

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL DIVORCE ON THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Annisa Febri Bancin¹

Shabiroh²

Putri Adelia³

Risa Padilah⁴

*1,2,3,4 Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara

*1. annisafebribancin02@gmail.com

2. sabirohsyifa@gmail.com

3. risapadilah3@gmail.com

4. pudellia13@gmail.com

Abstract: Parental divorce is a family event that has a significant impact on a child's emotional and social development at an early age. At this stage, children are at a point in their development that is highly sensitive to changes in situations, especially in their relationships with the adults around them. According to Bowlby (1988), secure attachments are disrupted when children face the loss of a loved one due to divorce or conflict, leading to anxiety, fear, and regressive behavior. Furthermore, Papalia & Feldman (2014) explain that children who experience family instability often have difficulty managing emotions, interacting socially, and forming a self-identity. Socially, children often exhibit more withdrawn behavior, act aggressively, or encounter difficulties in forming friendships as a result of the emotional stress they experience. Santrock (2011) emphasized that conflict between parents can reduce a child's ability to adapt socially and impact the development of empathy and self-confidence. Research from various experts shows that the effects of divorce can be mitigated through good co-parenting practices, ongoing emotional support, and a responsive educational environment. Therefore, the active involvement of parents and educators is a crucial factor in maintaining the stability of early childhood social-emotional development after divorce.

Keywords: Divorce, Early Childhood and Social-Emotional Development

Introduction

Divorce is a social event that has a significant impact on family members, especially children in their early developmental stages. Children aged 0 to 6 are developing the foundations of social skills and emotional regulation; experiences in a consistent family environment and responsive parenting significantly influence the trajectory of their development. When a family deals with divorce, the structures and routines that provide a sense of security and closure for children can be disrupted—this can ultimately affect children's ability to manage emotions, build trust in others, and interact with peers.

At the national level, divorce trends in Indonesia have shown significant variation and dynamics in recent years. The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) presents divorce data by province and specific factors; this information demonstrates an increase in the number of divorces, which has attracted the attention of policymakers and researchers due to its impact on family well-being and children's rights. For example, national statistics show an increase in divorce rates over a specific period, prompting further research into the underlying causes and socio-economic impacts on children (Statistik, n.d.).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag), as one of the institutions responsible for marriage and divorce affairs in Indonesia, also communicates publicly about divorce trends and mitigation efforts, including the role of the Religious Affairs Office (KUA), premarital counseling services, and family mediation. In one of its releases, the Ministry of Religious Affairs noted changes in divorce trends over the years and encouraged the role of local institutions in strengthening family resilience. Kemenag's statements and data are important to use as policy context when discussing interventions that can mitigate the negative impact of divorce on children .

The Impact on the social and emotional development of early childhood research from both Indonesia and abroad shows that parental divorce can affect various aspects of a child's emotional and social life.

Emotionally, young children who experience divorce often show signs of anxiety, inconsistent mood swings, relapse into old habits such as bedwetting or dependence on caregivers, and difficulty expressing or managing feelings appropriately. Socially, children may also experience difficulty forming good peer relationships, withdraw from social settings, or exhibit aggressive behavior due to internal pressure. However, these impacts do not always last a lifetime—various studies show that outcomes can vary depending on the protective or risk factors present in the post-divorce environment (Gembong & Tangerang, n.d.).

Direct research in Indonesia provides evidence relevant to real-life situations. For example, qualitative and quantitative research in early childhood education settings and local communities shows that the impact of divorce can vary: some children experience visible negative emotional and social effects, but others adapt well if they receive consistent parental attention and support after the divorce. Several studies in early childhood education institutions have found a correlation between parental conflict or divorce and a decline in children's emotional management and social interaction skills. However, these studies also emphasize the important role of co-parenting and support from the social environment as a way to mitigate these negative impacts (Emosional & Usia, 2012).

Based on the background and gaps discussed, the main objectives of this research are as follows:

- a. To identify and analyze the impact of parental divorce on the social and emotional development of young children, including their emotional regulation skills, social interaction skills, and indicators of psychological well-being.
- b. To explore protective and risk factors, such as how parents collaborate in raising their children (co-parenting), family economic conditions, and support from the social environment, which influence the relationship between divorce and early childhood development outcomes.
- c. To connect field research findings with official national data, such as data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), data from religious courts, and reports from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, to understand the extent and prevalence of divorce cases and their impact on child protection policies (Statistik, n.d.).
- d. To develop policy recommendations and intervention programs based on research evidence, which can be used by educators in early childhood education (PAUD), social workers, child mental health services, and policymakers such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, and education and child protection offices, to mitigate the negative impact of divorce on children.

Literature Review

Parental divorce is often associated with an increased likelihood of social and emotional disorders in children. However, research shows that the impact is complex and influenced by factors such as parental discord, economic circumstances, social support, and the quality of post-divorce parenting. Meta-analyses and literature reviews indicate that children from divorced families are more likely to experience internalizing (such as anxiety and depression) and externalizing (such as aggression and difficult behavior) problems compared to children from intact families. However, the average effects are often small to moderate and are strongly influenced by family circumstances (*summary-AmatoPR-set*, n.d.). Several studies have indicated that parental conflict before or during divorce may be a stronger predictor of poor child outcomes than the divorce itself. Prolonged conflict damages children's emotional well-being, causing persistent stress that impairs emotional management and social skills from an early age. Therefore, empirical studies often distinguish between the effects of "conflict" and the effects of "divorce status" in their research (Dijk et al., 2020).

In the Indonesian context, local research provides contextually relevant insights. Qualitative and quantitative studies conducted by Haryanie (2013) and Widiastuti (2015) revealed that preschool children experiencing divorce often exhibit signs of regression (e.g., recurrent bedwetting), separation anxiety, disturbed sleep patterns, and difficulties interacting with peers. However, they also noted the role of local barriers—such as extended family and alternative caregivers—that can help mitigate negative impacts. Haryanie emphasized that attentiveness and consistency in parenting are crucial for maintaining children's emotional stability (Gembong & Tangerang, n.d.).

More recent international literature supports the finding that child developmental outcomes after divorce are strongly influenced by post-divorce conditions (co-parenting, financial stability, access to support services). Longitudinal research and meta-analyses indicate that when conflict decreases after divorce and parenting patterns become warmer and more consistent, many children show emotional improvement in the intermediate period. Therefore, the focus of interventions shifts from simply "preventing divorce" to "improving parenting methods after divorce" (Gembong & Tangerang, n.d.).

Besides conflicts and growing older, money issues also play a big role. When a family's income goes down after a divorce, kids might not get the same good things they needed before, like a nice place to grow up, help with their feelings or mental health, or enough food to eat. All of these things can make a child's growth and development worse. Studies in Indonesia show that when families can take care of their kids' basic needs and give them steady support—like through help from grandparents or other family members—the kids usually do better in life.

In conclusion, studies from around the world show that divorce can harm the social and emotional growth of young children, especially if there is a lot of conflict and financial trouble. But this doesn't mean it always has bad effects. Things like good parenting after the divorce and strong support from family and friends can help a lot in reducing or even stopping these negative effects. So, to help kids, it's important to create policies and support systems that reduce conflict, encourage better cooperation between parents, and provide easy access to financial help and emotional support services (Europe, 2019).

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the impact of parental divorce on early childhood social-emotional development, which is complex, contextual, and

influenced by family dynamics and the child's social environment (Europe, 2019). This approach allows researchers to explore children's experiences, feelings, and social-emotional behaviors more comprehensively through the perspectives of parents, teachers, and the child's immediate environment (Widiastuti, n.d.).

A case study was used because the research focuses on young children from divorced families within a specific context, such as a preschool or a specific family environment. This design allows researchers to understand the phenomenon holistically and in-depth.

Data collection techniques were carried out using several techniques, including:

Observation

Observations were conducted directly in the school environment to observe children's social- emotional behavior, such as their ability to interact with friends, manage emotions, and respond to social situations. Observations were conducted using structured observation sheets tailored to early childhood social-emotional development indicators (Latifah et al., 2025)

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents/guardians and teachers. The interviews aimed to elicit information about changes in children's behavior after divorce, post-divorce parenting patterns, and the emotional support children received. This technique enabled researchers to obtain rich and in-depth data.

Documentation

Documentation included child development records, teacher reports, photos of activities, and other supporting documents relevant to the children's social-emotional conditions. Documentation was used to strengthen the data from observations and interviews.

Result and Discussion

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation of young children from divorced families, it was found that parental divorce significantly impacts children's socio-emotional development. These impacts manifest in various forms, both emotional and social, with varying degrees of intensity for each child.

1. Impact on Children's Emotional Aspects

Observations show that most children experience difficulty managing their emotions after their parents' divorce. Children appear more easily angered, cry for no apparent reason, exhibit excessive anxiety, and experience unstable mood swings. Teachers also report regressive behavior, such as children becoming more spoiled, easily frightened, and less confident than before the divorce. Interviews with parents/guardians indicate that these changes are influenced by the reduced presence of one parent and changes in parenting patterns. Children often feel the loss of a figure who usually provides a sense of security and emotional comfort. This condition aligns with findings by Haryanie (2013), who stated that children affected by divorce tend to experience emotional distress due to the absence of a complete parental figure.

2. Impact on Children's Social Aspects

In terms of social aspects, observations show that children experience difficulties interacting with peers. Some children tend to withdraw, are less active in group play, and prefer to play alone. Conversely, some children exhibit aggressive behavior such as being easily

offended, snatching toys, and having difficulty following play rules. Instructors of young children noticed that those hailing from homes where parents had separated needed more time to get used to interacting with others in class. Furthermore, they seemed to react more strongly to small arguments with their peers. This implies that going through a divorce affects children's social skills in addition to their feelings and mental state, making it harder for them to form good relationships.

3. Factors That Help or Hinder

Conversations showed that youngsters who still get caring, love, and steady guidance from their folks or stand-in family, like their grandmothers and grandfathers, face less serious challenges. However, children dealing with disagreements after the divorce and without sufficient emotional help undergo bigger problems concerning their emotions and interactions with others.

Discussion

The results of this study reinforce previous research findings that parental divorce is closely related to the socio-emotional development of early childhood. Early childhood children are in a critical phase of emotional and social development, so changes in family structure can be a significant stressor.

Emotional Impact from a Theoretical Perspective

According to Bowlby's attachment theory, children need a stable emotional attachment to a primary caregiver to build a sense of security. Parental divorce often disrupts this bond, especially if one parent becomes less physically or emotionally present. This explains why the children in this study exhibited symptoms of anxiety, emotional instability, and overdependence.

These findings align with research by D'Onofrio et al. (2019), which states that children from divorced families have a higher risk of experiencing internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression, especially at an early age.

Social Effects and Peer Interactions

A child's trouble with social interactions is seen as a knock-on effect of emotional problems. Children who struggle to handle their feelings often find it hard to fit into social settings. Research by Widiastuti in 2015 showed that kids aged five to six from divorced families often have a hard time working together and making good friends with others their age. Still, this research also makes it clear that divorce does not always have negative outcomes. Children who have strong emotional support, loving care, and a helpful school atmosphere tend to adapt socially in a better way. The Impact of Surroundings and Parenting After Divorce. The research findings back up the idea that how well children are cared for after a divorce matters more than the divorce itself. Children raised with lots of care, good talks, and little arguing between parents are more likely to regain their emotional balance and social abilities. These findings line up with a big study by Amato and Keith, which said that the bad effects of divorce can be reduced if parents argue less and children's emotional needs are still taken care of.

Research Consequences

The results of this research have important results for parents, early childhood teachers, and policy makers. Parents should understand that divorce is not just a legal issue but also an emotional experience for children. Early childhood teachers should be ready to give extra

emotional help and create a safe and welcoming learning space. Also, there is a need for programs that help and counsel families after divorce to lessen any negative effects on young children.

Conclusion

After conducting research and thorough discussions, the main conclusion is that when parents separate, it greatly affects how young children develop socially and emotionally. Young children are at a crucial stage where they grow and learn, especially when it comes to understanding basic feelings, getting along with others, feeling secure, and understanding who they are. Therefore, if a family's structure changes because of a divorce, it can disrupt a child's mental and social well-being. The research indicates that children from separated families often struggle with their feelings, becoming emotionally unstable, anxious, constantly sad, easily angered, and less confident. This situation arises due to a parent's absence, changes in how they are cared for, and the child's emotional uncertainty. If a child's emotional needs are not adequately met, they may find it difficult to manage their emotions healthily.

Furthermore, parental separation can also affect a child's social development. Young children from divorced families often find it challenging to interact with their peers, possibly withdrawing from social situations, struggling to cooperate, or acting aggressively. These difficulties stem from the emotional issues the child faces, hindering their ability to adjust to social settings. Nevertheless, the research also suggests that the effects of divorce are not absolute or irreversible. Protective factors, such as the quality of care after the divorce, emotional support from parents and extended family, and a supportive school environment, play a crucial role in reducing the negative impacts of divorce. Children who receive attention, love, and consistent parenting are more likely to adapt well and demonstrate positive social and emotional development.

References

- Dijk, R. Van, Valk, I. E. Van Der, Deković, M., & Branje, S. (2020). A meta-analysis on interparental conflict, parenting, and child adjustment in divorced families: Examining mediation using meta-analytic structural equation models. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 79(March), 101861. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2020.101861>
- Emosional, D. A. N., & Usia, A. (2012). Dampak perceraian pada perkembangan sosial dan emosional anak usia 5-6 tahun. *Dampak Perceraian Pada Perkembangan Sosial Dan Emosional Anak Usia 5-6 Tahun*, 2(5), 76–86.
- Europe, W. (2019). *Parental divorce or separation and children's mental health*. February, 100–101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20590>
- Gembong, S. D. N., & Tangerang, I. K. (n.d.). *EMOSI ANAK (Studi kasus pada dua anak yang memiliki orang tua yang*. 100–106.
- Latifah, A., Anisak, D., Fitri, N., Teni, A., Afriliani, N., & Farida, N. A. (2025). *The impact of divorce on the social emotional development of early children*. 11(April), 30–35.
- Statistik, B. P. (n.d.). *Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia. Jumlah Perceraian¹ Menurut Provinsi dan Faktor, 2023. Diakses pada 25 November 2025, dari* <https://www.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/3/YVdoUIIwVmlTM2h4YzFoV1psWkViRXhqTIZwRFVUMDkjMw%3D%3D/jumlah-perceraian-menuru>.
- Summary-AmatoPR-Set. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.110.1.26>

- Widiastuti, R. Y. (n.d.). *DAMPAK PERCERAIAN PADA PERKEMBANGAN SOSIAL DAN EMOSIONAL ANAK USIA 5-6 TAHUN*.
- Rahimah, R., & Koto, I. (2022). Implications of parenting patterns in the development of early childhood social attitudes. *International Journal Reglement & Society (IJS)*, 3(2), 129-133.
- Yuris, E., Raniyah, Q., & Rahimah, R. (2023). Pengaruh pola asuh orang tua terhadap perilaku sosial anak usia dini di TK ABA. *Jurnal Muara Pendidikan*, 8(2), 525-532.