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Does parental divorce have an affect on a child's education?

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Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

In the U.S., 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. Children who experience their parents going through a divorce are often left susceptible to depression, acting out, and suffering problems academically. This study examines the relationship between academic problems and parent relationships and divorce. When parents decide to divorce or separate, their actions can affect their children's education and schooling. The twenty former Abington High School and now Bridgewater State University students were each interviewed one-on-one to find out if their parents' relationships and conflicts had any affect on their academics. Between the ten students who came from divorced parents, and the ten students whose parents were married, the majority felt that their parent's negative relationships affected their academics. While the results of this study offer a comparison between the experiences of children of divorced parents and married parents, the findings show more similarities than differences.

Introduction

Academics are one of the most important aspects of a student's life. With good grades, students are able to get into colleges and universities, and allow themselves to earn degrees in order to obtain jobs that they want. If the relationship between the student's parents is unstable and filled with conflict, this can alter the student's academic performance. Divorce rates in the U.S. are at 50% for first marriages, and subsequent marriages are 2.5 times more likely to end in divorce (Afifi, 2013; Brown, 2012; Overland, 2012). This leaves many children to go through divorce and parental conflict during their school years. Through conducting interviews with 20 Bridgewater State University students, 10 of whom come from divorced parents, and 10 of whom come from married parents, I examined whether the students who come from divorced parents experience more academic trouble than their peers with married parents.

This research examines whether these students, who are all graduates of Abington High School, report that their parent's divorce has affected their academics. It also examines students whose parents are still married and whether arguing between married parents also caused any changes in their academics. Whether the students come from divorced or married parents, all were able to graduate high school and apply to and be accepted by Bridgewater State University.

Literature Review

Children of Divorced Parents

"In the U.S., it is predicted that 50% of marriages will end in divorce "

(Overland, 2012). Divorce is now a common act that people do when they no longer want to be married, but divorce is different when children are involved. "Family relationships have become increasingly complex due to rising divorce rates and subsequent (step) family formation, potentially threatening intergenerational exchange of family support" (Wijckmans, 2013, 1). When parents go through a divorce, they are not the only ones affected. Divorce affects children in a multitude of ways. "Ongoing conflict, blocked communication and power imbalances between parents are problematic for child and family functioning" (Vanassche, 2013, 3).

Children who experience their parents going through a divorce are susceptible to becoming depressed, being withdrawn, acting out, and acting differently. "It is well documented that psychosocial stressors constitute a significant, pervasive risk for children's mental health problems" (Velez, 2011, 244). When children experience their parents going through a divorce, the actions of the parents affect the children all throughout their childhood, and eventually may overlap into their adulthood. "It is well documented that parental divorce is associated with multiple problems for youth that extend into adulthood, including internalizing and externalizing problems, interpersonal difficulties, poor physical health, and substance abuse" (Sigal, 2012, 150).

Divorce Rates

According to Afifi, "Divorce rates have increased dramatically on a global scale since the 1960s, particularly in industrialized countries" (Afifi, 2013, 240). This is largely due to changes in attitudes where divorce has become socially

acceptable, particularly in the U.S.. “Perhaps nowhere has this change been more palpable than in the United States, where anywhere from 40 to 50 percent of Americans will experience divorce in their lifetime” (Afifi, 2013, 240). As divorce rates increase, more and more families with children are affected.

“Roughly 1 in 4 divorces in 2010 occurred to persons aged 50 and older. Demographic characteristics, economic resources, and the marital biography were associated with the risk of divorce in 2010. The rate of divorce was 2.5 times higher for those in remarriages versus first marriages, whereas the divorce rate declined as marital duration rose” (Brown, 2012, 731). Many different reasons go into why couples decide to go through with a divorce. Mullins (2012), explains that “historically, the United States has one of the highest rates of divorce in the industrialized world” (p. 20). Van Dolen (2013) conducted a study where there was a telephone and internet help seeking line. Through the study, it was found that “When the divorce rate goes up, the number of calls to the helpline increases” (p. 1).

Family Issues

Amato (2014) found that “children with divorced parents, compared with children with two continuously married parents, score lower (on average) on a variety of measures of achievement, adjustment, and well-being (p. 370).” Although divorce is a reason why children may negatively act out and feel poorly about themselves, it is not the main reason. As Amato (2014) states:, “Longitudinal studies make it possible to compare children before and after parental divorce, assuming that identical child outcomes are available at both times. These studies have

demonstrated that many of the child problems typically associated with divorce are present years before the divorce occurs (e.g., Sun, 2001). Thus, many of the negative outcomes attributed to divorce in cross-sectional studies appear to be due to troubled family relationships (e.g., high levels of marital conflict or ineffective parenting) that precede marital disruption rather than to separation itself” (p. 371). Here it is often the conflict and fighting between parents, not the act of divorce itself that causes issues for children.

There are other factors that contribute to a child’s attitude and emotions such as the way parents play a role in their lives. The more positive attention and support a child receives from their parents, the stronger the bond will be with the parents. And the stronger the relationship between the parents, the stronger the relationship will be within the entire family. “Because parents select into divorce, the factors that lead parents to end their marriages also may affect children negatively, resulting in spurious associations between divorce and child outcomes” (Amato, 2014, 371). The actions of the parents always affect not only themselves, but their children also.

When these children of divorced parents grow up, their problems usually stay with them into adulthood. “As adults, they are also more likely to divorce and become single parents themselves than those who grew up in intact families” (Baxter, 2011, 87). Children learn through experience, and how they were raised during childhood stays with them when they grow up into adults. If a child grows up only knowing conflict and arguments within the family and between their parents, they will carry that knowledge into their own lives when they are older and have a

family of their own.

Effects of Divorce

Divorce can have both physical and mental effects on children. “The health consequences of divorce are also well documented, showing the detrimental effects of divorce on both somatic [1-5] and mental health [2,6-9], with the divorced or separated experiencing higher levels of depression, stress, and fear, as well as lower levels of self-esteem” (Bracke, 2010, 1). The physical and mental toll of a divorce is astounding. “Compared to the married or cohabiting, the divorced or separated visit professional health care providers like general practitioners [21], specialists [21], and psychiatrists [22] more often, and are also hospitalized more often [21,25]” (Bracke, 2010, 1). In thinking about how divorce affects adults, it is important to remember that when divorced adults are hospitalized and seeking medical care that this has an effect on their children as well.

Molepo (2012) explains that “the findings suggest that teachers perceive younger children from divorced parents were more likely to have emotional and behavioural challenges than those from intact families” (p. 251). As Baxter (2011) states, “It is therefore not surprising that the elevated risk of adjustment problems apparent for children whose parents have separated are frequently linked to their experiences of significant pre-separation conflict” (p. 87). Van Dolen (2013) also finds that, “Experiencing parental divorce during childhood is associated with increased likelihood of being subject to child abuse and/or witnessing violence” (p.1). When parents go through a divorce, the children can become witness to what

it brings about in their parents, and sometimes even unknowingly get in the middle of it.

Children who get caught up in their parents divorce are likely to suffer greater stresses than those who do not become involved. "Compared to those from intact families, children of separated parents show poorer outcomes in multiple domains " (Lucas, 2013, 53). A parents' choice to divorce brings on a slue of issues for the children. "While parental separation may bring about relief from exposure to very frequent and intense conflict between parents, it also tends to create a range of other disruptions" (Baxter, 2011, 87). In a study done by van Dolen (2013), he found that, "higher levels of misbehavior and aggression, higher risk of committing suicide, less competence, more under-controlled behavior, poorer academic performance and reduced likelihood of participating in tertiary education" (p.1).

Baxter (2011) then goes on to explain these disruptions, stating, "immediate upheavals may include substantial increases in financial difficulties and associated deprivations, changes in housing and school, enhanced parental distress and/or diminished quality of parenting, and substantially reduced time or even total loss of contact with one parent. Such disruptions can be very distressing for the children" (p. 87). Baxter (2011), explains further that children of divorce suffer more emotional and social problems than those of intact families. Mullins (2012) also finds that children of divorce experience greater problems explaining that, "the personal, social, and economic consequences of marital disruption on former partners, their children, and American society in general are both pervasive and continuing" (p. 20).

Child Custody

Another major problem that can arise when parents get a divorce, is whether the parents get sole or shared custody of the children. This custody battle can cause issues for not only the parents, but for the children themselves. Having to be shuffled back and forth between parents can really take a toll on children. Custody issues can also cause problems if one parents wants or gains sole custody, but the children do not want to be with said parent. Patel (2014), states “the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) reported that nearly 46% of children do not live with both biological parents” (p. 18). Patel (2014) goes on to explain that 10 percent of separating parents disagree on custody and visitation, and this ultimately leads to legal battles and use of the courts. These legal battles over the children may cause the children to feel like they are being forced to choose sides. Children may feel that if they choose one parent over the other, the other parent may not want to be involved in their life.

Klass (2014) states that “in the middle years of child development, this issue becomes more decisive in affecting a child’s moral compass. By living with a parent’s certain level of morality, a child becomes indelibly influenced by that parent’s behavior” (p. 8). The age of the child also comes into play when dealing with parents and custody battles. The younger a child is, the more they can be easily influenced and swayed to believe what one parent may want them to think and believe. Yet the older the child gets, the more they can see what is right and what is wrong, and they are then able to make their own decisions about their parents.

Remarriages

When parents get divorced, they now have the option to remarry. As Whitton (2013) states, “in the past 25 years, remarriage has become increasingly common. In 2000 – 2001, remarriages represented around 29% of existing marriages” (p. 276), and more recently that number has increased. Remarriage among parents can either be a good or bad thing, depending on how the parents deal with it. Yet, as discussed earlier, Brown (2012) explains that the divorce rate for second marriages is 2.5 times higher than that of first marriages, which means that children can be forced to go through divorce again after a parent remarries. Whitton (2013) goes on to state that “because they have experienced firsthand that marriage did not last forever, that they were able to make it through a divorce, and that they were able to form a new relationship after ending their first marriage, remarried people may be more willing and more likely to choose divorce as a way to handle problems in their remarriage” (p. 277). When parents decide to remarry, the marriage has an effect on the children and their feelings and emotions. Parents who remarry and then decide to get another divorce are only creating more problems for themselves and their children.

Also, parents who decide to remarry are also combining families and children. These children may not get along, and can clash with each other. The same goes for children who have to learn to adjust to having a new parental figure in their life. Children may not want to have to obey the rules set out by their new step parent and may resent them. Whitton (2013) explains that “remarried adults, whether or not they brought children from a previous union into the remarriage,

reported marital quality (happiness and conflict) equal to those in first marriages. They also reported more positive attitudes toward divorce, which were associated with higher divorce proneness” (p. 276).

At the same time, remarriage can be a good thing among families. Higginbotham (2013) states that “the consistency of remarriage-related cognitions between stepfamily members has been posited to be of ‘primary importance’ in functional stepfamily systems”. When a parent gets remarried, it can benefit not only the parent, but also the children. The child may actually find themselves bonding with the stepparent, or even accepting the stepparent as their own parent. When parents remarry, the family’s economic status may also be improved, now that two incomes may come into the household. Children may also come to have new stepsiblings. Stepsiblings can both be a positive and a negative to children. If a child gets along with his or her stepsiblings, new bonds can be formed, and children will have new friends and siblings to be able to talk and play with. But if children do not get along with their stepsiblings, this can cause problems within the family. Fighting among stepsiblings can cause the parents to evaluate whether their marriage was the right idea or not.

Conflict Within Intact Marriages

Emotional and physical damage to families and children do not only occur to parents going through a divorce. Parents who are still married, yet fight constantly also contribute to the emotional and physical damage done to children and themselves. “Regardless of whether separation takes place, processes associated with deteriorating relationships between parents are also likely to impact

negatively on the children” (Baxter, 2011, 87). Parents who believe that they are doing a good thing by staying together, whether it is for financial, or appearance reasons, can often do more harm than good. It is not healthy for children to live in an environment where conflict and arguments are constantly taking place. “There is some evidence to suggest that of children exposed to high levels of inter-parental conflict, those whose parents remain together tend to indicate poorer adjustment than those whose parents separate” (Baxter 2011, 87).

However, some parents may actually benefit from getting a divorce, as to stop the conflict between them that harms the children so much. “Exposure to parental conflict may also explain poor child mental health after parental separation” (Lucas, 2013, 54). Even when parents get a divorce and that experience stays with children far into their adulthood, the conflict between parents also stays with the child into adulthood. “There is consistent evidence that exposure to high levels of parental conflict has negative and long-lasting effects on child development (Lansford, 2009), with reviews (Amato, 1993) indicating that parental conflict is more consistently related to child post-separation adjustment than any other factor, including separation itself” (Lucas, 2013, 55).

The separation itself can bring on more problems for a child, but it does not mean that the conflict between the parents does not. Children notice when parents are not getting along, and they can remember the actions that the parents took when engaging in conflict. “Regardless of whether parents were together or separated, children whose parents had a hostile relationship had poorer emotional wellbeing than those whose parents did not have a hostile relationship. (Lucas,

2013, 55). The emotional wellbeing of children who experienced their parents' hostilities affects their social relationships as they grow into adulthood.

Options for Help

Children whose parents are going through a divorce do not have to suffer alone. There are programs and organizations that help children cope with divorce. "There are a number of preventive interventions designed to improve children's adaptation after parental divorce" (Sigal, 2012, 150). Sigal (2012) goes on to explain how academic intervention programs for children from divorced families have had success in changing the academic outcomes for these children. These programs have been put into place in order to keep children whose parents have gone through a divorce from straying away, and help children create and achieve goals, and provide them with the support that they may not feel that they have at home.

It is crucial to get children the help that they need when going through divorce and parent conflict. Willemijn (2013) states that, "childhood is characterized as a vulnerable period in which many young people experience distress. Being able to cope with this by seeking help is important for a healthy transition to adulthood (Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996); if children receive help when they are in distress, troubled behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, and suicide may be reduced" (p.1). Children are very vulnerable when parents are going through divorce because they do not have their parents to turn to for help. Intervention programs that limit the negative social outcomes are important to protect children when they are at their most vulnerable.

Methodology

Subjects/Sample

The subjects in this study are Bridgewater State University students who have either divorced parents, or parents that are still currently married. Each student consented to take part in the study. The students were informed of the study through recruitment by the researcher and by snowball sampling. The first participants were all personally asked if they would participate in the study, and all agreed to it.

All 20 subjects are graduates of Abington High School, and are all current students of Bridgewater State University. All of the subjects are over the age of 18. Snowball sampling was used to locate and recruit subjects. I started with friends and asked them to reach out to other friends and students in order to find willing participants. Through snowball sampling I was able to find 20 former Abington High School students who are also current BSU students to interview. Ten of these students come from families where the parents are divorced, and ten come from families where the parents are still married, giving me equal groups. Twelve of the students are female, while eight are male. Table 1 shows the students name, their current year at BSU and if their parents are divorced or still married. The student's names have been changed as to keep the students identity private.

Table 1

Name of Student	Current Year at BSU	Divorced or Married Parents
Luke	Senior	Married
Kevin	Junior	Married
Emily	Senior	Divorced
Kelly	Sophomore	Married
Amanda	Freshman	Divorced
Meredith	Senior	Divorced
Caroline	Senior	Married
Drew	Sophomore	Divorced
John	Senior	Married
Sarah	Senior	Married
Nick	Senior	Divorced
Samantha	Junior	Married
Jen	Freshman	Divorced
Tim	Junior	Married
Melissa	Senior	Divorced
Molly	Freshman	Married
Dan	Senior	Divorced
Beth	Junior	Married
Tom	Sophomore	Divorced
Rachel	Sophomore	Divorced

Setting

This study took place at Bridgewater State University (BSU) in Bridgewater, Massachusetts during the Spring 2014 semester. Bridgewater is located in Plymouth County, in Southeastern Massachusetts. The town of Bridgewater consists of 26,000 residents. Bridgewater State University is located inside of the town of Bridgewater, and is a public state university. BSU is a majority commuter school, with most of its students being from the Southeastern region of Massachusetts. The data collection took place in various locations around the BSU campus. Some interviews took place in the Maxwell Library, while others took place in other academic buildings such as Burnell and Hart Hall. The locations for the interviews were based on the student's

academic schedule and availability. The length of the interviews were different for each student, depending on how long they wanted to take answering questions.

Research Questions

1. Does the divorce of one's parents affect student's academics?
2. Does parental fighting (outside of divorce) in the home affect students' academics?
3. Do students with married parents experience trouble with their academics when their parents fight?
4. Do students with married parents experience fewer academic problems than their peers with divorced parents?
5. Do students with married parents with an unstable relationship experience problems with their academics?
6. Do students with married parents with an unstable relationship report the cause of their academic troubles as coming from their parents fighting, or other factors?
7. Are there differences in student's academics for those with married parents compared with those with divorced parents?
8. Are there differences in student's academics for those with fighting parents compared with those whose parents (both married and divorced) are not fighting?

Instruments

For the data collection, I used a set of open-ended interview questions. Before conducting the interviews, each student was given an informed consent form that they could read and sign if they chose to participate in the study. The informed consent form assured the students that all of the data collected would be kept confidential, that the student's identities would remain anonymous, and that they could choose leave the study at any point.

Open-Ended Interviews

The data that was used in this study was collected through open-ended interview questions. I chose to use open-ended questions so that the students would feel comfortable answering, and allowing themselves to divulge as much or as little information as they wanted. The open-ended interviews are qualitative, which means that their answers cannot be quantified.

I designed two lists of interview questions, one list for students who have parents that are still married (Appendix A), and a list of interviews for students who have divorced parents (Appendix B). Some questions were the same for both groups, and other questions were different. There were seven questions for each interview.

Each interview was recorded via audio on my laptop. There was no set time frame for the interviews, the students were allowed as much or as little time as they needed to respond to the questions. I also took short hand notes on my laptop simultaneously.

Limitations

For this study, there were several limitations. One limitation is that the study only uses 20 students, all who came from the same high school and who are all currently students of the same college (BSU). The sample size does not accurately represent the population of the school, or the larger population.

Another limitation of the study is that all students are over the age of 18, and are all college students. None of the students are under the age of 18, and none of the students are high school students. The study only focused on current college students. Most of these students are reporting what they remember from when their parents divorced during their earlier childhood years. These memories may be less accurate than interviewing students currently going through divorce in their families.

Findings & Discussion

R1: Does the divorce of one's parents affect student's academics?

Students whose parents go through a divorce are likely to experience some type of disturbance in their academic careers. Literature has previously shown that youth who experienced parental divorce attain lower levels of education (Sigal, 2012). Of the 20 students that were interviewed, four commented on how their academics were affected in regards to their parents divorce.

When asked if parent's divorce affected the student's academics, Emily, a senior commented on her experience. She stated that:

My parents divorced when I was in the sixth grade. I remember it was a tough year, so when I went to junior high, I was in all level two's. At the time I did not understand why because I knew I was smart. But I was told that since I had a bad year in sixth grade, they made seventh grade easier. That made me upset.

When asked the same question, Drew, a sophomore also commented on his experience when his parents divorced. He responded with:

My parents divorced before I was two. I guess this couldn't affect my grades at the time, but looking back throughout my schooling, I can now see where my grades dropped, around eight grade, and eleventh grade. Both times my parents tried to reconcile, both times they failed. Makes sense now.

Both Emily and Drew had the same type of realization, that they did not know in the moment that their grades and schooling were being affected, but realized years later when they were asked. When recalling their schooling and parents divorce, both students seemed to have a sense of awe, not being aware that their schooling was affected at the time, but only now realizing when looking back on it.

The other two students however did notice at the time that their grades and academics were affected. When asked if the divorce of their parents affected their academics, one student, Meredith, a senior, commented on how her parents had been divorced for many years, but did notice that her grades were affected when her father and step mother fought. She stated that:

My parents have been divorced for so many years, with my dad now remarried. My parents never really fight because they never see each other, but I do notice when my dad fights with his new wife. I don't think this has caused my grades to drastically suffer, but when they fight, I do notice a bad test grade or two.

The second student, Nick, also a senior, commented on how his academics were directly affected because of his parents divorce, however much more drastically. When asked the question, Nick responded with:

My parents only divorced about two years ago. It was probably the worst year or two of my life. I ended up breaking up with my girlfriend, and my grades totally went down the shitter. I just wanted to be alone.

In my research I was able to find a relationship between the divorce itself, and students' reported academic outcomes.

R2: Does parental fighting (outside of divorce) in the home affect students' academics?

According to previous research, literature has stated that, regardless of whether separation takes place, processes associated with deteriorating relationships between parents are also likely to impact negatively on the children (Baxter, 2011). Out of the 20 students interviewed, 14 of the students mentioned that their academics suffered one way or another when their parents fought. 8 of the 14 students came from a household with divorced parents, while the other 6 came from a household where the parents were still married.

All of the students who come from divorced families commented on how it is not the fighting over the divorce itself, but rather the fighting between their separated parents are over other matters that caused issues with their school work.

Three students whose parents are divorced discussed that when their parents argue, its over issues that involve finances, and these fights adversely affect school work:

My parents have been divorced for a while now. When they first got divorced there was a lot of fighting between them about regular divorce stuff like custody and who got the house. But now that its been a few years, they still fight but over stupid things like who's paying for my college and where we go for holidays. I find that when they fight I do tend to stop doing homework and school work, and just try cut off communication from both of them (Dan, Senior).

Haha funny question, my parents are ridiculous. They don't even live together yet they still manage to fight over who's getting the house. Like come on dad you haven't been living here for three years why would you want the house all of a sudden. So yeah whenever he comes over to discuss it with my mom I usually leave all of my school work home and run out of the house as fast as I can. I have to say it has led to a few bad tests and papers. (Melissa, Senior).

My parents are the king and queen of fighting. They've been separated for over ten years yet they're still at each others throats constantly. Its so weird, both of them are well off with money, but for some reason they love to argue about child support. Its like they have some ego issue and need to keep fighting until one of them wins. I can hear my mom screaming on the phone with my dad, and her room is right next to mine so I feel like I can never get any work done, so I just give up and let my grades suffer (Jen, Freshman).

Three other students who came from divorced households did not seem to know why their parents were fighting, but they also reported that the fighting affected their ability to concentrate on schoolwork:

Yeah my parents still fight, why I have no clue. They've been divorced for a while, but I can still hear them arguing on the phone, I don't even have to see the caller ID to know that my dad is on the phone with my mom. The second I hear the yelling I drop whatever I'm doing, put in my headphones and blast my music. I don't even care that I have a test or something the next day, grades aren't on my mind. (Amanda, Freshman).

My dad does this weird thing where he'll just show up to the house some days unannounced. I think he comes over to try to talk to my mom or something, but once I see his car pull in I either lock myself in my room, or grab my keys and run. I'll either drive around or try to watch TV with the volume up, but either way I don't do any homework when he's over. (Tom, Sophomore).

Obviously my grades suffer, like hello my mom doesn't even live in this state

and she's still causing problems. I was trying to write a paper on the home computer once, and I saw that she had emailed my dad. I didn't even have to read the email, only that I saw it was from her and I stopped doing my paper. It was due the next day and I didn't even turn anything in. (Rachel, Sophomore).

The last two students came from divorced households, but now had stepparents. They commented on how the fighting was not taking place between the divorced parents, but between the parent and stepparent. As previously quoted, Meredith a senior stated that:

My parents have been divorced for so many years, with my dad now remarried. My parents never really fight because they never see each other, but I do notice when my dad fights with his new wife. I don't think this has caused my grades to drastically suffer, but when they fight, I do notice a bad test grade or two.

The other student, Emily, who had noted academic issues when she was in sixth grade, also commented on how the fighting between her mother and stepfather has caused academic issues more recently.

My mom remarried about two years ago, although she definitely should not have. Her and Ed, I don't like to call him my stepdad or anything, fight constantly. I'll find him sleeping on the couch or out of the house for a night or two. Whenever this happens I leave my house and stay at my friends. This usually leads me to leave all of my school work behind at my house, so I never can do any of it, or won't have certain books to bring to school in the morning.

Of the six students who come from households where parents are still married, the reasons that their parents fight are for multiple different reasons. Yet all six of the students comment on how they have noticed a drop in their academic performance.

One student, Luke, recalls a time when his parents were trying to conceive another child. He states that:

Yeah I remember when my parents were trying to have another baby and they couldn't get pregnant. Tensions were running high between them, and it affected me definitely. They were tense and aggravated, which made me tense and aggravated. I remember one day I came home and my mom said that my teacher had called home saying I wasn't doing too well in math, and I guess my mom explained to my teacher what was going on at home.

A few other students talked about how their parents were fighting over work and finances. Two students even talked about how they had to pick up extra hours or another job because they felt like they needed to help out the family.

A few years ago things got pretty tight with money. My dad lost his job so my mom was the only one working. My dad tried looking for a new job but it took him a while to find one. My mom blamed him for being lazy and that caused a lot of problems. I ended up picking up another day at work to help, even though it didn't. Between them fighting and me not having time for homework, my grades were pretty bad for a while. (Kevin, Junior)

My dad always worked and my mom stayed home and looked after the kids and house and stuff. Apparently this worked well for a while, but once me and my sister went to college, money became a problem. My dad would tell my mom she needed to find a job now that we were older. I definitely saw my grades slip, I just wanted to get away from it all. (Samantha, Junior)

My dad got laid off a while ago. My mom never worked so now there was no income coming into the house. I worked, well still work, at Lowes, but at that time I felt like I needed to help out. I got another job at Shaws, thinking my parents might stop fighting and also look for jobs since I did. Man was I wrong. With work and school, at the time work and fixing my family had to come first. (John, Senior).

The other two students who reported that their academics did suffer when their parents were fighting, commented on how their parents were actually fighting about their academics.

I guess I've never really been good at school. When I was a senior in high school, I only had a 2.5 GPA. It was getting close to the time where we apply for colleges, and this seemed to open some type of can of worms with my parents. They fought over whether I should go to community college or a four year. Their fighting did not seem to help my already low GPA. Lets just say that their fighting lowered my GPA even more, and sealed my fate for my freshman year at Massasoit. (Kelly, Sophomore).

When I got into BSU, my parents started to fight about whether they wanted me to live at school, or stay home and commute. I thought it was weird that they were trying to decide for me. I remember thinking that I knew I had gotten in to college, so between that and my parents arguing I didn't really care about my grades for the rest of my senior year, and really let them drop. (Molly, Freshman).

As previous research found, "There is consistent evidence that exposure to high levels of parental conflict has negative and long-lasting effects on child development" (Lucas, 2013, 55).

R3: Do students with married parents experience trouble with their academics when their parents fight?

As previously discussed, six out of the ten students interviewed who came from households with parents who were married reported having academic troubles when their parents fought. There were various reasons as to why the students' parents fought, but the students all reported that they experienced trouble with their academics while the parents were fighting for whatever reason. The students explain their experiences here:

My parents do this thing where they fight for a year, and then get along for a few years. Then they go right back into fighting for a year, and then stop for a few. Its crazy. I feel like I'm stuck in a loop and every time they fight I just drop everything and want to run away (Molly, Freshman).

I feel like my parents don't really fight that much, but when they do, oh man do they. I can only remember a few times, the time my dad was laid off, and one or two other times when I was younger. Yeah my social life and grades definitely suffered. Its like World War Three when they go at it. I tried helping, but that didn't work, so now I just kind of keep my distance and keep to myself (John, Senior)

Last year when I was a freshman at Massasoit, I commuted. My parents then continued to fight over whether I would live at school next year, so this year,

or if I were to stay home. Once again my grades weren't as good as they should have been, so I made the decision to live at school this year. Not surprisingly, my grades are ten times better now that I'm away from them. (Kelly, Sophomore).

As literature has stated, conflict within the marital dyad has been associated with maladjustment among adolescents (Blodgett, 2013). I had hypothesized that students' grades are affected when their parents fight, even when the parents are married. I was surprised to find that six out of the ten students with married parents fell into this category, and that they actually did experience academic troubles. This fits with previous research that the conflict most children experience happens prior to divorce, which means that students with married parents can also experience that conflict also (Lucas, 2013; Baxter, 2011).

R4: Do students with married parents experience fewer academic problems than their peers with divorced parents?

Out of the ten students whose parents are married, only four of them reported that they never have experienced any serious type of academic problems. However, all ten of the students who have divorced parents have stated that they have noticed troubles with their academic performance, whether it be from their parents fighting or other factors. When fathers are married to the mother of their children, they benefit from this division of labor because children tend to visit parents together and they provide social and emotional support to both parents simultaneously (Kalmijn, 2013).

When asked about their academics, the students stated that:

I've been an A and B student my entire life. All throughout elementary, middle, high school and now college, I've never really had any trouble with my academics and school work. I mean yeah sure sometimes it gets overwhelming and annoying, but it's nothing I can't deal with. Yeah I can see how my parents getting along has probably helped me get such good grades my entire life, I've never really had anything else to worry about except myself. (Caroline, Senior)

Grades aren't my top priority in life. They probably should be, honestly, but school was never my thing. I scraped by with B's and C's, and miraculously got into college somehow. I guess having good parents contributes to my grades not being totally crap, can't imagine what they'd look like if my parents fought. (Sarah, Senior).

The two other students, Tim and Beth, are cousins whose mothers are sisters. Although interviewed separately, they both have similar comments on how strong family bonds have helped them succeed academically.

My parents always supported me. They never really fought except for the few stupid fights here and there, but nothing serious. Both my mom and dad equally pushed for me to achieve in school, and really wanted me to do well, but at the same time never pressured me so much that I felt like a bad grade would disappoint them. I'm happy that they pushed just enough. (Tim, Junior).

For as long as I can remember, my parents have always been there to help me with my homework. Thank god my dad was good at math or else I probably would not have been able to pass in high school. As you know, my mom's an English teacher, so I sort of had the best of both worlds growing up when it came to schooling. (Beth, Junior).

Married fathers and mothers evaluated the impact of divorce on their children more negatively (Moon, 2011). Only four out of the ten students who came from married parents reported having no academic troubles, but actually reported that because of the bond their parents have, their academics flourished. Compared to those from intact families, children of separated parents show poorer outcomes in multiple domains (Lucas, 2013, 53). The students whose parents were married and did not fight showed much more positive attitudes about academics and did not

report any problems.

R5: Do students with married parents with an unstable relationship experience problems with their academics?

Of the ten students who come from families with married parents, three of them reported that their parents had noticeably unstable relationships. “Regardless of whether separation takes place, processes associated with deteriorating relationships between parents are also likely to impact negatively on the children” (Baxter, 2011, 87). The students notice the impact of their parent’s relationships and problems on their [the student’s] academics.

My parents definitely should not still be together, holy shit. I mean like I said one year they’ll be fine, the next they’re fighting, the next they’re fine. Like make up your minds people its not that hard if you want to be together or not. Now that we’ve been talking about this, I definitely don’t completely blame myself for my grades anymore (Molly, Freshman).

Yeah now that you ask, I feel like my parents probably would have been better off separating a while ago. I can see that they’re not the best match, and don’t really go to one another for support, they’d rather blame each other than blame themselves. I feel like if they had divorced, I wouldn’t have to work twice as hard with school and work in order to try to keep up. (Kevin, Junior).

Is it bad that sometimes I don’t want to go home on weekends, even if my parents want me to? I almost want to stay at school for as long as I can to avoid them. I don’t know if they’re fighting when I’m not home, but I know for a fact they fight when I’m there. I’d rather just stay here and focus on myself. (Kelly, Sophomore).

All three students expressed how they believed that their lives and academic grades may have been better off if their parents had made the decision to separate, rather than stay together and argue. Previous research supports these findings.

Baxter (2011) explained that, “there is some evidence to suggest that of children exposed to high levels of inter-parental conflict, those whose parents remain together tend to indicate poorer adjustment than those whose parents separate” (87).

R6: Do students with married parents with an unstable relationship report the cause of their academic troubles as coming from their parents fighting, or other factors?

Previous research has shown that regardless of whether parents were together or separated, children whose parents had a hostile relationship had poorer emotional wellbeing than those whose parents did not have a hostile relationship (Lucas, 2013). This was also the case in this research where of the ten students who came from families with parents who are married, two of the three reported their parents as having an unstable relationship also were the same students who blamed their parents’ relationship for their academic troubles.

I would absolutely blame my parents arguing and relationship to be the main reason why I didn’t go straight to Bridgewater, and had to spend my freshman year at Massasoit. (Kelly, Sophomore).

Yeah my parents are definitely the reason as to why my grades suck. Well they only suck during the times when they fight. So yeah it’s totally their fault. (Molly, Freshman).

Acs’ (2007) research found that even among children living with married parents, stressful home environments adversely affect their well-being. One student, however, did not totally blame his parents for his grades. As previously mentioned, Kevin commented on having to pick up extra time at work in order to try

to help his family during a time of need.

I mean I wouldn't totally blame my parents fighting for why my grades aren't what they should be. I also wouldn't totally not blame them, if you know what I mean. I'd say they played a pretty important part in why my grades aren't great, if they didn't fight I wouldn't have felt the need to pick up more work, but at the same time I made the decision to work more on my own, no one forced me to. (Kevin, Junior).

When creating the interviews and hypotheses, I had assumed that some students may find that work had gotten in the way of their grades, and had wondered if work would get in the way because the students' parents needed them to work, or if the student themselves choose to work to help. I had also hypothesized that some students may use work as a way to get out of the house if parents fought, but this never came up in any interviews. For Kevin, it was not the fighting and conflict that led to poorer grades, instead it was the economic issues that come with divorce that led him to choose work over academics. Yet, it is still divorce Kevin believes led to his academic problems.

R7: Are there differences in student's academics for those with married parents compared with those with divorced parents?

Acs (2007) found that the home environment for children whose parents ultimately separate and divorce is likely to be of lower quality than that of children whose parents remain married. Of the ten students with divorced parents, and the ten students with married parents, there was less of an academic difference than previously hypothesized. All ten of the students with divorced parents had reported some type of academic trouble at one point in their lives, and six out of the ten

students with married parents reported some type of academic trouble also. None of the students reported ever failing a class or having to stay back a year, as well as none of them reporting that they did terrible in school.

When asked how they would overall describe their academic career, disregarding how their grades were when parents fought, most students responded positively. The students who came from divorced parents responded as stating:

Surprisingly, I enjoy school. I like going and learning, and I feel like I get a lot out of it when I actually do well and pay attention. I get good grades when I try, and if I tried all of the time I bet my grades would be awesome, but I'm ok with what they are now (Emily, Senior).

School comes easy to me, I know that sounds cocky but it does. I feel like I don't have to try as hard as some kids do, and that I can kinda breeze by with decently good grades most of the time. (Meredith, Senior).

To me, school was sort of a joke. I remember being in high school and only trying to keep my grades up in order to stay on the soccer team. If I let any grades slip, I'd be cut or put on probation. Wasn't trying to let that happen (Jen, Freshman).

Ugh school was boring. I guess I only went because my friends were there, and I didn't pay attention in class as much as I should have. At the same time I didn't do too bad for someone who was a regular class snoozer. Surprised I actually got into a good college. (Tom, Sophomore).

While looking through the interviews of students with divorced parents, I was able to detect a pattern that ran through their answers. Although mostly all of the students reported that they did pretty well in school, and did not have much trouble with academics, besides when their parents fought, I noticed that they did have a sense of not trying. Some spoke directly about this during their interviews:

Yeah I can totally see that I didn't try as hard as I should have. I mean my grades were alright, nothing super. They did go down whenever my parents fought, but when they didn't I didn't seem to try to do anything to bring them back up. (Amanda, Freshman).

I didn't try as hard in high school. I sort of just skated by with my grades, doing the minimum work to do decent in classes, but just enough to not do horrible. Honestly, I probably used my parents divorce as an excuse in high school as a way to get out of a lot of the work assigned to me. At the time I thought I was genius, looking back, I was retarded. (Melissa, Senior).

Even before my parents divorced, I barely tried in school. I guess I did ok, with A's, B's and C's, but it was always a mix. I never got all A's, or all A's and B's. I was ok with that. (Nick, Senior).

When it came to the students with married parents, the six who reported that their parents fought showed lower grades than those whose parents did not fight. But compared to students with divorced parents, the students were on the same level.

My grades overall are alright. I mean when I compare high school to college its obviously different. Here I actually have to try, as with high school I could do well with the bare minimum. I never failed any class or anything, my parents would have shot me (Luke, Senior)

A, B+, C-, I mean yeah I've gotten them all. But no I've never gotten below a C-, I'm not stupid. I bet if I actually studied and didn't spend all of my time goofing off and going out every weekend I'd have way better grades. But yeah I'm fine with what I've gotten in the past, I mean I'm in college right, so I didn't mess up too badly. (Sarah, Senior).

Like the students who came from households with divorced parents, there was a pattern of laziness, or lack of effort among the students who came from households with married parents.

When I was in high school I was all like "what's the point of this, I'll never use the Pythagorean theorem or whatever the hell its called in my life after this math class". So obviously I didn't try, and didn't care what I got in certain classes. Mistake on my part. (John, Senior).

I mean I was an A and B student my entire academic career, but sure I didn't try as hard as I could have, I mean I could have been a straight A student if I really applied myself. (Caroline, Senior).

I never really felt that I needed to try with school. My parents were

supportive enough that even if I got a bad grade or two, they didn't really get angry or anything. I guess I kind of saw that, as they didn't care what grades I brought home at times. So yeah I did alright, but slacked off a few times. But never enough for them to notice a pattern, haha gotta keep them thinking I do well. (Tim, Junior).

There were no major differences in students' academics, whether they were from divorced or married parents. The only time differences showed up were when students commented on parents going through the divorce, or fighting, times when conflict was higher in the house. The students talked about how during the times of argument their grades would falter, but as an overall judgment, all students interviewed said they had decent grades. As Sigal (2012) presents in his research, "several studies have found that parental divorce in childhood is also linked with negative educational and occupational outcomes across the life span, such as a decreased probability of graduating from high school" (Sigal, 2012). I was able to find in my interviews that students who were of divorced parents did seem to have a more negative view on education and school, along with students whose parents were still married, but fought often. Yet, as explained earlier, this did not lead to failing classes, being held back a grade or dropping out of school. It left students with a few lower test grades, and sometimes less incentive to work hard in classes.

R8: Are there differences in student's academics for those with fighting parents compared with those whose parents (both married and divorced) are not fighting?

Of the 20 students that were interviewed, all ten that had divorced parents reported that their parents still fought. And of the ten that had parents that were

married, six of them reported that their parents fought, whether it was frequently or just now and then. No students had divorced parents that did not still fight in some way. However, when comparing the students whose parents did not fight at all and students whose parents did fight, there were significant differences. Only four students commented that their parents never fought, and that they do agree that it has positively affected their schooling.

Yeah like I've said a few times, I'm an A and B student. Never got anything below a B-. My parents have been married for thirty something years and I think I've only seen them fight maybe once, but they made up maybe an hour later. The way they act definitely helped me achieve good grades and they are very supportive. (Caroline, Senior).

No my parents never fight, I mean that's a lie, everyone's parents fight. I guess I mean that they don't fight in the sense that they never go crazy, but yeah they might like argue over what they want for dinner haha. I think I said before something about how they pushed me just enough, and didn't go crazy when I brought home a bad grade. But my grades were always pretty high (Tim, Junior).

I was really lucky growing up, with my dad being an accountant and my mom being an English teacher, like hello free tutoring over here! It was also a super plus that they got along, you could say I hit the jackpot with those two. Gotta partially thank them for my good grades, I doubt I'd be doing as well if I had other parents. (Beth, Junior).

As found in previous research, a conflict free environment is ultimately better for children. As seen in my findings, when parents do not fight the students are able to obtain better grades and do well with their academics. Compared to students whose parents fight, whether they come from divorced or married parents, the students whose parents do not fight do much better academically than the others.

Conclusions

The divorce rate between parents has been steadily rising over the years to where it stands now at approximately 50% (Afifi, 2013; Brown, 2012; Overland, 2012). Parents are not the only ones affected during their divorce, it spreads through the entire family. As parents make the decision to seek a divorce, the lives of their children are affected. The findings of this research show that all ten of the students whom have divorced parents reported having trouble with their academics, because of their parents' conflicts. Although some of the students' parents were divorced before they even began school, they still commented on how years later the divorce still affected their grades and academics when their parents would continue to fight. Students' whose parents divorced while they were in school reported that their schooling was directly affected around the time of the divorce, and they were able to relate the bad marks to their parents actions. It is clear that all of these students have felt that their parents' divorce has negatively affected their academics.

The affect of fighting between parents that are still married was another interesting finding. Six of the ten students who have married parents reported that even though their parents were married, they still fought constantly. They reported that when their parents fought, they experienced problems with their academics, similar to that of the peers with divorced parents.

On the other hand, the four students who reported that their parents rarely if ever fight reported that they never experienced any problems with their academics due to their parent's relationship. They commented on how if they did experience

any trouble with their academics, it was not related to these types of conflicts. They went on to explain how they believe that since their parents have a stable relationship, this allowed the students to succeed academically and find plenty of support from their parents to do so. The majority of the students in this study had problems with their academics during at least one point in their schooling, and all noticed the relationship between their grades and their parents fighting. Yet, it was clear that it was not the divorce that directly affected each student's grades, but the fighting between parents that caused the failing of tests, failure to complete homework, and generally doing poorly in classes. While the climbing divorce rate is problematic for children's schooling, it is less problematic than fighting between parents and the continuous conflict that comes with that.

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Appendix A: Interview questions asked to students with married parents

1. How would you describe your parent's relationship?
2. How long have they been married/together for?
3. Have your parents ever gotten into an argument?
4. If your parents have arguments, do they occur often or rarely?
5. If/when these arguments occur, do you feel that your schoolwork is compromised? If yes, how so?
6. How would you describe your usual study habits and grades while your parents are not arguing?
7. How would you describe your study habits and grades while your parents are arguing?

Appendix B: Interview questions asked to students with divorced parents

1. How would you describe your parent's relationship?
2. How long were they together/married for?
3. How old were you when they separated/divorced?
4. How would you have described your study habits and grades while your parents were together?
5. How would you describe your study habits and grades after your parent's separated/divorced?
6. Would you say your study habits and grades have changed over time since the separation began? How so
7. Has your parent's separation/divorce have any negative effect on your academics? If yes, how so?