
Systematic Literature Review: The Impact of Divorce on Children's Mental Health

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Abstrak

The increase in divorce cases has raised concerns about the psychological well-being of affected children, with the risk of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders. The purpose of this writing is to find out the impact of divorce on children's mental health. The method used is a systematic literature review using databases from PubMed and ScienceDirect. The search was carried out using the keywords children, divorce, marital dissolution, mental health. Article screening used the PRISMA method and 8 articles were found that were in accordance with the research topic. The results showed that divorce increased the risk of mental problems such as anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, and decreased academic performance. In addition, children from divorced families face a higher risk of mental disorders. High parental conflict exacerbates negative effects, while good social and emotional support can reduce those adverse effects. This study highlights the importance of paying special attention to the mental well-being of children post-divorce to prevent adverse long-term effects. It is hoped that the results of this study can deepen the understanding of the impact of divorce and help develop support strategies for children who have experienced parental divorce, in order to reduce the risk of long-term mental health disorders.



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INTRODUCTION

Parental support for children in the process of adaptation to the physical and social environment has a significant impact on the social development and personality of children (Meng *et al.*, 2023). One of the most important factors that determine a child's development is the family. In the family, parents provide a safe place for psychosocial development, where children learn behaviors as well as moral and ethical principles (Tahirović & Demir, 2018). In addition, children's mental health is also one of the important aspects of their development, which has a significant effect on life in adulthood (Mulraney *et al.*, 2021; Otto *et al.*, 2021). Around the world, children's mental health is getting more and more special attention, given the high incidence of mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders in children (Larsen *et al.*, 2019). One of the factors that is considered to have a big impact on children's mental health is family conditions, especially parental divorce (Caksen, 2021).

Divorce has become a growing social phenomenon, especially in countries with high urbanization. This can have a complex psychological impact on the children involved. In Indonesia, the divorce rate continues to increase every year. Based on BPS (Central Statistics Agency) data, the number of divorces in the last 3 years has actually increased. In 2021 there were 447,743 divorce cases. It increased in 2022 to

448,126, a decrease in 2023 but higher than in 2021 which was 408,347 cases. Divorce is often a traumatic experience for children, especially during the child's development (Williams-Owens, 2017). Children face deep emotional disruption, including a sense of loss, confusion, and insecurity. In more severe cases, divorce can create a tendency to blame oneself or parents, thus exacerbating emotional disorders such as depression or anxiety (Hashemi & Homayuni, 2017). Study conducted by Lange *et al.* (2022) showed that children from divorces with high conflict may experience post-traumatic stress symptoms. Additionally, children from divorced families are more prone to experiencing social isolation, which ultimately results in feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, and lower self-esteem (Odis, 2021).

On the other hand, Divorce can also trigger external problems such as juvenile delinquency and substance abuse (Arifansyah *et al.*, 2023). Research shows that parental divorce is associated with an increased risk of adjustment problems for children and adolescents, including academic difficulties such as low grades and school dropouts, as well as behavioral and substance use problems (Lee & McLanahan, 2015). This is due to a lack of emotional support and drastic changes in family structure, which create psychological instability in the child (Behere *et al.*, 2017). Children who grow up in divorced families tend to face long-term impacts on their mental health. Longitudinal studies reveal that individuals from divorced families have a greater risk of developing chronic depression, anxiety disorders, and problems in building long-term relationships in adulthood (Chen *et al.*, 2023). Factors such as unresolved conflicts or a lack of emotional support post-divorce are the main drivers (Tullius *et al.*, 2022). A study found that the lack of stable parental figures and consistent emotional support makes it difficult for individuals from divorced families to manage stress (Lu *et al.*, 2021).

Divorce creates emotional distance between the child and the parent who does not live with the child full-time, especially if the divorce is preceded by conflict, tension, or domestic violence (Kganyago Mphaphuli, 2023). When parent divorce, children become vulnerable to the development of a wide variety of social, behavioral, and emotional problems (van der Wal *et al.*, 2024). When divorce occurs, children who are in the middle of parental divorce conflicts can feel insecure, confused, and guilty. Divorced parents create loyalty conflicts in their children and unbearable stress (Stokkebekk *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, divorce often leads to significant changes in family structure and dynamics, which can have a direct impact on the psychological well-being of children (Apata *et al.*, 2023). Children whose parents are divorced tend to have a higher risk of developing mental health disorders compared to children who come from intact families (Pittelli, 2019).

The effects of divorce on a child's mental health can vary, from anxiety and depression to declining academic performance and behavioral problems (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Tran *et al.*, 2023). Children from divorced or separated families are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, live in poverty, and experience instability in their own families (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). However, the results of research related to the impact of divorce on children's mental health are still mixed. Not all children experience significant negative impacts, and some are able to adapt well in post-divorce situations (High *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, a systematic literature review is needed to develop a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the impact of divorce on children's mental health.

The lack of longitudinal research that explores the long-term effects of divorce on children's mental development makes our understanding of the impact of divorce not optimal. This study is expected to provide a clearer picture of the type and extent of the impact of divorce on children's mental health and the factors that affect their vulnerability or resilience. With this literature review, it is hoped that more in-depth insights can be obtained to support the psychological well-being of children after parental divorce. In addition, the results of this study can be a reference to increase awareness about the importance of mental support for children affected by divorce.

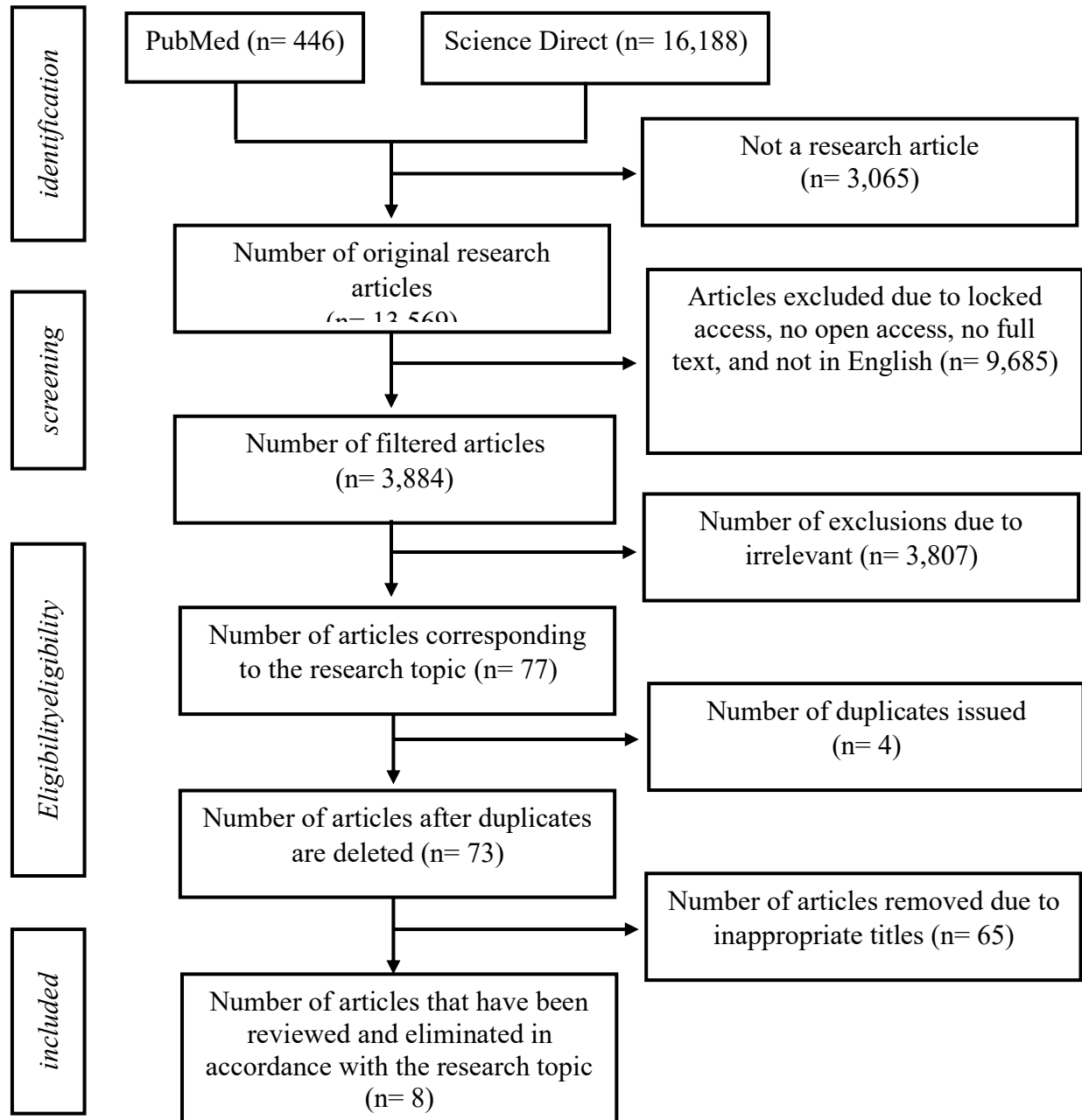
RESEARCH METHODS

Data Search

This research method uses a systematic *literature review* to explore and analyze the impact of divorce on children's mental health. *This literature review* aims to bring together the results of research that have been published in international journals accessed from the PubMed and ScienceDirect databases. The search uses the keywords "*divorce*" and "*mental health*" and "*marital dissolution*" and "*children*" with inclusion criteria, namely articles published in the last 10 years with the range of 2014-2024, using English, using only research articles, having open access and *full text* and articles about the impact of divorce on children's mental health. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria in this study are articles that discuss the impact of divorce other than on children. The *screening process* is carried out using the PRISMA method.

Data Extraction and Findings Reporting

Data extraction related to important information such as research methods, samples, findings, and conclusions from each article will be extracted and recorded in a table. The number of articles found through the PubMed database is 446 articles and 16,188 articles were found from ScienceDirect, bringing the total to 16,634 articles. After being filtered by issuing articles that are not original research as many as 3,065 articles. Then, after re-screening, 13,569 articles were obtained which were original research and 9,685 of them met the inclusion criteria. Furthermore, from the 3,884 articles, 3,807 irrelevant articles and 77 articles were obtained in accordance with the research topic. Then a screening was carried out to find 4 duplicate articles. Of the 73 articles, the quality of the study was assessed and then 8 articles were obtained that could be categorized according to the research topic and data extraction could be carried out. This data extraction was carried out by analyzing data based on the author's name, title, objectives, type of research, data collection method, population and sample, and research results (Table 1).



Picture 1. PRISMA diagram: Systematic stages of literature review

RESULT

Based on the analysis of the 8 articles that have been determined, it shows that there is a significant impact of divorce on children's mental health.

Table I. Article Extraction Results

| No | Title/Author/ Year | Research Objectives | Type of Research | Data Collection Methods | Population and Number of Samples | Result |
|----|--|---|-----------------------|---|---|--|
| 1. | "Association between parental divorce and mental health outcomes among Lebanese adolescents: results of a national study" Sahar Obeid, Gloria Al Karaki, Chadia Haddad, Hala Sacre, Michel Soufia, Rabih Hallit, Pascale Salameh, Souheil Halli /2021 | The study aims to explore the relationship between parental divorce and its impact on the mental health of adolescents in Lebanon, with a particular focus on depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. | Cross Sectional Study | Data were collected through questionnaires using the <i>Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS)</i> , <i>Adolescent Depression Rating Scale (ADRS)</i> , and <i>Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS)</i> to measure social anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. | The population of the study was Lebanese adolescents aged 14 to 17 years. Of the 2000 students contacted, 1810 students (90.5%) were willing to participate. The sample was randomly selected involving 16 private schools. | This study shows that adolescents with divorced parents experience higher levels of social anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation compared to adolescents whose parents are still together. Teens with divorced parents showed more social fear, avoidance, and had significant suicidal ideation. |
| 2. | "Associations of parental divorce with student mental health and academic outcomes: A quantitative study in rural China" Xiaodong Pang, Cindy Feng, Haiping Xue, Scott | This study aims to understand the relationship between parental divorce and the mental health and academic performance of students in rural China. | Cross Sectional Study | Data was collected using questionnaires filled out by 17,955 students in 122 junior high schools. For mental health, the <i>Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)</i> is used which covers emotional, behavioral, hyperactivity, and | The population of the study was junior high school students in rural Ningxia, with a final sample of 17,955 students | The results showed that students with divorced parents had a higher risk of internalizing (such as anxiety) and externalizing (such as aggressive behavior) problems on the <i>SDQ</i> scale, as well as lower math scores compared to students whose parents were not divorced. |

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| 3. | <p>Rozelle, Huan Wang /2024</p> <p>"Developmental Cascade Models of a Parenting-focused Program for Divorced Families on Mental Health Problems and Substance Use in Emerging Adulthood"</p> <p>Sharlene A Wolchik, Jenn-Yun Tein, Irwin N Sandler, Han-Joe Kim /2016</p> | <p>This study aims to understand the effects of intervention programs on mental health problems and substance use among adolescents to young adults who come from divorced families.</p> | <p>Randomized controlled trial with experimental group and control group.</p> | <p>social relationship problems.</p> <p>Data was collected through a series of interviews and questionnaires.</p> | <p>The study involved 240 children from divorced families, who were between the ages of 9 and 12.</p> | <p>The program showed significant results in reducing internalization (such as anxiety and depression) and externalization (such as aggressive behavior) problems in early adulthood, as well as reducing the incidence of binge drinking among young men.</p> |
| 4. | <p>"Family dissolution and children's social well-being at school: a historic cohort study"</p> <p>Line Lund Laursen, Kathrine Bang Madsen, Carsten Obel, Lena Hohwü/2019</p> | <p>The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between family dissolution and children's social well-being at school, as well as to explore how the relationship varies based on the age of the child.</p> | <p>Historical cohort studies</p> | <p>The data collection method was carried out using questionnaires filled out by children electronically during school hours, where they answered questions related to their social welfare.</p> | <p>The population in this study is children and adolescents aged 9-16 years who attend public schools in Denmark. The number of samples used in this study is 219,226 children with complete data.</p> | <p>The results showed that children from disbanded families had a higher likelihood of experiencing low social well-being at school compared to children from intact families, especially for those who experienced family dissolution at preschool age.</p> |
| 5. | <p>"Grandparental and overall social support as resilience</p> | <p>The purpose of this study was to test the</p> | <p>Cross Sectional Study</p> | <p>Using an online self-report survey given in 2015-2016.</p> | <p>The population in this study is divorced families in Israel. A sample of</p> | <p>This study found that parental conflict is negatively related to the evaluation of children's quality of life,</p> |

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|----|--|--|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| | factors in coping with parental conflict among children of divorce" | resilience factors associated with support from outside the nuclear family in terms of their ability to help children from divorce overcome parental conflict. | | | 122 children from 86 heterosexual families | where children's involvement in the conflict tends to decrease various aspects of their quality of life. In contrast, overall social support, especially from grandparents, is positively associated with the evaluation of a child's quality of life. The findings also support three models in which perceived social support, both in general and from grandparents, can moderate the impact of parental conflict on children's quality of life. |
| | Yoa Sorek /2020 | | | | | |
| 6. | "Impact of parental divorce versus separation due to migration on mental health and self-injury of Chinese children: a cross sectional survey" | The purpose of this study is to investigate how parental divorce and parental migration impact children's mental health and self-harming behaviors and thoughts. | Cross Sectional Study | Data was collected using questionnaires related to aspects of children's mental health, self-harm thoughts and behaviors (SITB), the quality of communication between parents and adolescents, and psychological resilience. | The population of this study is students in grades 5-8 from 18 schools in 2 districts in Anhui Province. The number of samples was 3,983 children | Children from divorced families showed higher levels of internalization and externalization problems, lower prosocial behaviors, and increased suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviors. |
| | Feng Wang, Jingjing Lu, Leesa Lin, Jingjing Cai, Jiayao Xu, Xudong Zhou/2021 | | | | | |
| 7. | "Parental divorce is associated with an increased risk to develop mental disorders in women" | This study aims to identify the most common traumatic experiences experienced by children with | Cross Sectional Study | The data collection method uses interviews using <i>Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I and II Disorders</i> | The population in this study is young women with an average age of 23 years. The sample was 121 women. | The results of this study showed that young adults with divorced parents had a higher risk for Axis I disorder but not for Axis II disorder than young adults with non-divorced parents. |

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| | Violetta K Schaan, André Schulz, Hartmut Schächinger, Claus Vögele/2019 | divorced parents. | | | | |
| 8. | "Preventing Mental Health Problems in Children After High Conflict Parental Separation/Divorce Study: An Optimization Randomized Controlled Trial Protocol" | The study aimed to identify components to include in digital coping intervention s to reduce mental health problems among children who are exposed to high levels of parental conflict after divorce. | Experime ntal research with a 2x2x2 factorial design (randomi zed controlle d trial) | Data was collected using various measurement instruments, namely the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC), Caught in the Middle (CIM), Responses to Stress Questionnaire (RSQ-PIC), Security in the Interparental Subsystem Scale (SIS-SF), Coping Efficacy Scale (CES), and Brief Problem Monitor (BPM). | The population in this study is children aged 9-12 years whose parents are divorced. A sample of 144 children will be divided into 8 experimental groups. | An effective intervention component to reduce mental health problems in children experiencing post-divorce parental conflict. |
| | Karey L O'Hara, Sharlene A Wolchik, Irwin N Sandler, Stephen G West, Harry T Reis, Linda M Collins, Aaron R Lyon, E Mark Cummings /2023 | | | | | |

DISCUSSION

Parental divorce has a significant impact on a child's mental health (Obeid *et al.*, 2021). Divorce is considered a form of bad childhood experiences that are a major risk factor that can affect the development of mental health disorders (Money *et al.*, 2021). This study highlights several questions related to the impact of divorce on children's mental health.

RQ1: What are the psychological impacts experienced by children after their parents' divorce?

Parental divorce often has a significant psychological impact on children. This is due to the various psychological impacts that children most commonly experience, such as behavioral problems, social fears, social avoidance, depression, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, and stress (O'Hara *et al.*, 2023; Obeid *et al.*,

2021). Such anxiety is described as a chaotic state of mind that is often accompanied by nervous behaviors, such as rumination and somatic manifestations (Andrioni *et al.*, 2022). In addition, as a traumatic childhood experience, divorce can also be classified as *Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)*, where this trauma contributes to an increased risk of long-term mental health disorders for children (Enami *et al.*, 2024). Divorce can also trigger disturbances in children's psychological development, such as decreased social adaptability and prolonged internal conflicts (Sorek, 2020).

Many children experience depression characterized by prolonged feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities they enjoy, and a tendency to withdraw from social environments (Anderson, 2014; Anonymous *et al.*, 2024). Anger and frustration are also reactions that often arise, if the child feels that the divorce is detrimental to him, especially if the parental conflict is felt to be very intense. In this situation, it is not uncommon for children to have difficulty building trust in their parents and other people around them, which can affect their interpersonal relationships in the future (Xu, 2022). This psychological impact also often has an impact on children's academic achievement, because they have difficulty focusing and lose motivation to learn due to emotional pressure felt (Arkes, 2015). In addition, cognitive impairments, such as decreased thinking and concentration skills, often appear in children who are caught in prolonged conflict. This not only hinders their academic achievement but also exacerbates feelings of isolation in the school environment (Pang *et al.*, 2024; Sorek, 2020).

The stress that arises from divorce is often exacerbated by a variety of additional factors, such as a change in residence, a decrease in financial support, and changes in family social dynamics. Studies show that children from divorced families are more likely to experience declining academic performance and face a higher risk of behavioral problems. These academic and behavioral difficulties are often related to unresolved emotional issues, especially when the child has to adapt to family changes that occur too quickly (Schaana *et al.*, 2019). In the long term, children who go through divorce are at greater risk of developing mental health problems in adulthood, such as depression and chronic anxiety. They also showed difficulty in building stable emotional relationships, due to the experience of the divorce (Wolchik *et al.*, 2016). Research has revealed that parental divorce is associated with a higher prevalence of clinical-level mental health problems during adolescence and early adulthood, with an estimate that 36% of the population is at risk of developing mental health problems in young adulthood (Wolchik *et al.*, 2016).

Divorce also affects the direct impact on the mental health and physical well-being of children (Pellón-Elexpuru *et al.*, 2024). Prolonged parental conflict has been shown to trigger physical problems, such as hypertension, somatic complaints, and sleep disturbances (Eilers *et al.*, 2023; Miralles *et al.*, 2023). This condition is often exacerbated by high levels of emotional stress due to family instability. In addition, divorce often triggers risky behaviors in children, such as juvenile delinquency or substance abuse, which are often forms of escape from stress (Mwangangi, 2019; Saladino *et al.*, 2021). These impacts are not only emotional but also physical, for example sleep and eating pattern disorders, which can affect overall physical health. A drastically changed family environment can also reduce children's sense of security and stability (Wu, 2024), which is an important foundation for their mental health (Open *et al.*, 2022).

RQ2: Are children who have experienced parental divorce more vulnerable to mental health problems compared to children from whole families?

Divorce not only changes the structure of the family, but it also causes great emotional stress for children. Especially for those who are highly dependent on the presence and stability of their parents, this pressure can have a significant impact. In addition, conflicts involving children, such as attempts to influence the child's view of one of the parties, also increase the likelihood of psychological disorders in children. Children who feel involved in parental conflict often face difficulties in building healthy social relationships. As a result, they tend to feel isolated and have lower social well-being compared to children from intact families (Laursen *et al.*, 2019; Sorek, 2020).

Children from divorced families have a higher susceptibility to mental health problems in adulthood. For example, they have a greater risk of developing ongoing mental disorders, including depression and anxiety in adulthood (Wolchik *et al.*, 2016). In addition, children of divorced parents tend to show more psychological symptoms compared to children from non-divorced families. These symptoms include a greater risk of depression and anxiety, lower self-esteem, increased avoidance problems, as well as external behavioral problems (Sorek, 2020). Scientific evidence consistently reveals that children from divorced families have a higher risk of developing mental health problems in adulthood. Empirical studies show that of the 60 adults with divorced parents, 26 of them meet the criteria for mental disorders. This indicates that they tend to face an increased risk of mood disorders, anxiety, and depression. In addition, they also have a tendency *attachment insecure* which is more complex compared to children from whole families (Schaana *et al.*, 2019). In fact, risk comparisons show that 65-75% of children from divorced families have the potential to face mental problems, compared to 25-35% of children from intact families (O'Hara *et al.*, 2023).

Research conducted by Schaan *et al.* (2019) revealed that individuals from divorced families compared to non-divorced families reported more depression, loneliness, childhood trauma, attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, chronic stress, as well as a lack of parental attention. In addition, the effect of divorce on children's mental health is not only limited to that generation, but can also have an impact on the next generation. Children of divorced parents tend to carry the burden of their childhood experiences into their relationships as adults, job stability, and their mental health outcomes (Apatha *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, socio-economic factors also affect the impact of divorce on children. For example, the mother's level of education and financial stability also affect the ability of children to adapt to divorce. For example, mothers who have a higher level of education tend to be better able to provide a stable environment for their children, thus helping to reduce the negative impact of divorce on children's mental well-being (Anderson, 2014; Enami *et al.*, 2024).

Overall, the impact of parental divorce on children's mental health is complex and widespread. These impacts involve a variety of factors, from conflicts between parents to changes in social and economic stability. Therefore, these long-term effects highlight the importance of giving extra attention to children whose parents are divorced.

CONCLUSION

Parental divorce has a significant influence on a child's mental health. The most common impacts are anxiety, depression, and emotional instability, which have the potential to increase the risk of mental

disorders in adulthood. Children who have experienced parental divorce show a higher risk for behavioral, social, and academic problems. Prolonged family conflicts often exacerbate negative impacts, especially if children are directly involved in the conflict. Therefore, further longitudinal research is needed to understand the long-term effects of divorce on children's mental and social development. Targeted interventions are expected to help children get through difficult times as a result of a divorce and prevent adverse effects in the future.

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