Attachment and Divorce: A Review of the Literature

Jessica Ciattei

State University of New York at Oswego
Attachment and Divorce: A Review of the Literature

One of the most stressful transitions experienced by both adults and children is parental divorce; it is believed that attachment theory plays a crucial role in explaining its’ effects on the attachment styles of children and parents and vice versa (Vareschi and Bursik, 2005). Hayashi and Strickland (1998) indicated that half of all children will be subjected to dealing with the divorce of their parents (as cited in Ahlberg & DeVita, 1992). Divorce can be a very difficult change for anyone to deal with, especially children. It generally leads to the children not being able to see both parents every day, losing structure and stability in their life and needing to find ways to cope with all of these changes. But why does divorce really have such a major impact on children? John Bowlby would infer that it has to do with attachment theory and the activation of the Attachment Behavioral System. This paper will discuss the relationship between attachment theory and divorce, including, the attachment and co-parenting styles of adults involved in divorce and how each have different effects on how children cope with the change. It will also discuss the parent-child relationship, the child’s type of attachment toward the parent and how this is also a factor in divorce having an effect on the child. In addition, parental response to the marriage breakup, including attitude towards the former spouse and availability of the parent to the child post-divorce will be talked about in terms of attachment theory. These ideas all suggest that perhaps the relationship between the parents and the way in which the parents respond to the overall transition, not the actual divorce, might be what has the biggest effect on children. The review of the literature and the presentation of several studies done in addition to the discussion of the previously mentioned ideas will seek to justify this notion.

Attachment is the bond a person has to an older, stronger, wiser person known as an attachment figure, generally a parent. Bowlby’s Attachment Behavioral System is a biologically
Attachment and Divorce: A Review of the Literature

based system, which functions to keep an individual in proximity to an attachment figure no matter what. If something happens that threatens the availability of an attachment figure, the system will be activated and attachment behaviors will occur in order to maintain or regain that proximity. Attachment figures should provide a child with both a safe haven, for the child to be comforted and soothed in times of distress, and a secure base, for the child to feel safe and confident exploring the world. In addition to this system, Internal Working Models of attachment (IWMs), which store information about how each attachment figure behaves, are formed for each individual figure through everyday experiences with these figures and serve as scripts for how they will act in the future. As a person reaches adolescence and adulthood, these separate IWMs consolidate into one “state of mind,” which is how an individual processes and organizes attachment related affect. Children are said to have different attachment styles (i.e. secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant or disorganized) whereas adolescences and adults have different states of mind (i.e. secure, preoccupied, dismissive or unresolved). All of these can be influenced by and have influence on life experiences and how one responds to different situations.

It has been said that conflict and lack of cooperation between parents going through a divorce are significant factors in the children’s adjustment (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). During most divorces, spouses who are also parents are faced with the fact that they must maintain some sort of contact with their ex because of their children. Depending on the type of relationship the two people had with each other, this could either lead to them having a positive or negative post-divorce relationship; this is known as the post-divorce co-parenting relationship (Roberson, Sabo, & Wickel, 2011). The quality of this relationship also plays a vital role in how their children will adjust to the new arrangement. There are three distinct types of co-parenting
relationships: stable, conflicted and disengaged, which are influenced by adult romantic attachment styles (Roberson et al., 2011). A stable co-parenting relationship occurs when both parents are able to disconnect themselves from their former roles as romantic partners and completely focus on their new roles as co-parents to their children (Roberson et al., 2011). Individuals in these relationships often exhibit more characteristics of a secure internal working model and are therefore able to consistently, directly and openly communicate with each other about information, mainly regarding their children (Roberson et al., 2011). Behaviors characteristic of stable co-parenting also include, consistent discipline between both households, emotional availability of both parents, and clear but flexible boundaries between parents (Roberson et al., 2011). This is the ideal outcome of a divorce situation for everyone involved, especially children. According to attachment theory, a child’s Attachment Behavioral System is activated when there is a threat which will deny them contact and proximity to their attachment figures, so having two parents who, despite not physically being around all the time, are able to be both secure bases and safe havens for them no matter what is an important notion.

The next co-parenting style, conflicted, occurs when former spouses interact in a negative way, such as showing anger, distrust, verbal or physical abuse and making communication about the child difficult or even impossible (Roberson et al., 2011). Conflicted co-parents are likely to have anxious-ambivalent attachments and since they more readily have their attachment system activated, are more likely to continually engage in conflict and be angry when trying to resolve a problem (Roberson et al., 2011). This relationship is often volatile and causes major problems when the children become triangulated into the co-parent relationship, leading to the children being put in the middle and the parent’s not being emotionally available for them (Roberson et al., 2011). Putting children in the middle of any problems that are supposed to be between the
parents can be detrimental to their emotional and psychological health and states of mind. Children are supposed to be able to go to the parents for security and safety, but when they are put in the middle of a fight or disagreement their secure bases and safe havens are not available to give them the attention they need. If these behaviors constantly occur, a child might start to rework their internal working model of one or both of their parents, in order to avoid pain or conflict. It is also characteristic of conflicted co-parents to be unable to redefine solely into the role of parent because they can’t separate the role of parent from spouse, and consequently are reminded of their former spouse when they see their children, which leads to their lack of emotional availability (Roberson et al., 2011).

Similar to conflicted co-parenting is the final relationship of disengaged, where the parents also link their children and former spouses together and elicit negative feelings towards the former spouse (Roberson et al., 2011). Disengaged co-parents differ from conflicted co-parents however, in that they simply cut off contact from the former spouse because they are unable to adjust to the change and can’t handle the emotional pain (Roberson et al., 2011). These individuals tend to have an avoidant attachment style (Roberson et al., 2011), evident by the way they completely cut off contact, thereby avoiding the main source of pain and diverting it elsewhere. This relationship is often formed when one parent is able to redefine their role to parenting while the other is not (Roberson et al., 2011). The main problem that can arise from this is the disengaged parent losing contact, temporarily or permanently, with their child, leading to the child believing they did something wrong and potentially reevaluating their relationship with the parent and reforming their internal working model of them. The conclusion formed by Roberson et al. (2011) is that, clearly, children who experience divorce with parents in a stable co-parent relationship will do better, both emotionally and psychologically.
Parents’ having a good relationship even after separating is key to the child properly adjusting to situation, but some people aren’t always capable of being civil with an ex-spouse. Lowenstein (2010) discusses how parental alienation can have a major effect on a child’s attachment to a parent. He talks about how some parents go through divorces and have such anger and resentment towards their former spouse that they only talk to their children about that parent in a negative way; this is against the best interest of the child, who is, yet again, being put in the middle of the problems between the parents. When a parent is thinking about the best interest of the child, they would never think to diminish the reputation of or depreciate an attachment figure in front of them; this would potentially lead the child to think negative thoughts about the parent being bad-mouthed. Lowenstein insists that using attachment theory as a weapon against a former spouse in order to manipulate the child to conform to the way they think about them will cause the child distress, which is entirely true. The area where he might be off base is when he says that there is a threat of the attachment to the absent parent being “damaged or destroyed” completely. There is, however, a possibility that attachments, which are already defined in a parent/child relationship, might change over time due to loss of communication and availability of the parent. Also, since separation is involved, secure attachments might be less likely to occur with younger children (Rogers, 2004). But to have an attachment be completely destroyed and demolished is impossible because children’s attachment to their parents is enduring, despite the quality.

Conflict between parents can evidently cause problems for the children, but the attachment style of the child and their subsequent interactions with their parents can determine whether or not they successfully adjust to the situation. These coping differences are particularly significant during the first two years after the divorce, which is known as the “crisis period”
Attachment and Divorce: A Review of the Literature

(Rogers, 2004). Young children, especially, during this time, show increased need for contact and comfort from their parents, express fears of punishment or rejection and are generally confused and have trouble expressing their feelings about the situation (Rogers, 2004). Bowlby’s idea of affect regulation comes into play when coping with a stressful event. Affect regulation is essentially any process, intrinsic or extrinsic, “that monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions” (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). It also involves “tolerance, awareness, expression and control of the physiological, behavioral, or experiential aspects” of an experience (Garber & Dodge, 1991, as cited in Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). In addition, the regulation is comprised of both enhancing and inhibiting emotional arousal so an individual can either enjoy or tolerate a situation (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). Individual differences in attachment style and caregivers both factor into how a child will respond to a divorce. Since securely attached children are confident that their attachment figure will be protective, supportive and emotionally available in times of distress (Bretherton & Munholland, 1990), they can be sure that the attachment figure, in this case a parent, will be there to provide the emotional support and comfort needed to regulate their distress during the divorce (Faber & Wittenborn, 2004). Avoidant attached children are classified as insecure and are characterized by minimizing their attachment related needs, avoiding contact and proximity to their parents because a parent has most likely been insensitive to their attachment needs in the past. These children have experience with a caregiver who often rejects them in times of distress; during a divorce, when affect regulation is important, avoidant children will deemphasize the seeking of comfort. Their internal working model of their attachment figure leads them to believe they won’t be emotionally available and will consequently use anger to communicate with others about the situation (Faber & Wittenborn, 2004). Lastly, anxious/ambivalent children, who generally
maximize their attachment needs and work hard to maintain proximity to attachment figures due to inconsistent parenting, will subsequently develop affect regulation strategies which will intensify their expressions of the negative emotions felt during and after a divorce by displaying fear and anger (Cassidy, 1994, as cited in Faber & Wittenborn, 2004). All of these different approaches to affect regulation demonstrate how early attachments to parents are vital because they determine the extent to which a parent will be emotionally available to a child during a divorce.

Several studies have been done which provide further evidence that attachment along with parental response plays a major role in a child’s adjustment to divorce. One longitudinal study by Vareschi and Bursik (2005) was done to examine the attachment style differences in positive and negative interactions of divorcing parents. Participants were a group of men and women who were partaking in court-mandated parent education programs which were implemented in the best interests of children of divorce and were designed to achieve seven goals: “reduce parental conflict; increase communication; teach co-parenting techniques; provide normalizing data; increase parents’ awareness of financial responsibility; decrease problems in children; and decrease court litigation” (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Data was collected at two points: Time 1, which was one week following completion of the course and Time 2, which was three months following completion. Time 1 participants included 29 males and 71 females, who experienced different lengths of marriage, ranging from less than one year to 33 years; had different numbers of children (25% having one child, 48% having two children and 23% having three or more); and had different custodial arrangements (75% sharing joint legal custody, 28% sharing joint physical custody, 51% having sole physical custody, 16% saying their spouse had
custody and 5% having split custody, with different children residing with each parent); Sixty-three of these individuals also served as Time 2 participants (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005).

Participants were asked to complete a number of questionnaires, which measured five areas of data: Demographic, Adult Attachment Style, Positive Parental Interaction, Negative Parental Interaction and Workshop Satisfaction (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Adult Attachment Style was measured using the Hazan and Shaver General Relationship Attitudes measure (1990), which was adapted from Ainsworth, Blehars, Waters and Wall's (1978) infant attachment descriptions and translated into descriptions appropriate to adult romantic relationships (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). The measure includes three vignettes about relational styles and participants are asked to respond using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (unlike me) to 7 (like me); they were also asked to indicate which of the three adult attachment styles most represented their own feelings and experiences (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Adult Attachment Style was only assessed at Time 1. The Positive Parental Interaction, assessed at Time 1 and Time 2, used three different measures: two subscales of the Family Environment Scale (FES), used to assess familial cohesiveness and expressiveness; and the support subscale of the Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale (QCCS), which was designed to assess the relationship of divorced parents who are redefining their relationship (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Negative Parental Interaction was measured using several different scales at Time 1 (where participants were asked to reflect upon the last year) and Time 2 (where participants were asked to reflect only upon the three months following the program): the conflict subscale of the FES was used to measure amount of openly expressed anger and conflict between family members; the verbal aggression scale of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and the conflict subscale of the QCCS were both used as measures of inter-parental conflict (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Workshop Satisfaction was
measured at both times using a questionnaire with specific questions about the program created by the Massachusetts Family and Probate Court where participants used a rating scale of 1 (excellent) to 5 (terrible) (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005).

Results of the attachment measures indicated that there were 56 individuals who were securely attached, 26 who had avoidant attachment, and 18 with anxious-ambivalent attachment (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). It was predicted that securely attached individuals would score higher on Time 1 measures of positive parental interaction while insecurely attached individuals would score higher on negative parental interaction measure, and a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) revealed that there was a significant overall effect of attachment, significant attachment style differences for FES cohesion and FES expressiveness. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that secure participants scored higher on both the FES cohesion and expressiveness measure (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). It was also hypothesized that between Time 1 and Time 2, insecurely attached individuals would report increases in positive interaction, expressiveness and support as well as a decrease in conflict and verbal aggression. Several repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted and revealed a significant main effect of time for cohesion but not for expressiveness, although it approached statistical significance (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Repeated measures also found significant effects of time for verbal aggression and conflict, indicating that participants showed a decrease in these areas, as hypothesized. One-way and repeated measures ANOVAs conducted for workshop satisfaction indicated there was no significant attachment style differences in ratings and no significant change in satisfaction over time (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Overall, this study implied that parents with secure attachment styles will ultimately fare better and be able to more readily and easily cope with divorce. But it also showed that parents with insecure attachments can potentially decrease
negative effects of divorce with the proper help, such as the court appointed education course discussed in the study. When parents are able to make the experience of divorce easier on themselves, they consequently make the experience easier on their children, who rely on them to maintain structure and stability so they can keep their Attachment Behavioral Systems in check, but to also be able to go to their parents when it is activated.

Another study, done by Nair and Murray (2005), investigated the impact of divorce on preschoolers’ attachment security. The major question in this study was whether maternal parenting style and psychological variables, including stress, depression, parental conflict, and social support, contributed independently to attachment or whether the parenting style moderated or mediated these factors (Nair & Murray, 2005). Nair and Murray hypothesized that divorce is associated with maternal psychological health variables, which affect parenting style and consequently predicts the level of attachment security of the child. Child temperament was also examined in some of the models. Participants in this study included 58 mother-child dyads with 3- to 6-year old children from both divorced (n=28) and intact (n=30) families (Nair & Murray, 2005).

Mothers were sent invitations from the preschools their children attended and those who consented to participate completed a number of questionnaires related to measures of each of the psychological variables, parenting style and attachment. A demographic questionnaire was used to gather information such as maternal age, educational level, child’s gender, household income, race and date that the divorce was final (Nair & Murray, 2005). Attachment was measured by a revised Attachment Q-Set (AQS), which consists of 90 statements that describe young children’s behavior while interacting with their primary caregivers. The mothers were asked to sort these descriptors into three categories (i.e. descriptive of child, not descriptive, or neither) and then
further into three more subcategories. Stress was measured using the Daily Hassles Scale (DHS), which is a self-report measure where the mothers evaluated the level of stress (mild, moderate or very serious) that everyday, minor stressors had on them (Nair & Murray, 2005). It is said that major life events, such as divorce, could create new demands on a person that they didn’t have to deal with before. Maternal depression was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Parental conflict was measured using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to gauge the frequency of three ways (reasoning, verbal aggression and violence) of resolving conflict with a spouse (Nair & Murray, 2005). The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) was adapted to measure parenting style. There are three subscales, which related to Baumrind’s three parenting styles, permissive, authoritarian and authoritative. Social support was measured with the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (ASSIS), which measured support satisfaction and need on a 7-point scale. Finally, child temperament was measured using the Behavioral Style Questionnaire (BSQ), which measures nine different dimensions (activity, rhythmicity, approach, adaptability, intensity, mood, persistence, distractibility and threshold) (Nair & Murray, 2005).

In the initial analysis of this study a t-test was used to compare the divorced and intact groups on each of the separate variables (Nair & Murray, 2005). The major question in this study was measured by comparing three models of additive, moderator and mediator for the best-fit model and addressed each model using hierarchical multiple regression analyses (Nair & Murray, 2005). The additive model measured the independent effects of conflict, stress, depression, support and parenting style on attachment security; the moderator model measured interactive effects of conflict, stress, depression and support with parenting style on security; and the mediator model measured the indirect effect of those variables through parenting style on
security (Nair & Murray, 2005). The mediator model was measured by determining whether adding parenting style before any of the other variables had any significant relationship of those variable on attachment security (Nair & Murray, 2005).

The results of this study indicated that parental style was significant in predicting attachment security when being entered into the regression after each of the psychological variables and that these variables did not significantly contribute to attachment security whether they were entered before or after parenting style (Nair & Murray, 2005). These results suggest that parenting style did not mediate or moderate effects of the psychological variables. It should be noted that demographic variables, including child’s gender, were not significantly related to attachment security whereas child temperament and group (divorced or intact) were significantly related (Nair & Murray, 2005). The results also showed that the group effects were mediated by the parenting style differences, which suggests that group differences in attachment security were caused by less ideal parenting by those who were divorced than those who weren’t (Nair & Murray, 2005). It was also found that children of divorce had lower attachment security scores than children of intact families, as shown by the AQS (Nair & Murray, 2005). But surprisingly, parenting style had no effects on psychological variables and even though those variables were related to divorce, they were not related to attachment security. The main contribution of this study in terms of attachment is that parenting style mediates the effects of divorce, where mothers are more prone to using less positive parenting styles, which in turn might have an effect on the child’s attachment security and whether they can use the mother as a safe haven during the difficult transition.

Attachment theory describes a major means by which children adjust to difficult life transitions, such as divorce. When a person is faced with a difficult situation, where their
Attachment and Divorce: A Review of the Literature

Attachment Behavioral System is activated and they are looking to either gain or maintain proximity to an attachment figure, they want to have confidence that this person will be available to comfort them in any way necessary. Divorce can affect this notion because the parents themselves are trying to cope with this life altering change and may not be able to give their children complete emotional availability. The romantic attachment style of the parent is an important factor in this situation because it affects not only their response to separating from a spouse but also their ability to maintain a stable relationship with their former spouse in order to discuss matters about parenting. Clearly, individuals with a secure state of mind in regards to attachment are going to be better at maintaining a relationship with their co-parent, in comparison to those with an insecure state of mind, and will therefore be able to be more emotionally available for their children and make the experience less traumatizing for them. Similarly, children who are securely attached to their parents will more readily go to their parents for a secure base and safe haven and will be able to openly communicate their feelings about the situation. It is therefore vital that parents, no matter what, attempt to have a non-adversarial relationship with each other after divorce in addition to maintaining open communication with their children about how the situation and how they feel about it. Those parents who are insecure or have a conflicted or even disengaged co-parenting style should utilize intervention methods such as court mandated classes to improve their states of mind in addition to their relationship with their former spouse in order to make this tough transition easier on their children. Future research in the area of attachment and divorce should further investigate how co-parenting relationships affect a child’s attachment style and ability to cope with divorce. There could even be investigations of children’s perception of co-parenting relationships and how they in turn affect their internal working models of self.
References


