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# The Collision: College Students, Family Problems, and University Life

Jacque Little<sup>1</sup>

*Parental divorce can have a forceful effect on children of all ages and stages of life. Currently, 25%-35% of college students come from divorced families (Archer & Copper, 1998; Johnson & Nelson, 1998). According to recent studies, family functioning significantly impacts the lives and development of college students. The focus of this article is the connection between family functioning and the issues college students may face, as well as how student affairs professionals might reach out to these students.*

Divorce and family separation are more prevalent in the United States today than at any other point in history. For example, in 1935, for every 100 marriages in the United States, there were 16 divorces. In 1998, the number of divorces per 100 marriages rose to 51. Currently, over eight million children live with a divorced parent and one million children experience divorce each year (Fagan & Rector, 2000). It seems as though the once typical nuclear family, with a mother and father living together with one income includes less than 10% of families today (Archer & Copper, 1998). Thus, it should not be surprising that 25%-35% of college students come from divorced families. According to recent studies, not only divorce, but also poor overall family functioning can have harmful effects on a child's psychological development, which can lead to a surfacing or resurfacing of a plethora of problems during the college years. The connection between family functioning and the issues college students may face, as well as how student affairs professionals may reach out to these students, is the focus of this article (Archer & Copper; Johnson & Nelson, 1998).

## Literature Review

For the purposes of this article, the term "family functioning" according to the Personal Authority in the Family System Questionnaire (Version C) and the Family Environment Scale as the relationship between conflict, cohesion, and expressiveness between family members (Johnson & Nelson, 1998). While it is well known that parental divorce can have strong effects on young children, recent research indicates that the degree of family functioning plays just as significant a role on these children. Patrick Johnson and Mark Nelson's research points to family functioning as a more significant factor of certain developmental tasks than the actual marital status of one's parents. For example, they found that the family dimension most related to developmental task attainment in college students was family expressiveness. In other words, students who come from families that encourage open communication seem to go through the process of separating from family during college years without completely emotionally cutting off from their families. The influence of expressiveness within a family on a child's behavior overrides the influence of conflict on developmental tasks such as separation. However, higher levels of conflict and intergenerational triangulation, which is defined as a child "feeling caught in the middle of parents' disputes," within a family do predict lower levels of intimacy and individuation between students and parents (Johnson & Nelson, p. 360).

Recent research has revealed a number of connections between parental divorce and college student development ranging from self-esteem and graduation rates, to classroom participation and career choice. Clinical psychologist Judith Wallerstein (1991) suggests that if divorce occurs when children are between the ages of six and eight, patterns of low self-esteem and a constant need for reassurance in many areas of life can set in and persist throughout college and adult life. This can impact development of interpersonal skills and self-awareness.

Some effects of divorce are specific or more detrimental according to the gender of the child. Susan Silverberg Koerner, University of Arizona Family and Consumer Resources Associate Professor, reported to the *Arizona Daily Wildcat* statistics about such effects (as cited in Missel, 2000). According to Koerner, divorce can cause psychological damage in adolescent daughters that leaves them not necessarily clinically depressed, but with more psychological stress than those from intact families. She claims that these psychological effects are just as applicable to college-aged women as younger girls.

While Koerner focused mainly on daughters of divorce, Hoffman and Weiss (1987) found parental conflict as a highly

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reliable indicator of problems for both genders. Divorce often leaves daughters finding less value in their femininity, and sons of divorced parents tend to lack confidence in their ability to relate with women professionally and romantically (Fagan & Rector, 2000).

Lower levels of family functioning and divorce also contribute to lower educational outcomes for many students. For example, Wallerstein (1991) found 66% of children from divorced families attended college as compared to 85% of children from intact families from affluent high schools in a single county outside of San Francisco. Similarly, the rate at which children from divorced families attend college is nearly 60% lower compared to children from intact families. Additionally, children from divorced families who do decide to attend college have lower rates of graduation and complete fewer college courses than their counterparts (Fagan & Rector, 2000).

Students who attend and remain at a college or university who have experienced family problems or parental divorce deal with a wide range of issues throughout their college careers, such as the inability to manage conflict between roommates; challenging relationships with partners and friends; and problems in the classroom. These result from the fact that many children learn from their parents how to deal with disagreements and strong emotions such as anger. Thus, when confronted by peers and friends, children from families with a high amount of conflict tend to use the same tactics as their parents. Children from divorced families resolve to using violence and aggressive behaviors with friends more so than those from intact families (Billingham & Notebaert, 1993). This is not to say that most parents who divorce are violent people, but that the ways in which conflict is dealt with often do not provide a good example for a child. Thus, when confronted as an adult, Fagan and Rector (2000) assert, a child often reacts compulsively in an attempt to avoid repeating actions of his or her parents. This rarely leads to progress in dealing with the conflict-filled situation. Another consequence of divorce is manifested in college students' withdrawal from friends and non-participatory or disruptive classroom behavior.

Family histories not only affect college students' development, but also spill over into other areas of their lives. Reactions to parental divorce or low family functioning can affect a student's career choice or dating preferences. A recent divorce or family argument may influence a college student to make a drastic change in his or her major as an attempt to draw attention away from the mishap. A student may also choose to date or even marry someone because he or she has either the opposite personality of one or both parents, or one who will draw strong parental reactions. These are examples of a multigenerational transmission of characteristics, which are characteristics passed down from one's parents that often lead to a generational series of divorces (Johnson & Nelson, 1998).

### **What can be done?**

A number of different avenues exist for student affairs professionals when working with students who come from dysfunctional or divorced families. Student affairs professionals often encounter and occasionally seek out mentoring or counseling relationships with students which provide opportunities for students to address personal issues. On a larger scale, programming can be done that is aimed at issues students deal with when leaving home, specifically students from low functioning families. However, it is important to note that not all students deal with family issues in the same way, therefore, these suggestions are simply that, suggestions.

In conversations with all students, it is important to note that college is a time and place in which students progress toward more thorough understanding of who they are as individuals. Likewise, when talking with a student who is struggling with family problems and trying to differentiate him or herself from the scenario at home, Johnson and Nelson (1998) have a helpful tip. They suggest helping the student identify patterns within the family that are similar to patterns in his or her current relationships with peers. Doing this will allow the student to attempt to actively interrupt those behaviors and will hopefully lead the student to develop the ability to make less reactive choices and more conscientious decisions.

However, in contrast to Johnson and Nelson (1998) is Deborah Fishman (1994) who suggests it is more important to teach students how to deal with family issues in a healthy way rather than encouraging a psychological detachment from parents and parental habits. She also suggests talking with students in a similar manner as one would speak with someone who is grieving the loss of a parent. For instance, when parents divorce, a child may never see one parent again in any regular manner, if at all. Another suggestion for helping students who deal with family problems is to encourage them to attend group therapy. This is because people tend to interact similarly with the group leaders and members as they would with family members, thus possibly providing more opportunities for the counselor to observe the students' most prevalent issues (Johnson & Nelson).

For student affairs professionals working to provide various campus-wide support opportunities, one option is to compare different methods of coping with stress that can result from personal problems. The University of Florida Counseling Department (2002) provides a few suggestions that have been successful for students. For example, some ineffective coping strategies college students may exhibit are withdrawing from others to protect themselves from hurt, turning to substance abuse, or developing various eating disorders in efforts to exert control in their lives. On the other hand, effective coping strategies for dealing with stress from personal problems, including family problems or divorce, are as follows: explore and clarify feelings, identify thoughts about the issue, and communicate your thoughts and feelings with someone trustworthy for support (University of Florida).

It is also important for student affairs professionals to be aware of the implications personal problems can have on students' identities as a way of helping them with self-reflection. Many campuses reinforce unwritten rules similar to those in society about emotional and personal problems, such as: always be in control, never cry, always be cheerful and happy, do not appear weak, appear successful, and never express anger (University of Florida, 2002). These "rules" can strongly inhibit one from talking about family problems and seeking out the support he or she needs in order to move through different levels of development. Therefore, as a student affairs professional, one should attempt to create a space with students in which these "rules" do not apply.

### **Conclusions and Questions**

As cited above, family problems can influence many aspects of one's life, many of which appear during college years. A connection has also been found between the rate of divorce in parents of one generation and the rate of divorce in their children's, and even grandchildren's generation (Archer & Copper, 1998; Fagan & Rector, 2000; Johnson & Nelson, 1998). However, as a student affairs professional, one must entertain and question the possibility of education playing a significant role in changing such a pattern. Does the academy have any responsibility to offer students courses or programs in the areas of relationship building, gender differences, interpersonal communication, or emotional management as a way of helping students who have not had positive family socialization processes in these areas? Do colleges and universities have a right to attempt character building in their students that may be helpful in lowering the booming divorce rate in this country? If so, what does this look like? One must also consider students who come from cultures that do not value monogamous marriages or lifelong relationships, and those students should be just as valued as students who may believe in these things. Thus, the question of responsibility remains unanswered. However, through researching this topic, it has become clear that divorce and family problems play significant roles in many problems college students deal with during their time at any given institution. It is also evident that student affairs professionals will most likely build relationships with students who experience these personal issues. Therefore, it is important to have an understanding of how these issues could be affecting them and what possible avenues exist to help.

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