

**EDU WORLD 2018**  
**The 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference**

**SELF-ESTEEM, DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN ADOLESCENTS  
WITH DIVORCED PARENTS**

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*Abstract*

The increased interest in the evolution of the family institution and the careful analysis of its decline in our country, especially in the last two decades (as a result of the increase in the number of divorces), formed the framework for the elaboration of this study. The phenomenon of divorce has come to be regarded as a normality, not as a stigma, as it did not many years ago. Moreover, Romania is the European Union's leader in divorce rates. The underlying idea for this research is the importance of the consequences of divorce on the development of the adolescent as a future adult. In addressing the issue, we assumed that there are significant differences between adolescents from divorced families and those from intact families, with regards to the self-esteem, depression and anxiety. The identification of these mental states was accomplished through three questionnaires. The results show significant differences between the groups of subjects, but also gender differences. Further research findings provide relevant data for improving intervention measures on teenagers experiencing parental divorce in order to obtain the necessary support. Regardless of the level of normality of divorce in today's society, parents' decision to divorce and divorce leads to adolescent suffering both in the short and long term. If more attention and support were given to this phenomenon, the negative effects on children and adolescents could be diminished.

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**Keywords:** Self-esteem, depression, anxiety, adolescents, divorced parents.



## 1. Introduction

The main objective of the research is to compare the manifestations of adolescents from divorced families with adolescents from intact families. Previous research has shown that parental separation has negative effects on children and adolescents with respect to their behaviour, emotional dysregulation and school difficulties, compared to those from intact families.

Paul Amato conducted a meta-analysis of 92 studies, comparing the well-being of divorced children living in single-parent families and those living in intact families. In 70% of these studies, children with divorced parents had a lower level of well-being compared to those in intact families. The biggest differences were in the areas of aggressive behaviour and low social adaptation, also, there were significant differences between the two groups, indicating that the most children from divorced families had lower outcomes in school achievement and psychological adaptation. Amato resumes his research in 2001, using the results of 67 new studies, results that were strikingly similar to those of 1991. Once again, Amato's conclusion was that children from divorced families were more significantly affected than those from intact families in terms of academic achievement, self-esteem, social behaviour, depression and anxiety. Another finding of his meta-analysis was that children from divorced and intact families have not only psychological differences but also a number of physical health issues, such as diabetes, which seems to be more common in children who have gone through the shock of their parents' divorce.

In 1992, Hillevi Aro, Ulla and Palosaari, conducted longitudinal study, using questionnaire sat age 16 and were followed up at age 22 in the city of Tampere in southern Finland. The results of the survey have shown that girls from divorced families reported lower self-esteem than those who came from intact families, while between the boys in those two groups, there was no significant difference. Also, women showed more problems with self-esteem and interpersonal relationships, while men whose parents divorced reported more somatic complaints and conflicts of authority.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found in their well-known study of California divorced families that a significant number of children had severely affected psychological health, not only in the short term, but also in adolescence. Mitchell (1985), in his Scottish study based on a representative sample of families, confirms the conclusions of Wallerstein and Kelly. With few exceptions, the children in both studies wanted their parents to stay together despite serious family problems. Wallerstein and Kelly have determined that most children find theseparation and the consequences really hard and stressful. More than half of the children in these families feel that their lives have been totally shaken, and less than 10% have expressed relief. Marcelli and Braconnier (2006) claim that younger children expressed their relief only when they themselves feared their father's violence, and older children also opposed the separation if they did not understand it as a remedy for insoluble problems.

In the study by Laumann in 2000, although the teenagers from divorced families reported few symptoms of depression and anxiety, many reported painful feelings about parental divorce; the greatest distress was associated with the paternal guilt, feelings of loss, as well as the belief that life was massively changed after the divorce.

Clarke-Stewart and Brentabo (2006) claim that adolescents in divorced families have a much lower scores on school tests and have lower educational aspirations than adolescents from intact families. They may also have problems related to anxiety, depression and low self-inducements, more pronounced than

adolescents in intact families. It is likely that they feel hopeless or have more suicidal thoughts than adolescents whose parents have a happy life.

Adolescence is a period marked by multiple transformations, at the physical, affective and behavioral level of the young person. At this stage, in order to reach a normal and healthy maturity, both physical and emotional, the adolescent needs the presence of both parents and a stable, balanced family climate. The adolescent is attached to his parents more than other society's members they come into contact with, and is naturally inclined to be more influenced by his family, to an extent, rather than those outside.

Relationships between spouses have an important role: harmony and parental understanding will be beneficial to the adolescent's formation as a future adult, while misunderstandings followed by quarrels and insults will negatively mark his future experiences.

Considering all of the above, we think it is of utmost importance to study the effects of divorce on adolescent development, especially, since there are very few studies in our country, to address the complexity of this topic.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The issue of divorce is a topic of major interest in the current society, with multiple repercussions both on the whole family dynamics as a whole and on each individual member, particularly on adolescents who are deeply marked by the break-up of their parents.

The absence of basic family functions leads to multiple behaviour and personality disturbances in the adolescents' development/growth. The failure of the family as a group is, in fact, equivalent to the failure of the teenager's socializing process, which, in the absence of one or both of the two parents, he/she will identify himself/herself with only one parental model. The adolescent's neglect, as well as emotional abuse, are often seen after the parents' divorce. All of these, will have a strong mark on the teenager's behaviour and generate a series of disturbances in their lives, such as: school failure, isolation, feelings of guilt and blaming themselves for the break-up, loss of faith in oneself, feelings of fearfulness and anger towards their parents, low self-esteem and poor self-image, depressive and anxious moods, conduct disorders, leading to delinquency

## **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1.** Is parental divorce negatively affecting the self-esteem, depression and anxiety in adolescents?
- 3.2.** Does the gender of subjects, significantly, influence the self-esteem, depression, and anxiety in teenagers who have experienced parental divorce?
- 3.3.** Is there a link between self-esteem, depression and anxiety in adolescents?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study is to investigate the effects of parental divorce on adolescents, and more specifically, to observe the relationship between the different family types as well as the differences between the subject's gender when looking at the self-esteem, depression and anxiety in adolescents.

## 5. Research Methods

I/we sent a number of 220 questionnaires to 6 randomly selected high schools in Iasi county, to be filled by 11th and 12th grade students. They generally spent 25-30 minutes to complete all the tools needed for the analysis. Out of those, 13 questionnaires were excluded as they were incomplete. The rest of 207 were selected for analysis. 147 subjects were from intact families, 85 of which are female and 62 male, and 60 are divorced, of which 34 are female and 26 are male.

The data collection tool was a questionnaire comprising the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, STAI-Y Test (Only the item for Anxiety Status Used) and Beck's Depression Inventory. The questionnaires were implemented between December 14, 2009 and February 8, 2010, in high schools in Iasi County.

A pre-test has been done using the same questionnaire, on a sample of 30 11th and 12th grade students, of which 14 males, 6 were from divorced families and 8 were from the intact families and 16 were female, 8 from the divorced families and 8 from the intact families. The purpose of the pre-test was to calculate the correlation coefficient (alpha Cronbach) between the distribution of individual scores (of each item) to remove inappropriate items, but this was not done because high scores were obtained, which is why the tools used in research were exactly those used for pretesting (Alpha Cronbach of 0.70 for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, 0.66 for the STAI-Y Anxiety Test, and 0.91 for the Beck's Depression Inventory).

## 6. Findings

First, we analysed the hypothesis that adolescents who have experienced parental divorce have a lower self-esteem than those from an intact family. To verify this hypothesis, we applied the t-test for independent samples, where the test variable is the total score of items that represent self-esteem, and the group variable is the type of family that the subject comes from.

The outcomes of adolescent's self-esteem influenced by parental divorce, clearly shows that the divorce does not significantly affect the development of self-esteem in adolescents aged 17-18 ( $t(207) = 0.698$  and  $P = 0.486 > 0.05$ ), although research on the subject showed that teen's self-esteem is more (negatively) affected in divorced families than in the intact ones.

The second tested hypothesis was that adolescents, who have experienced parental divorce, have more depressive tendencies than those who come from an intact family. To verify this hypothesis we applied the t-test for independent samples and we obtained  $t(207) = 7.611$  and  $P < 0.05$ , meaning that there are significant differences between depression of teenagers from divorced families and depression of adolescents from intact families, in the sense that those from divorced families are significantly more depressive than those from intact families. Being in a vulnerable period of their lives, adolescents can suffer serious psychological disturbances caused by divorce separation of their parents. By age, adolescents are more sensitive than adults. They can perceive the moment of divorce more dramatically than their parents, who are directly involved in divorce.

The third hypothesis I/we tested was that adolescents who have experienced parental divorce have a more pronounced anxiety than those from an intact family. In this case we applied the t-test for independent samples and we obtained  $t(207) = -1,438$  and  $P = 0,154 > 0,05$ , which means that there are no

significant differences between the anxiety of teenagers coming from divorced families and the anxiety of adolescents coming from intact nuclear families.

The next objective of the study, was to find out whether the gender of the subjects influences the level of self-esteem, depression and anxiety. This analysis was conducted through the Independent t-test and it was found that there are significant differences between the depression of adolescents from divorced families and the depression of those from intact families, in the sense that adolescents from divorced families are significantly more depressive than those from intact nuclear families. According to the table below, we notice that these differences exist only for the depression variable, both for girls and for boys.

**Table 01.** Results of an independent samples T test, based on gender, in terms of self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Sig. (2-tailed))

<b>Dependent variables</b>	<b>self-esteem</b>	<b>depression</b>	<b>Anxiety</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	0,372	,000	0,218
Male	0,976	,000	0,270

Another objective of the study was to identify whether there is an interaction effect between the independent variables, the type of family and the type of subjects on the dependent variable represented by depression.

To analyse this hypothesis we used the Anova Univariate test and we found that there was only one significant principal effect ( $P < 0.05$ ), that of the family type variable. The rest of the effects are insignificant. The general interpretation of this primary effect is that the type of family from which adolescents come, influences their depression regardless of their gender.

The last aspect analysed in the study was to identify whether there is a stronger link between self-esteem, depression and anxiety in adolescents who have experienced parental divorce compared to adolescents in intact families.

To analyse this hypothesis we used the Pearson correlation coefficient and the results are detailed in the table 02 below.

**Table 02.** The correlations between self-esteem, depression and anxiety

	<b>self-esteem</b>		<b>depression</b>		<b>Anxiety</b>	
	<b>Intact families</b>	<b>Divorced families</b>	<b>Intact families</b>	<b>Divorced families</b>	<b>Intact families</b>	<b>Divorced families</b>
self-esteem	1	1	-,045	,226	,061	-,135
Depression	-,045	,226	1	1	-,114	,009
Anxiety	,061	-,135	-,114	,009	1	1

From the results we can see a higher correlation difference only for the self-esteem variable with the other two variables, depression and anxiety, and the correlation between anxiety and depression is much lower in teenagers who have experienced parental divorce than in those who come from intact families.

## 7. Conclusion

Although a number of immediate and long-term adverse effects and reactions have been identified as a result of studies on the effects of divorce on children and adolescents, this research has shown that only the depression of adolescents from divorced families is significantly higher than those from intact families, and in terms of self-esteem and anxiety, there are no major differences in the studied adolescent population.

It is well known that adolescents can deal differently with the divorce of their parents, struggling with it, and the wounds are much deeper than those of the parents. Each adolescent is unique, has his own personality, growth and development pace. A positive influence on adolescent development is often supported by extended family members (usually grandparents), in pre-and post-divorce periods.

Analysing this phenomenon, I have noticed that too few institutions are concerned about this problem and, unfortunately, fewer programs have an effective intervention. If more attention and support were given to this phenomenon, the negative effects on children and adolescents could be diminished. However, they are non-governmental organizations that pay attention to these cases, but most often the support they provide is focused on the material needs of the family, and less on the psychological support. But what could be done? Here are some solutions that could provide the necessary framework for a comprehensive and complex approach to counteracting the negative effects of divorce: public awareness campaigns on the effects of divorce on children, the involvement of local leaders in setting up support and decision-making groups, the involvement of other members of the community; teachers, neighbours, friends to support the parent left alone after divorce and to notify the parent and the competent person when observing deviant behaviour in the child, setting up support groups of parents who have gone through a divorce, setting up services to provides counselling to both parents and children during divorce, but also after completing it, implementing parental education programs that will lead to parenting responsibility.

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