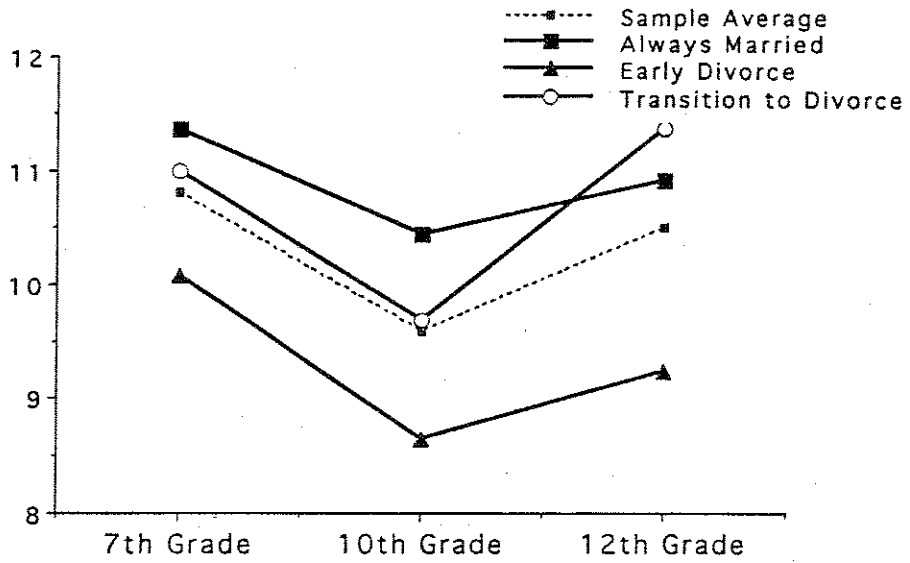


Figure 5. English Grades

