

# The Relationship between Substance Use, Self-Esteem, Academic Performance, and Parental Divorce

Kennedy Conner

Faculty Mentor: Stephanie Thomas, PhD  
Science Department/Psychological Science Program

## Abstract

Previous research on parental divorce has focused on the effects of the divorce for middle and high school students at the time of the parents' divorce. The specific objectives of this research are to determine the potential relationship between parental divorce and college students' self-esteem, academic success, and substance use. Another objective is to determine the relationship between growing up in a single household and college students' self-esteem, academic success, and substance use. The data were collected using a set of questionnaires to assess all four variables. Results showed that there was no significant difference in self-esteem, academic success, and substance use between those who experienced parental divorce and those who had not, or between those who had grown up in

a single household and those who had not. In a set of exploratory analyses, results showed that there was a significant positive correlation between how participants rated the happiness of their parents' marriage and the stability of the parents' marriage. Another finding was a significant negative correlation between how participants rated the happiness of their parents' marriage and the participants' self-esteem score. One limitation of the current research is how difficult it was to create a working operational definition of *parental divorce*. Another limitation is the very small and limited sample size from LaGrange College. Future research could investigate the operational definitions of *parental divorce* and *marriage* to determine the best way to measure this variable

Divorce has become more common today, so there are often fewer negative social repercussions as compared to previous times (Shansky, 2002). In the United States, 40-50% of first-time marriages, as well as 60% of second-time marriages, end in divorce (Clyde, Wikle, Hawkins, & James, 2019). Given these high rates of divorce, parental divorce has clearly shaped the lives of many children. From the ages 0 to 5, about 12% of children live with a single parent, and of all households, 13% are single parents (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). Children must make several major adjustments if their parents get divorced, such as being required to see a counselor (Shansky, 2002). The effects of a parental divorce can be associated with a broad spectrum of behavioral problems in children. Many families do not always consider the damage that can be incurred regarding things such as emotional adjustment, parental relationships, and substance abuse (Gatins, Kinlaw, & Dunlap, 2013). The current study investigated the relationships between parental divorce and self-esteem, academic success, and substance use.

## Academic Success

When high school children's parents get divorced, there are a lot of changes at home, so much so that the children's academics can become neglected (Shansky, 2002).

Academic performance tends to decline over time in children with divorced parents, as compared to those whose parents are still married (Shansky, 2002). This suggests that parental divorce influences children's academic priorities, given that the decline is not seen until after the divorce occurs.

Children from divorced parents who remarried reported testing lower on standardized tests than children from families that were still together or children from a single parent (Jeynes, 1999). This expands on the idea of how children from divorced families must go through different struggles compared to children from families that are still intact. This can also explain how academic performance is lower in children who have experienced parental divorce because there is a possibility for their parental situation to change again.

One specific concern related to academics is an increase in school absences. Students are more likely to skip school and receive lower grades if their parents are not fully together (separated but not legally divorced) (Hanson, 1999). In addition, school absences are significantly higher for children whose recently divorced parents get into another relationship soon after (Hanson, 1999). Together, this suggests that these changes at home have a strong relationship with a child's school attendance.

Another aspect of academics that has been investigated in relation to parental divorce is completion of high school or college. Children are 8% less likely to complete high school and 11% less likely to complete college if their parents were divorced (Brand, Moore, Song & Xie, 2019). This is important because this suggests that parental divorce can potentially be handicapping children's future.

### **Substance Use**

Alcohol can sometimes be used as a coping mechanism for changes in a person's life, so it is important to investigate substance-use behaviors in children of parental divorce. In one such study, 68.59% of seniors in high school revealed that they used drinking to cope with the changes and stress from their parents' divorce. This increased alcohol consumption is observed even years after the parents' divorce (Jeynes, 2001). Further, those with parents who have been divorced less than 4 years have a higher rate of drinking compared to those whose parents were divorced more than 4 years (Jeynes, 2001). In addition, research has found that high schoolers' grades dropped continuously due to excessive drinking, and that children with divorced parents are more likely to engage in drinking and driving (Billingham, Wilson, & Gross, 1999). In a situation in which parents are dealing with a divorce, they may not be able to monitor or notice the child's drinking behaviors, which could then lead to decreased academic performance and risky behavior. This is cause for concern because using alcohol as a coping mechanism for parental divorce increases the danger to both the children and others.

In some instances, individuals may use other illicit drugs in addition to or instead of alcohol. Higher drug use has been observed in high school students whose parents did not have the same house rules after their divorce (Gatins et al., 2013). If parents do not have a strong line of communication with each other after divorce, then children can take advantage of that. Another possible contributing factor to illegal drug use after divorce is that many children have lower self-esteem due to the parental divorce (Jeynes, 2001). This self-esteem reduction can result in the children finding an escape through illegal substances that make them feel better about themselves. Specifically, the lowered self-esteem can increase their need to fit in socially, which can increase their sensitivity to peer pressure. That peer pressure can then lead to increased use of illegal drugs (Jeynes, 2001).

### **Self-Esteem**

When comparing young children with divorced parents to children with parents who are still married, the children with divorced parents tend to have lower self-esteem over time (Shansky, 2002). Having lower self-esteem can cause children to crave social acceptance, especially females. Specifically, females in high school with divorced parents have lower self-esteem compared to males with divorced

parents (Hanson, 1999). This is important because this suggests that females can have a harder time adjusting to parental divorce compared to males.

Research suggests that the lower the child's self-esteem, the more conflict happened during the parental divorce period (Lau, 2007). This is important because the age of the child when the parents get divorced can impact outcomes and conflict. For example, students who experienced parental divorce while in high school had a higher chance of being depressed compared to those who experienced parental divorce when they were younger (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). Younger children seem to have an easier adjustment to parental divorce, perhaps because they are more naïve when it comes to the reasons for or the process of divorce. In addition, research has shown that college-aged children could not separate their feelings or thoughts of their parents and themselves when one parent would say negative things about the other parent. This resulted in the children having lowered self-esteem (Baker, 2005).

### **Current Research**

Not many studies have investigated the long-term changes in young adults when it comes to the effect of their parents' divorce. This study will address this gap by investigating college students and examining the relationship between parental divorce and academic success, self-esteem, and substance use, utilizing an online questionnaire. I hypothesized three specific relationships. First, I hypothesized that there would be lower self-esteem for college students with divorced parents compared to those who did not have divorced parents. Second, I hypothesized that there would be a higher rate of substance use for college students with divorced parents compared to those who did not have divorced parents. Lastly, I hypothesized that there would be lower academic success for college students with divorced parents compared to those who did not have divorced parents.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

A total of 34 undergraduate students participated in this study. Of these, 13 were female, 19 were males, 1 was a transgender woman, and 1 was non-binary. Ages ranged from 18-23 ( $M=20.15$ ). Regarding class status, 8 were first-year students, 11 were second-year students, 6 were third-year students, 7 were fourth-year students, and 2 were fifth-year students. Regarding race, there were 4 African Americans or Black students, 1 Asian student, 27 European American or White students, and 1 Latino student. There were 25 participants who had grown up in a single household (i.e., they have lived in only one house), and 4 participants who did not. There were 8 participants who had experienced parental divorce, while 24 participants had not.

## Materials

### Parental Divorce

The questionnaire for this section contained seven questions asking about each participant's parental marriage information. The first section of the questionnaire determined the participant's guardian's status as single, married, separated, or legally divorced. The second section asked the participant to rate the happiness and stability of their guardian's marriage. The answers for this section were on a 6-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being "not at all stable" and "6 being extremely stable." The last section asked participants to describe their family situation between the ages of 5 to 18 in 100 words or less.

### Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg self-esteem questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965) was utilized to assess self-esteem. There was a total of 10 statements to which participants indicated their agreement using a 4-point Likert scale from 1 "strongly agree" to 4 "strongly disagree." An example of one of the statements is "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself."

### Academic Success

The questionnaire for this section contained 3 questions. The first question asked for the year the participant graduated high school. The second question asked for the participant's SAT/ACT score. The last question asked how many total classes they have been absent from in their current semester. The participants were also asked to provide their full name as well as their student number in order to grant access to their final grades from the previous semester.

### Substance Use

This questionnaire contained 14 statements to which participants indicated their agreement using a 6-point Likert scale. The statements assessed factors such as the participant's chances of consuming an alcoholic beverage during the week or on the weekend, their chances of consuming a drug or an alcoholic beverage if their friends were, and other statements related to substance use. One example of these statements is "I do not see a problem with driving while under the influence of alcohol."

## Procedure

Participants were recruited through the Lagrange College Research and Experiment Participation System (REPS). This system includes courses in psychology, sociology, and many other departments. The first form that was presented to each participant was the consent form. If the participant did not agree to the consent form, then they were exited from the study. If they agreed to the consent form, then they were granted access to the study.

When the participants started the study, they were presented with the following questionnaires in this order:

- the parental divorce questionnaire,
- the Rosenberg self-esteem questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965),
- the academic success questionnaire,
- and finally, the substance use questionnaire.

After completing these, the participants were presented with a few questions pertaining to demographics such as age, gender, race, and class status. After completing all questionnaires, the participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

### Substance Use

There was no significant difference in substance use for participants who had divorced parents compared to those who did not:  $t(29) = -1.492, p = .146$ . There was no significant difference in substance use for participants who had grown up in a single household compared to those who did not:  $t(27) = 1.623, p = .116$ . Thus, this hypothesis was not supported (see Figure 1).

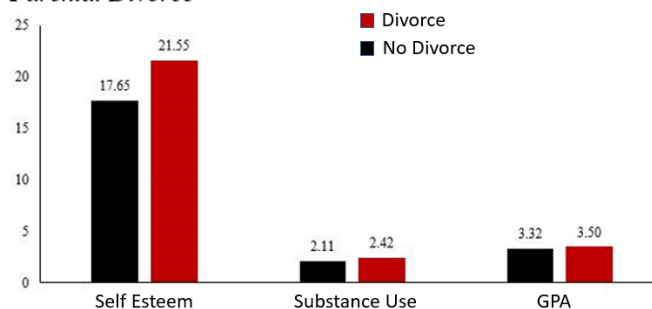
### Self-Esteem

There was no significant difference in self-esteem for participants who had divorced parents compared to those who did not:  $t(29) = -1.594, p = .122$ . There was no significant difference in self-esteem for students who had grown up in a single household compared to those who did not:  $t(27) = 1.326, p = .196$ . Thus, this hypothesis was not supported (see Figure 1).

### Academic Performance

There was no significant difference in academic performance for participants who had divorced parents compared to those who did not:  $t(24) = 0.008, p = .994$ . There was no significant difference in academic performance for participants had grown up in a single household compared

**Figure 1**  
*Self-Esteem, Substance Use, and GPA for Those with and without Parental Divorce*



Note: There was no significant difference in self-esteem, substance use, and GPA between participants who had experienced parental divorce compared to those who had not.

**Table 1**

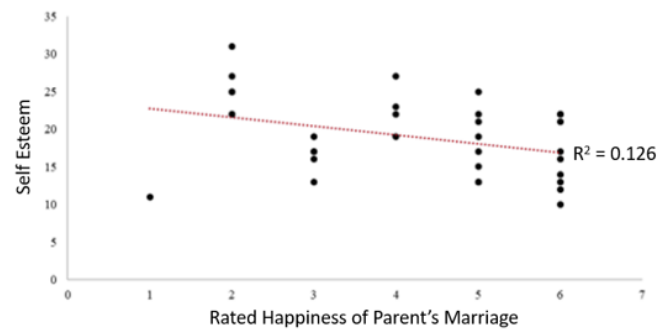
Correlations among All Variables of Interest

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Marriage Happiness	—							
2. Marriage Stability	.830***	—						
3. Self-Esteem	-.355*	-.278	—					
4. Substance Use	-.261	-.248	.352*	—				
5. GPA	-.023	-.048	.227	-.139	—			
6. Age	.033	.117	-.002	.071	.036	—		
7. SAT	.046	.027	-.037	.194	.437	.450	—	
8. ACT	.302	.435	-.502*	.037	.195	.172	.516	—

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 2**

Relationship between Happiness of Parents' Marriage and Children's Self-Esteem



to those who did not:  $t(22) = -0.080$ ,  $p = .937$ . Thus, this hypothesis was not supported (see Figure 1).

### Exploratory Analysis

To explore the data further, I calculated a series of correlations between many of the main variables of interest (see Table 1). There was a significantly positive correlation between the rated happiness of the parents' marriage and the rated stability of the parents' marriage ( $r = .830$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was a significantly negative correlation between the rated happiness of the parents' marriage and the children's self-esteem ( $r = -.355$ ,  $p = .043$ ) (see Figure 2). There was a significantly positive correlation between the children's self-esteem and substance use ( $r = .352$ ,  $p = .041$ ). Finally, there was a significantly negative correlation between the children's self-esteem and their ACT score ( $r = -.502$ ,  $p = .047$ ).

I also conducted two independent sample t-tests to explore differences between males and females. There was a significant difference in self-esteem between males and females:  $t(30) = 2.132$ ,  $p = .041$ , with females ( $M = 20.39$ ) having higher self-esteem than males ( $M = 16.95$ ). There was also significant difference in GPA between males and females:  $t(26) = 3.521$ ,  $p = .002$ , with females ( $M = 3.69$ ) having a higher GPA than males ( $M = 3.094$ ).

### Discussion

When starting this project, I had three hypotheses. First, there would be lower self-esteem in college students with divorced parents as compared to those who did not have divorced parents. Second, there would be higher substance use in college students with divorced parents as compared to those who did not have divorced parents. Lastly, there would be lower academic success in college students with divorced parents as compared to those who did not have divorced parents. Contrary to predictions, my results did not support any of my three hypotheses.

Contrary to previous research (Shansky, 2002), academic performance did not decline in college students

with divorced parents as compared to those without. Also conflicting with previous findings (Jeynes, 2001), substance usage was not higher for those who had experienced parental divorce. However, exploratory analyses indicated there was a positive correlation between self-esteem and substance use. This demonstrates that substance use may be related to another factor besides parental divorce. Finally, contrary to previous research (Hanson, 1999), college females had significantly higher self-esteem than college males. This could be because there was a smaller number of females to males, making the variety of scores smaller. My results imply that there is not a significant difference in self-esteem, academic success, and substance use between students who had experienced parental divorce compared to those who had not.

### Limitations

There were a few limitations with the current research. One was the overall small sample size ( $N = 34$ ). Having used only undergraduates from one small private liberal arts college in Georgia created a small sample of individuals with divorced parents. Another big limitation was the difficulty in defining *parental divorce*. During the process of defining *parental divorce*, I went through all of the open-ended responses and determined which participants fell into the categories of parental divorce or not, as well as single household or not. This strategy was utilized because every family is different; thus, I had a hard time defining what would be considered *divorce* for my study. For example, some participants grew up with only one parent, but then would spend periods of time with their grandparents. This participant would be categorized as *no parental divorce* and *no single household*.

### Future Research

For future research, it is important to try to establish a clearer operational definition of *parental divorce*. Individuals' family situations are very complex. For example, some participants had parents who had separated into different

households but never legally divorced. This resulted in these participants not being included in the *parental divorce* category, but they may have still experienced many of the same situations as those who had experienced parental divorce. Having a clearer operational definition of this important variable would lead to more clearly defined groups and thus might enable researchers to better explore the difference between them.

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