

## Family Disruptions and the Impact on the Personality Development of Young Children

BY

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### Abstract

Family disruptions significantly impact children's personality development. This paper explores the various forms of family disruptions, including divorce, parental death, substance abuse, and domestic violence, and their effects on children's emotional, psychological, and cognitive development. The stability of the family environment that children experience has a significant impact on their personality development. In the latter half of the 20th century, a large number of children in most developing countries faced family disunity, with divorce becoming a more prevalent cause than parental death. This trend has raised concerns in several nations as empirical studies have indicated that such changes may have negative consequences for the affected children. Findings have shown that children who experience family disruption tend to have poorer outcomes in various areas, such as education, financial stability, and physical and mental health. Children in disrupted families tend to have less progress and low self-esteem in most spheres of their lives. Studies indicated that families must be cognizant of family disruption that causes disunity and be proactive in avoiding it. In addressing family disunity, the family members usually avoid being in contact with issues and people that cause disagreements and problems within the family.

**Keywords:** Family disruption, child development, parental separation, mental health, personality formation.

### Introduction

The family unit is essential in shaping children's development as the state of the family environment contributes to the better educational, social, and emotional well-being of the child. Sociologists place a significant value on the family unit because of its critical role in children's development (Altintas, 2012). Sociological studies indicate that changes in family structure, such as divorce and single parenthood, affect children's emotional and cognitive growth. As an essential institution of

socialization, families are responsible for introducing children to learning, growth, and interaction with others. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of this institution, especially when working with children from diverse family backgrounds and structures. A child's experiences at home are likely to influence their personal growth, development, learning, and interactions with the outside world, making it imperative to recognize the importance of the family unit (Mariani, Özcan, & Goisis, 2017). In the same vein, there is a consensus among social scientists, (Lee, and McLanahan, 2015) that the most recent years of family change, including the rises in divorce and separation rates, single motherhood, cohabitation, and step family formation have led to an explosion in popular and scholarly interest in the effects of family dynamics on children's happiness and developmental opportunities.

### **Problem**

In spite of the extensive research on family dynamics and their subsequent effects on child development, there still is a lack of consensus on how different types of family disruptions may specifically affect personality development in children as some studies have gone to suggest how children may learn to adapt with the right support overtime (Torche et.al 2019) while others also highlight persistent deficits in emotional regulation and social competence (Craig et al.,2012). Additionally, the existing literature mostly focuses on adolescents and adults, thereby leaving a gap in understanding how early childhood disruptions have a bearing on personality development. In the light of these highlighted issues, the current study seeks.

In this regard, the current research adds to two strands in the body of knowledge: the importance of the environment in shaping child development and the process of personality development in young children. Current studies looking at the link between a child's life experiences and personality development seem to focus more on adults than young children.

### **Research Objectives**

This study explores how family disruption impacts children's personality formation and their overall well-being, with a focus on three objectives:

1. To analyze how different types of family disruptions (divorce, parental death, substance abuse, domestic violence) impact the personality development of children aged 12 and under.
2. To identify and understand the disruptions responsible for affecting child development.
3. To evaluate how disruptions, interfere with children's development;

### **Literature Review**

A British longitudinal study by Prevoe (2014) revealed three main facts in proving the impact of family disruptions on personality development. First, between the ages of 10 and 16, children generally demonstrate positive personality development, as shown by increasing scores on self-esteem and internal locus of control, as well as decreasing scores on the Rutter index for behavioural problems. However, in the study, these favourable changes proved to be significantly smaller for children who have experienced family disruptions, especially at a young age. Thus, family disruption has both a level and growth effect on personality development. Second, children who do not live with both natural parents throughout childhood not only ranked lower in terms of personality traits but also showed less growth between the ages of 10 and 16. Third, while children seem to recover from experiencing the death of a parent in terms of personality outcomes, children from divorced parents show significantly lower self-esteem and internal locus of control while also scoring higher on the behavioural problems index. Thus, the effects of family disruption on personality development in children seem to be more pronounced if the child is younger.

In this regard, the family institution becomes a fundamental factor that decisively influences a child's growth and overall well-being. It encompasses the complex relationships between parents and children, as well as the crucial roles and responsibilities played by each member of the family, (Mariani et al., 2017). For instance, if a child grows up in a nuclear family, they are highly likely to acquire conventional family values such as obedience and respect, which can have a profound impact on their emotional and cognitive development. In such a family, the mother usually provides emotional and nurturing care, while the father provides a sense of security and direction. This parental relationship undoubtedly helps a child to have a more stable upbringing, which significantly improves their general sense of well-being. Children mature in terms of personality during childhood, but early life experiences, such as disruptions in family structure, could act as an impediment to a child's personality development (Prevo, 2014). Psychological problems of a clinical nature are often rooted in early expressions of stable personality traits in formation, beyond the capture of isolated clinical symptoms, forming emergent personality patterns (Olărescu & Dumitriu, 2016).

Empirical studies investigating the association between life experiences and personality change seem to be inconclusive. For working-age adults, Cobb-Clark & Schurer (2012) show that Mean level changes are small and intra-individual changes are generally unrelated to adverse employment, health and family-related events. Specht, Schmukle & Eglo (2011), however, conclude that such events do explain a significant part of the variation in personality traits. Knudsen et al. (2006) indeed conclude that being raised in disadvantaged environments is associated with diminished cognitive and social skills. Similarly, Almlund et al. (2011) argue that personality traits are responsive to a wide variety of nuances, among which are educational and parental investments. The technology of skill formation (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner & Masterov, 2006) models the role the quality of the home environment plays in shaping skills in children. This literature highlights the

importance of the early childhood environment and explains the associations between disruptive early environments and personality development.

A large amount of literature suggests that parental divorce decreases children's socioemotional well-being and limits their educational attainment. Moreover, relationship transitions occur more frequently following parental divorce, and such instability disrupts children's lives (Lee and McLanahan 2015). According to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, children born to married parents who divorce by the time children are 5 years old have lower vocabulary and pre-reading skills and more aggressive behaviours at age 5 than children in stably married families (Craigie et al. 2012). The number of changes in family structure experienced from birth through kindergarten is also related to children's problem behaviours during the transition to 1st grade (Cavanagh and Huston 2006). Studies have found that family instability and lack of parental affection and supervision during preadolescence and adolescence predict the formation of dependent and passive-aggressive personalities with high levels of symptoms of antisocial, avoidant, and borderline personality disorders (Olărescu & Dicu, 2023). Together, these findings reveal that even one change in family structure has the potential to be disruptive to a child's well-being, but each additional change that contributes to family instability predicts worse outcomes.

### **The Role of Family in Personality Development**

Personality development in young children is deeply influenced by their family environment. According to Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019), personality is shaped by a combination of genetic temperament and environmental experiences. The family serves as the primary socializing agent, where children learn emotional regulation, social skills, and moral values. A stable, nurturing family environment fosters secure attachment, which is linked to traits such as confidence, empathy, and adaptability (Mariani et al., 2017). Conversely, unstable or conflict-ridden households may contribute to anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal (Prevoo, 2014).

### **Effects of Divorce on Personality Development**

Parental divorce is one of the most studied family disruptions, with research consistently showing associations with emotional and behavioural challenges in children. Studies indicate that children of divorced parents often exhibit lower self-esteem, trust issues, and academic struggles (Carlson et al., 2022). The British longitudinal study by Prevoo (2014) found that children who experienced divorce before age 16 showed slower positive personality development compared to peers from intact families. These children scored lower on measures of self-esteem and internal locus of control while displaying higher rates of behavioral problems. Conflict between parents' post-divorce exacerbates these effects, particularly when children are exposed to ongoing hostility (Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

### **Impact of Parental Death**

The death of a parent is another significant disruption that can alter a child's personality trajectory. While grief is a natural response, prolonged emotional distress may lead to depression, social withdrawal, or academic decline (Gillihan, 2022). However, outcomes vary depending on the surviving parent's ability to provide emotional support and stability. Some children demonstrate resilience, particularly when extended family or community networks step in to fill the emotional gap (Torche et al., 2024).

### **Parental Substance Abuse and Domestic Violence**

Children raised in households with substance abuse or domestic violence face unique challenges. Parental addiction often leads to neglect, inconsistent parenting, and exposure to risky behaviours, which can contribute to impulsivity, aggression, or low self-worth in children (Fauziah, 2022). Similarly, witnessing domestic violence correlates with heightened anxiety, difficulty forming healthy relationships, and an increased likelihood of perpetuating violence in adulthood (Edwards, 2019).

### **Protective Factors and Resilience**

Not all children from disrupted families develop negative outcomes. Protective factors such as strong relationships with non-custodial parents, access to therapy, and stable school environments can mitigate harm (Herzhoff et al., 2017). Research suggests that early intervention programmes, parenting support, and mental health services play crucial roles in fostering resilience.

### **Methodology.**

This study employs a qualitative desktop review methodology, analyzing existing literature on family disruptions and child personality development. The research synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journal articles, longitudinal studies, and meta-analyses. Key sources include psychological, sociological, and educational research to provide a multidisciplinary perspective. Thematic analytical methodology was used to identify recurring patterns in how different disruptions affect children, while comparative evaluation assesses the severity of various family instability factors. Special attention is given to studies that differentiate between the immediate and long-term impacts of family disruptions, as well as those that explore resilience factors in children who exhibit positive adjustment despite adverse circumstances

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Family**

According to the Library Review of 2012, there exist multiple definitions of a family from various sources. A family is a group of individuals who are connected by marriage, birth, or adoption. They work together to create and sustain culture while also developing each family member's physical, mental, emotional, and social development, (Kuppens and Ceulemans, 2019). A family consists of two or more people who reside in the same house due to blood, marriage, or adoption links. They interact with one another, play distinct functions, and form and sustain a culture.

(Rumbold and Cunningham, 2018). A family is described as a group of people united by blood ties, marriage, or adoption who form a common residence, (Nancy, 2010). In their common residence, they perform their respective roles as husband and wife, sons and daughters, mother and father, brother and sister as they create their way of life. In addition, Nancy says that it includes adults of both sexes at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship which includes children either born to the family or adopted.

The significance of family influence on child development cannot be underestimated. To begin with, the family is the first social group that a child encounters and, therefore, forms the core of the child's identity. Secondly, the family environment is the primary place where a child is introduced to the values of life. Moreover, parents and other family members are the most eminent people who shape a child's personal development. Lastly, the family, as an institution, plays a crucial role in facilitating basic human needs, both physical and biological. Consequently, the family setting serves as the primary educational environment where the first child is raised and guided.

The family is the ideal environment for the safe development of the child, timely and adequate meeting of the child's needs in an environment that promotes the formation of healthy generations and strong societies in the future, (Masud, Ahmad, Cho, & Fakhr, (2019). It is within this broad purview that Pew (2018) opines that teachers strive to develop the healthiest ways to educate children so that they are harmonious and successful in the future. Although we accept that the development of personality continues throughout a person's life, the fact that the foundation of personality development and construction was laid in childhood remains, acknowledged by Masud, et al (2019). Research on social cohesion has shown that the initial effects of the family on the child are extremely important.

Turunen, (2016) provides an in-depth analysis of the work of the family environment as an indisputable predictor of a child's development. With the same objective, in their study, Westphal, Poortman, and Van der Lippe, (2015) reveal that the primary setting for a child's growth and development is their family environment, and family relationships have a decisive impact on shaping a child's future views and behaviour towards others. Regardless of the number of children in the family or the size of the household, the underlying pattern of influence is likely to persist. It is the duty of the family, particularly the parents, to provide a safe, nurturing, and socializing environment for their children. The child's interaction with the rest of the family has a significant impact on their attitudes towards others, and it is the responsibility of the family to ensure that their children are well-prepared to control themselves in social situations and to be capable of developing healthy relationships with others.

The family unit is undeniably the primary and most crucial educational environment for individuals, particularly children, as it is where they receive education and supervision. Since most of an individual's or child's life is spent in the family, education is most commonly accepted by them, and it provides the groundwork for the fundamental understanding of ethics and standards. A family is typically a group of individuals living in one household due to blood ties, marriage, or adoption, and they live together as one unit - the smallest unit of society. There is almost always a blood relation, marriage, or other relationship, with one person leading the family and everyone eating together from a shared pot. They interact with each other, have their roles, and create and maintain a culture.

As primary educators in a family, parents play a critical role in shaping their children's values and standards. They have the first and most significant opportunity to create a clear and compelling picture of what these should be, (Mullan & Higgens, 2014). This is far easier than trying to find white spaces on a colourful canvas. A child's character is primarily shaped by their family and parents, so parents and

families must be actively involved in the development of their children's education. It is essential to recognize that parents and families should not be excluded from influencing their children's education. They must be supportive and actively engaged in helping their children acquire the best possible education.

### **Personality development in young children**

Kuppens and Ceulemans, (2019) postulate that personality development refers to the growth of a person's behaviour and attitude that sets him or her apart from others. A child's personality is his or her attribute. The components that may be used to determine an individual's personality include temperament, environment, and character. Temperament is a collection of genetically determined qualities in a child, whilst the environment is the adaptive pattern associated with the child's surroundings. Thus, the desire is to produce strong and confident children, and we try our best to provide a pleasant atmosphere in which they may better comprehend the world. Schizoid and schizotypal personalities have been correlated with withdrawal, as well as social, thinking, and attention problems, probably due to children's severe detachment from interpersonal relationships, their very restricted range of expressions and emotions, along the presence of unconventional beliefs and odd behaviours (Barber & Demo, 2013). When it comes to the child's personality development, the most essential factor is determining professional achievement and general attitude in life. Personality is a collection of features and looks that accurately reflect a person's inner self. It is a collection of characteristics that comprise a person's inner and exterior existence, as well as an organized pattern of behaviour that distinguishes them. Zuckerman considered that human personality could be reduced to two fundamental temperamental dimensions: the tendency of behavioural approach (including sociability, impulsivity, aggressiveness) and the tendency of behavioural avoidance/inhibition (neuroticism, anxiety), these characteristics being visible very early in children, the two fundamental tendencies constituting a pre-existing ground

that can lead to the differentiated development of later adult personality (Frey & Carlock, 2013)

Along with academic development, a distinct and well-rounded personality will help the child stand out from the crowd. Children must develop self-assurance to thrive both personally and academically. Thus, developing personalities ought to begin at a very young age, embrace the complete growth of children, and emphasize acquiring positive interpersonal qualities to foster children who are capable and secure persons. Finally, a character is a set of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural characteristics that define a child's personality. Essentially, parents need to understand the need for personality development for their young children.

### **Family disruption**

Family disruption is a term used to describe the breakdown of family relationships or the loss of stability within a family (Stanick, Crosby & MacDonald, 2017). This can occur for a variety of reasons, including divorce, death, substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health issues. Family disruption can have a profound impact on children and adults, leading to emotional, behavioral, and social problems. Family disruption can take many forms and can have a profound impact on the well-being of children and adults alike (Prevo & Weel, 2014). Some common causes of family disruption include: Parents' divorce, Death of a parent, Parental substance abuse, Mental health issues, and Domestic violence.

These events can lead to a breakdown in family relationships and may result in feelings of insecurity, instability, and emotional distress. In many cases, family disruption can also lead to financial hardship, as parents may struggle to provide for their children after a separation or loss of income. The disruption may also have an effect on personality development in children. It is, therefore, worth discussing the different causes of family disruption. Compared to children who grew up in an intact

home, those who experience family disruption score considerably lower and exhibit less favorable development in terms of self-esteem and behavioral issues (Prevo & Weel, 2014). Detailed patterns are concealed by these relationships. When a parent dies, the impacts of family disturbance on personality development are typically less severe than when a divorce occurs.

Family disruption manifests in various ways, including parental separation, bereavement, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Each of these forms of disruption has significant consequences for children's development. Divorce is one of the most studied aspects of family disruption, with research indicating that children from divorced families often exhibit lower self-esteem, trust issues, and academic struggles. Emotional distress tends to be heightened when parental conflict remains unresolved, affecting children's ability to develop secure relationships. The loss of a parent, while traumatic, has been found to have comparatively less severe effects on personality development, particularly when the child receives adequate support from the surviving parent or extended family members.

### **Effects of parental divorce on children**

The impact of divorce on families can be wide-ranging and profound. When parents separate, children may experience several adverse effects, including emotional distress, behavioural problems, academic difficulties, and social isolation (Carlson, Wimer, and Haskins, 2022). Additionally, divorce can create financial strain for both parents, as the cost of living may increase and income may be reduced. Divorce can also lead to conflict and tension between parents, which can hurt their relationships with their children. In some cases, children may feel caught in the middle of the conflict and may struggle to navigate the complicated dynamics of their new family structure. Immediately after parental divorce, separation, or remarriage, when children cope with the new situation and confusion, they experience emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and behaviour problems such as anger, resentment, and non-compliance. Chavda and Vinyas (2023) Studies in African countries showed that

children of single-parent families scored lower on assessments of psychological well-being than children from dual-parent households and faced depression, suicide, and substance abuse at higher rates.

Studies conducted in Britain indicated that early childhood personality development and family upheavals before the age of sixteen are statistically correlated. The biggest detrimental influence on a child's personality development is parental divorce (Prevo & Weel, 2014). The other effects of divorce on children's personality development can vary depending on their age and the specific circumstances of the divorce. In general, however, the study observed effects such as lower self-esteem and difficulty in trusting others.

#### **Effects of a parent's death on children**

The loss of a parent can have a significant impact on a child's personality development. Children who experience the death of a parent may struggle with a range of emotions, including grief, anger, anxiety, and confusion. This can lead to changes in behaviour, such as increased acting out, difficulty focusing in school, and emotional outbursts. In addition, the loss of a parent can also have long-term effects on a child's attachment style and ability to form relationships. Children who lose a parent may become overly clingy or distant, which can have implications for their ability to form close, trusting relationships later in life. Adversity in childhood also makes a person more likely to become irate, antagonistic, and violent, either physically or verbally. They might also have a propensity for rash actions. These actions may have emerged as a defense mechanism against abuse or loss, or they may have been taught from witnessing them as children (Gillihan, 2022).

#### **Effects of parental substance abuse on children**

Parental substance abuse refers to parents or caregivers who have a history of problematic long-term drug and/or alcohol use. Parental substance abuse can have several negative effects on a child's personality development. Substance-addled parents and caregivers may lead chaotic, erratic lives and find it difficult to identify

and provide for their children's needs. Their children might be in danger as a result of this. According to Fauziah (2022), some of the most common effects on a child's personality development include emotional instability, behavioral problems like aggression and deviance, low self-esteem, and difficulty in trusting others. Children raised in households affected by substance abuse often experience neglect, emotional instability, and behavioural problems. The inconsistency and unpredictability of their home environment contribute to feelings of insecurity and stress. These children may struggle with forming healthy attachments and may exhibit signs of anxiety, depression, or defiance. Similarly, children who witness domestic violence are likely to internalize aggression, develop anxiety, or become socially withdrawn. Exposure to violent environments conditions them to see conflict as a normal aspect of relationships, which can negatively influence their future interactions.

#### **Effects of mental health issues on children**

Children's personality development can be significantly impacted by mental health concerns. Some instances of how mental health problems might affect a child's personality include low self-esteem, where kids who experience mental health problems may have low self-esteem, which can affect their feeling of value and their capacity to build relationships. Anxiety is another mental health problem that may affect a child's personality. Kids with anxiety disorders may experience overwhelming fear and worry, which can make it difficult for them to interact socially and participate in everyday activities (Herzhoff, Kushner & Tackett, 2017).

According to Herzhoff, Kushner, and Tackett (2017), mental health issues can have a significant impact on a child's personality development. Some of the most common effects include anxiety depression, behavioural problems, and social difficulties: Children may struggle with social skills and may have trouble making friends or interacting with others. Should a parent experience depression or any other mental or emotional illness, the child's upbringing will be distinct from that of her peers. All family members are impacted by a parent's depression, which taints their interactions with one another and with those outside the home. Families with depressed parents

may communicate in a less upbeat emotional manner. When it comes to attending to their children's emotional needs, they are not as prompt or suitable. Additionally, rather than talking and negotiating problems with their children, they are more likely to be authoritarian and forceful.

The emotional and psychological impact of family disruption extends beyond immediate responses to long-term personality development. Studies indicate that children who experience instability at home tend to struggle with self-regulation, exhibit riskier behaviours in adolescence, and have difficulty establishing stable relationships in adulthood. Their cognitive development can also be affected, as instability often leads to decreased academic performance and concentration issues. Many children from disrupted families face difficulties in developing trust and forming secure emotional connections, which can impact their future relationships and mental health.

#### **Effects of domestic violence on children**

Youngsters who see parental abuse may also be more likely to use violence in their relationships later on. Knowing how to protect your child can be challenging if you are an abusive parent (Edwards, 2019). Domestic violence can have a profound effect on the personality development of both children and adults. Children who witness domestic violence may develop emotional, behavioural, and psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression, aggression and emotional detachment. According to studies, youngsters who see parental abuse may also be more likely to use violence in their relationships later on. Knowing how to protect your child can be challenging if you are an abusive parent an abusive parent.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and discussions in the paper, it is recommended as follows:

1. That stakeholders should adopt a multifaceted approach to mitigate the effects of family disruptions on personality development for young children.
2. It is critical for early intervention programmes to be established in school and community settings to provide timely emotional support and early psychological intervention.
3. Parents and caregivers should be supported with sensitization and education to equip them with effective strategies for dealing with family conflict as this will enable them to foster a nurturing and caring environment.
4. Further research should be conducted to explore the factors that can help to build resilience in affected children.

### **Conclusion**

Family disruptions negatively affect children's personality development, with impacts varying based on the nature of the disruption. Divorce tends to have the most severe effects, while strong parental and community support can mitigate some negative consequences. The study highlights that stability, open communication, and emotional security are crucial in helping children cope with family instability. Government policies and community support systems should work collaboratively to provide adequate resources and interventions to protect children's well-being. Understanding the long-term impact of family disruption on personality development is vital in implementing strategies that promote resilience and positive developmental outcomes.

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