

Separating a Child from their Parent: The Effect on the Child's Mental Health

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### Abstract

This paper explores the different types of separation that can occur in childhood and the implications of each on mental health. Two types of separation are discussed, which are separation with contact and separation without contact/abandonment. Separation with contact is when a child is separated from a parent but still has some contact, such as in the case of divorce of the parents. Separation without contact/abandonment is when a child is separated from a parent and never has anymore contact with them, such as in the death of a parent. The effects that each has on mental health are discussed, and the findings show that no matter what type of separation is being looked at, there will be negative effects on mental health both as a child and an adult. Overall, the paper shows that separation without contact/abandonment will have more negative effects on mental health.

### Separating a Child from their Parent: The Effect on the Child's Future Mental Health

Childhood in itself can often be a confusing experience for many individuals, and many people experience traumatic events during childhood that have lasting emotional effects. The changes that happen during childhood, both physical and emotional, can be enough to affect most children experiencing these changes. Sadly, many individuals have negative traumatic experiences during their childhood, other than the normal troubles of childhood itself, which can change them for the rest of their lives. Negative traumatic events affect children differently than adults since they are much more vulnerable due to the lack of development, so the effects of negative traumas are usually worse and longer lasting when they happen to children (Chernus, 2008).

The changes that happen to children that experience trauma are often quite negative (Hovens et al., 2009). One type of trauma that occurs during childhood is the separation of the child from their parent or guardian. In this paper I will be comparing the effects of different types of separation on the mental health of the child experiencing the trauma both in their childhood and in their future. I will first briefly discuss separation as a whole and then break it down into its two smaller components. After discussing the types of separation, I will look at the effects that they can have on the mental health of the child. I will explore which type of separation has more negative effects on mental health. Finally, I will look at the possible implications of the separation by discussing the effects on the future mental health of children that have experienced a traumatic separation event.

## **Separation**

Separation means, in this context, a child not living with or being in contact with their parent or guardian for whatever reason. Since there could be many different reasons for the separation happening, and each case is a little different, it makes defining separation difficult. The simplest solution is to break separation down into its two broad subtypes, which are separation with contact and separation without contact, which also includes abandonment. Using these two subtypes, the children that have been separated can be clearly defined as either being in one group or the other.

**Separation With Contact.** Separation with contact is when a child is separated from their parent or guardian, but still has contact with them. The contact does not have to be frequent or for a long time, as long as the child sees the parent at some point and has some type of relationship with them (Trinder, Kellet & Swift, 2008). This type of separation can happen in the case of a divorce between parents where the child still gets to see both parents. For example, in the case of shared custody, both parents usually get to spend about the same amount of time with the child, but the child is not usually with both parents at the same time. A different scenario of separation with contact could be a child living with guardians other than their biological parents due to any number of reasons. One reason, for example, could be that the parents are not financially stable enough to properly raise their child, so the child may go live with another family member, like an aunt or uncle, that is more capable of providing for the child. This could also happen in cases such as a child being put into foster care, where they are physically separated from the parent but often get to speak with the parent and occasionally visit with them. According to Lucas, Nicholson & Erbas (2013), many children are living with divorced or separated parents. For example, they found that 1 million children, or 22% of Australian children

are living with a non-resident parent, which is nearly a quarter of the children in Australia. This is a staggering figure, and the numbers are very similar in many places in the Western world.

**Separation Without Contact / Abandonment.** This type of separation differs from the first because once separated, the child will have no further contact with the parent. This could happen in the case of adoption, death of a parent, abandonment, or other circumstances under which a child cannot have contact with the parent. Approximately 5% of children in the United States will experience the death of a parent by the age of 15, which is less frequent than the instances of separation with contact, but still relevant (Mireault & Bond, 1992). Separation without contact or abandonment does not occur nearly as much as separation with contact, but the effects seem to be more devastating. This could be due to the lack of explanation that many children have or the feelings of loss and self blame from the death or abandonment of the parent.

### **Effects of Separation in Childhood**

Regardless of the reason for the separation of a child from their parent, there are always going to be some kind of adverse effects. There will be effects on the child's mental health at the time of the separation that will shape them for the rest of their lives. Chernus (2008) discusses how children are often more affected by separation than other traumatic events because the child often feels betrayed and isolated when trying to deal with the event of separation/ abandonment. This is understandable since parents are usually a child's main source of support, so when that support system is taken away children will often turn their feelings inward and they manifest psychologically. Heim and Nemeroff (1999) discuss how there is a strong relationship between childhood traumas and the development of mental health issues. The effects of the different types of separation will affect the mental health of the child differently, one being less severe and the other more.

**Effects of Separation With Contact on Mental Health of the Child.** Since this is a fairly common type of separation, the effects that it has on mental health are fairly well documented. Studies have shown that children that have been separated from parents but still have contact are at an increased risk for overall poor mental health (Lucas, Nicholson & Erbas, 2003). Liu, Li & Ge (2009) reported that these children are at an increased risk for anxiety and depression. Many children also develop behaviours that are viewed as inappropriate and also develop dysfunctional cognitive mechanisms (Valtolina & Colombo, 2012). These effects are detrimental to the mental health of the child, and are unhealthy in the sense that a normally developing child that does not experience a trauma most likely would not have to deal with these issues. These researchers came to these conclusions by surveying and interviewing children and analyzing the information that they gathered to find this information.

**Effects of Separation Without Contact / Abandonment on Mental Health of the Child.** The effects of this type of separation on a child's mental health seem to be more plentiful and more negative. Cardona, Manes, Escobar, & Ibanez (2012) found that children that have experienced this type of trauma scored lower than normal on levels of visual memory and attention, inhibitory control and visually mediated learning. They also found that these children scored lower on all subtests of attention, memory and executive functions. These are all functions that are important to the normal development of a child, so deficits in these would definitely impact the future of the child. Landerholm (2001) discusses how children that experience abandonment often do not share their feelings with others, therefore they often experience social isolation. The children often have trust issues and do not believe that their positive gestures will be returned.

Children that experience separation often have very strong emotions, such as fear, helplessness, dysphoria and rage, all of which are not emotions that are commonly seen in a normally developing child (Malone, Westen & Levendoksy, 2011). Depression is a very common mental health problem that is found in children that have experienced the death of a parent. Schoenfelder, Sandler, Wolchik & MacKinnon (2011) found that the risk of depression is three times higher in children that have had a parent die, and these children commonly develop the fear of abandonment or not being cared for. It has also been shown that children that have experienced parental death are more likely to develop internalizing or externalizing problems, with 21% of those children being confirmed as having these problems (Wolchik, Tein, Sandler & Ayers, 2006). For example, a child with an internalizing problem will keep all of their problems to themselves and bottle them up, which can cause a lot of problems in the child's life.

All of the problems that have been discussed, for both types of separation, will very likely carry on into or impact the future mental health of the child. These types of mental health issues are not easily eradicated, so they will very likely greatly affect the mental health of the child as they develop into an adult.

### **Future Effects of Separation on Mental Health**

Takeuchi et al. (2003) found that separation or loss of a parent as a child was a factor that predicted adult psychopathology, which included depression. There have been many studies showing that depression is a common mental health problem shown by adults that experienced a traumatic separation as a child, and there have been specific personality traits that have been shown to appear in these adults (Malone, Westen & Levendosky, 2011). These personality traits included the tendency to be emotionally unstable, internalizing/avoidant, hostile/paranoid, and psychopathic. Many of these are fairly straightforward, all except for being psychopathic. They

further clarified this trait as the tendency for the adults to be criminals, have very little empathy for others, and to be manipulative and impulsive.

Schoenfelder et al. (2011) found that the mental health issues that stem from a childhood that was affected by separation often leads the adult down a path that causes them to have trouble developing friendships and romantic relationships. This is particularly problematic because the development of these relationships is essential to leading a fairly normal life. Children that experienced the death of a parent often grow up to believe that either themselves or loved ones are more susceptible to death, therefore resulting in fear of themselves or significant others dying (Mireault & Bond, 1992). This and other types of anxiety are very common in adults that dealt with separation as a child, possibly because of the feelings of loss and the lack of understanding the situation that they experienced. Mireault & Bond (1992) also found that children who lost a parent surprisingly often receive very little familial support after the bereavement. This support could include emotional or financial support. This could be a part of the reason that adults that lose a parent as a child are at such a high risk for developing mental health problems.

### **Conclusion**

After discussing the different types of separation and looking at the effects on both the mental health of the child in the present and in adulthood, it is clear that separation is extremely detrimental to one's mental health. Separation of children from parents is becoming a huge problem with the huge number of divorces happening and the casualties of war all over the world. This differs from the past numbers since divorce is so prevalent in the world, when in the past it was almost unheard of. So many children are being separated from their families, many of which will never see their parents again. Overall, separation without contact / abandonment clearly has more adverse effects and is more likely to predict more severe deficits in mental

health both in childhood and adulthood. Luckily, the number of children that experience this type of separation is fairly small, so less children will have to suffer all of the consequences that this type of separation brings with it.

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