

***“ A CHILD’S RELATIONSHIP WITH  
THEIR PARENTS IS NEGATIVELY  
AFFECTED BY DIVORCE” .***

**<INSERT PICTURE/IMAGE>**

**Author name: A. Student (adapted from original)**

**Date: Monday, December 15, 2008**

# Abstract

Adolescence is seen to be a transitional period of development between youth and maturity, between being a child and being an adult (Knight, A. p.11). A child's wellbeing is influenced by many aspects of their lives including the relationships they hold and what is happening around them. Children often look up to their parents for guidance and support, with parents being the primary role models of appropriate behaviours and attitudes. A child closely examines their parent's behaviours to determine how they should behave and react in certain situations.

In today's society the probability that a marriage, particularly where children are involved, will end in divorce has increased over time with one-parent families increasing from 649,000 in 1996 to 800,000 in 2006, an increase of 23% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Potentially traumatic occurrences in a child's life, such as the separation or divorce of their parents, can trigger a change in behavioural patterns and influence the relationships a child has with their parents. It is common that a child only becomes familiar with the conflict when one parent leaves the household resulting in separation or divorce. For some children this could have a negative effect on the relationship they have with one or both of their parents. There is evidence to suggest that children are particularly likely to thrive if they live with both biological parents who care deeply for them as well as for each other (see Amato, 2005; Ambert, 1997).

The purpose of this Independent Research Project was to prove or disprove the hypothesis: **"A child's relationship with their parents is negatively affected by divorce"**.

Two different questionnaires; one for adolescent participants and one for parent participants were used to collect and record relevant data. A review of literature was also conducted using secondary sources in order to collect existing data on this hypothesis. However, only minor trends and responses could be gathered from the research due to limitations of secondary sources.

Through primary research it was found that the common emotions felt by an adolescent at the time of and after the separation/divorce of their parents included sadness, confusion and worthlessness. Secondary sources (Healey 2008 & Healey 2003) supported this with a range of changes that are or may be noticed in adolescents/child's behaviour after the divorce of their parents.

With limited secondary sources relating to the actual hypothesis and a collation of responses from both adolescent and parent participants, the hypothesis was neither proven nor disproved. Relative information in terms of feelings, reactions and the needs of adolescents after experiencing their parents' divorce was therefore used to provide an overall summary of the impact of divorce on children.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to extend many thanks to all those that shared the highs and lows of my IRP and acknowledge their assistance. In particular:

- My teachers – who offered continued support and guidance throughout the whole research process.
- The Adolescent and Parent participants that gave their time, patience and generosity to disclose their personal experiences and thoughts on the topic of divorce and separation.
- The librarian - who assisted me in locating a number of secondary sources on separation and divorce, marriage and relationships.
- My mother – who provided me with encouragement, support, advice and assistance along the way.
- My friends - for their moral support and guidance while they were all experiencing the same difficulties and emotions.
- The Family Relationship Centre - for providing information pamphlets, CD ROMs, story books, work booklets and brochures on family separation and divorce, children and relationships, parental relationships.

# Introduction

The research topic chosen relates to the trends of divorce within Australian families and the affect it has on adolescent children. From this topic, the following hypothesis was formulated:

*“A child’s relationship with their parents is negatively affected by divorce”.*

This topic is of particular interest as it is a common statistic in today’s society. The probability that a marriage will end in divorce has been increasing over time, with a large increase seen in nation-wide statistics for divorce and separation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). It is believed this topic is also of importance because the community needs to gain a wider understanding on how divorce can impact on the relationships shared by adolescents and their parents whether it is positive or negative.

This research topic relates to the following Community and Family Studies content areas and relevant syllabus focus areas:

Content area	Learn about:	Learn to:
Individuals	Individual wellbeing	Discuss dilemmas that may arise when attempting to achieve individual and group wellbeing
Families	Change in families	Research the impacts (both positive and negative) of a major change
	Sources of conflict between parents and children	Analyse the rights and responsibilities of parents and children to determine areas where tension or conflict might occur
Communities	Youth - Specific needs - Issues of concern	NIL

Parents play a vital role in optimizing individual and family wellbeing and it is important that they promote positive relationships between family members. Positive relationships among individuals and families, enhances an individual’s sense of belonging and, contributes to an environment where wellbeing is promoted. An essential skill in maintaining positive relationships between parents and their children is the management of conflict.

Conflict such as divorce can cause a change in families which can impact on family relationships in both positive and negative ways. When circumstances change parents are faced with many issues one of which is to maintain positive relationships with their children.

A major issue of concern for youth today is the impact of divorce on the relationships they have with their parents. Youth as a group have specific needs and during times of change may require greater attention and support.

It is expected that data collected from this research will be able to demonstrate that divorce does in fact have a negative impact on the relationships between parents and their children.

# Methodologies

Surveys and a literature review were used as the methodologies for this research.

## Surveys (written questionnaires)

In order to collect information for this research topic, two primary sources of data, youth and parents were surveyed using two separate questionnaires (appendix 1 and 2). Prior to selecting the research methodology, it was considered that the topic of divorce could raise some ethical issues due to its sensitivity. As such, questionnaires were the chosen research methodology because they could allow for participants to remain anonymous and allow participants to feel more confident to share their personal experiences. It was also expected that questionnaires would be able to obtain a large amount of quantitative data that could be easily collated and presented in graphs and tables as well as qualitative data that could be used to support the key findings from both primary and secondary research. Participants were selected using both stratified and convenience sampling methods. Stratified sampling was used to break the population into groups based on the characteristic of divorce. Both youth and parents who had experienced divorce were selected as the sample groups. A convenience sample was then obtained by randomly selecting those people who were easy to access from the stratified sample groups. Questionnaires were then distributed to a total of 40 people in order to collect primary data for this research, of which 34 responses were received.

The youth questionnaire included both open and closed questions which focused on;

- their feelings as a result of the divorce
- the nature of their relationship with their parents before and after the divorce
- any behavioural changes they had noticed in themselves after the divorce.

The parent questionnaire also involved a variety of both open and closed questions of which focused on;

- the impact the divorce had on their children
- the behaviours of their children during and after the divorce
- what they had found most difficult to deal with whilst adjusting to the change

## Literature review

In order to collect information for this research topic a variety of secondary sources of data were reviewed. It was expected that this research methodology would provide a large amount of both qualitative and quantitative data on the research topic. Prior to conducting primary research it was evident that there was a lot of existing information on the topic of divorce and as such it was anticipated that a literature review would provide a sufficient amount of secondary data to support primary research and assist in proving or disproving the hypothesis. Secondary sources of data included;

- Electronic sources – Australian Bureau of Statistics website
- Print sources – books and journal articles
- Libraries – computers

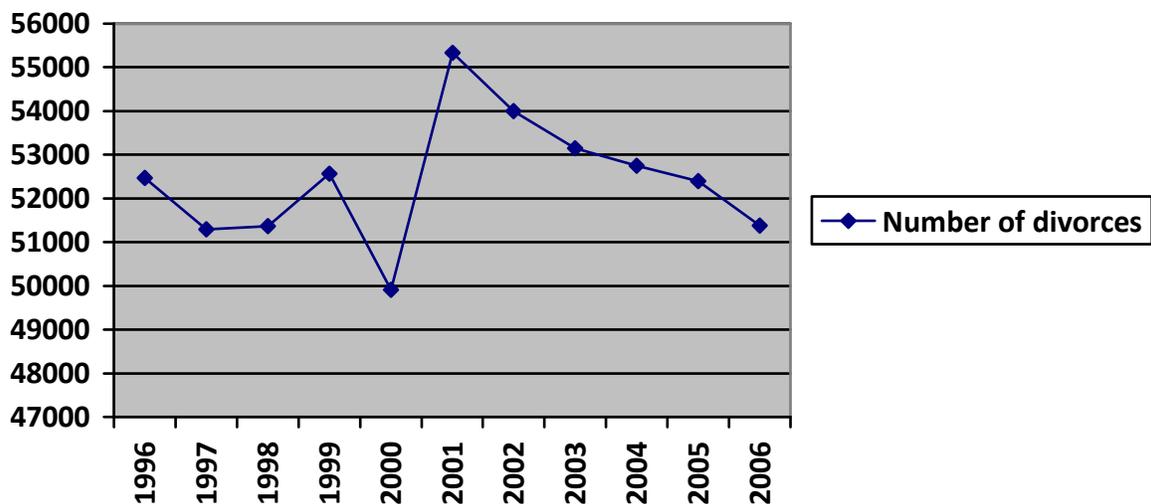
# Results

## Secondary research

### 1. Literature Review

Source 1 - Institute of Family Studies, AIFS, (2009) *Marriages and Divorces, Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics

Graph 1.1 – Total number of divorces between 1996-2006



Sources: ABS (various years), *Marriages and Divorces Australia*, Catalogue no. 3310.0;  
ABS (various years), *Divorces Australia*, Catalogue no. 3307.0.55.001 (Last modified 5 February, 2009)  
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/info/charts/divorce/divorcechildrendata.html>

Graph 1 illustrates that the number of divorces has declined steadily since its peak in 2001, although numbers are still quite high. Further data from ABS showed the higher the amount of divorces the higher the amount of children involved (in most years over 50%). In 2006, 50.1% of divorces involved children aged under 18yrs. (ABS)

**Source 2 - Charlish, A. (1998) "Talking Points, Divorce" London: Wayland Publishers, East Sussex**

When children are involved in divorce it can be longer and a more traumatic process as there is not only the spouses to consider. The legalities of where a child should live, who is more entitled to full time care of the child and visitation rights can all be immensely strenuous on the child's physical and emotional wellbeing as a divorce is an unexpected event and something a child is powerless over (Charlish, 1998, p.41).

Disruption in the family, such as divorce, not only has short-term effects on a child but long-term effects as well. Trust, loyalty and love are some of the many things a child will doubt within their relationships with their parents after divorce, as they feel as though they have been betrayed by both parents and in

some cases abandoned. Sometimes the immediate effects on children may be determined by what they say and how they behave (Charlish, 1998, p.40).

**Source 3 - Healey J. (2008) "Issues in Society, Separation and Divorce". Volume 282 Australia: The Spinney Press Thirroul**

Adolescents will react differently to divorce than younger children as they understand what is happening. Adolescence is a big milestone in a child's life as they are 'growing up', usually becoming more independent and becoming less dependent on parental figures. Relationships tend to feel an extensive amount of pressure from the divorce because of the change that has occurred and the emotional effects that have resulted. Establishing relationships and roles can be difficult enough for adolescents and going through their parent's divorce can put a larger strain on this, making it harder to trust others, meet new people and rebuild the relationships that have been affected.

Healey (2008) states that an adolescent can deal with the effects of divorce in many different ways. Older children, especially adolescents, show their grief in:

- becoming aggressive or naughty
  - withdrawing themselves
  - becoming 'clingy'
  - change their eating patterns
  - try to defend the parent who is being put down
  - show anger and hostility in play with siblings, friends or parent/s
  - show problems in their behaviour and get punished, which makes them feel worse
- (Healey, 2008, p.28).

**Source 4 - Healey J. (2003) "Issues in Society, Marriage and Divorce". Volume 183. Australia: The Spinney Press, Rozelle**

The Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Dr George Pell, recently asserted that 'family figure' is directly responsible for increases in crime, drug addiction, mental illness and sexual promiscuity in young people. (Healey, 2003, p.26)

In many cases the parents of adolescents, who seem to decline rather than improve in their behaviours and mannerisms after the divorce, are surprised as these children have been brought up in loving and stable homes. Parents are faced with these hormonal, raging teenagers that go off the rails and deconstruct their family relationships especially those shared with their parents.

A 1997 West Australian survey suggested that 30 per cent of children from sole parent families were low academic performers compared with 17 per cent from couple families. (Healey, 2003, p.28)

**Source 5 - Lewis J., M.D. & Sammons B., M.D. (2000) Children and Divorce, "Divorce Through the Eyes of a Child" [Accessed 3/1/09] Last updated 2000 <http://www.childrenanddivorce.com/id18.html>**

Adults are a very influential part of children's lives, being the role models they look up to for guidance and reasoning. Although they do not know as much as adults, they can still grasp the many things going on around them such as the tension between two parents. Even when parents are able to see beyond their own emotional, physical and economic chaos they make mistakes that will impact the relationship with their children for years to come. (Lewis & Sammons, 2000) During the process of divorce children suffer multiple losses. Not only do they lose the nuclear family we hold up to them as the ideal, but each loses the parents they knew, as both parents change to accommodate their new life situation. Some children are forced to suffer not only changing relationships with their parents, but abandonment-a loss greater than bereavement, as it carries with it the hope of reconciliation and the fear of not being worthy enough

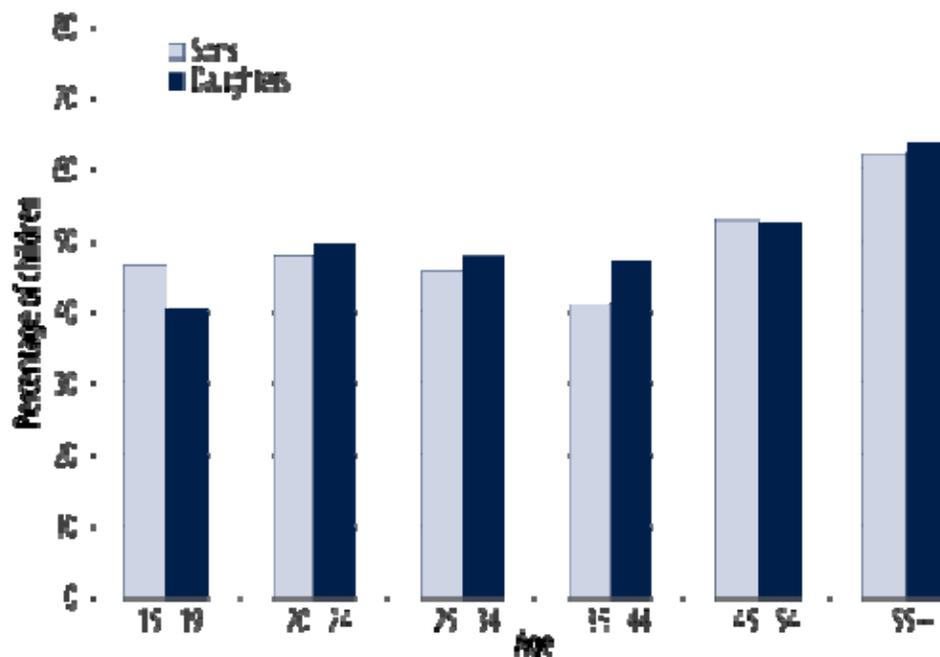
for that reconciliation to happen. (Lewis & Sammons, 2000)

For the duration of this process, children undergo many of the unwanted changes that occur within a family, such as the moving out of one parent, the adjustment to not having two parents at any one time together unless forced and then in future for the introduction of 'new partners' to each of the parents. Many children lose their self-esteem as they struggle with their understanding that they had done something to make this happen and they are the ones at fault rather than the parents, leading to their consequent obligation to put everything right again. (Lewis & Sammons, 2000)

**Source 6 – Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston, Snapshots of family relationships, Australian Institute of Family Studies, May 2008.**

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/snapshots/ssreport08/ssreport08.html#chapter3>

**Graph 1.2 - Children who reported high satisfaction with their relationship with their biological parents, by children's age**



Source: HILDA 2004

The oldest sons and daughters (aged 55 or more years) were the most likely to express high satisfaction (62% and 64% respectively), followed by the second oldest sons and daughters (aged 45-54 years) (53% each).

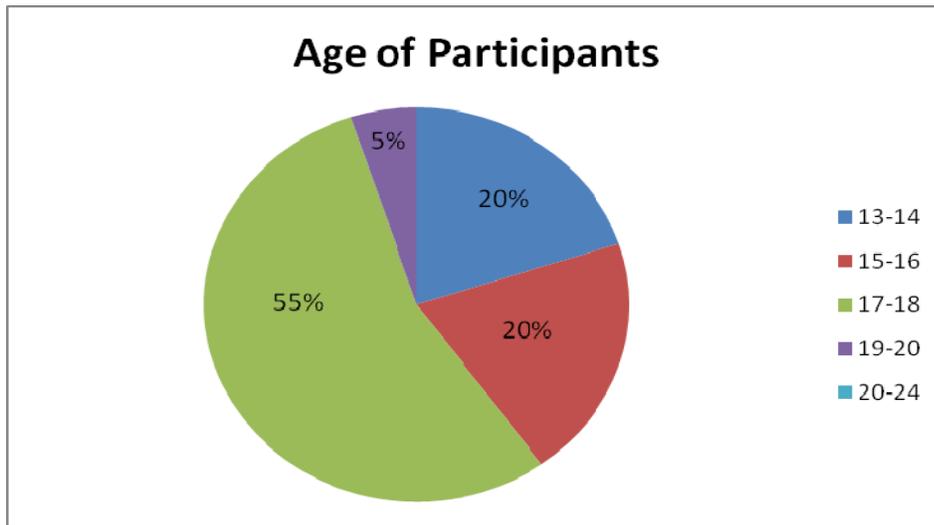
Sons aged 35-44 years were the least likely of all sons to express high satisfaction (41%), while teenage girls were least likely of all daughters to report high satisfaction (40%).

# Results

## Primary research

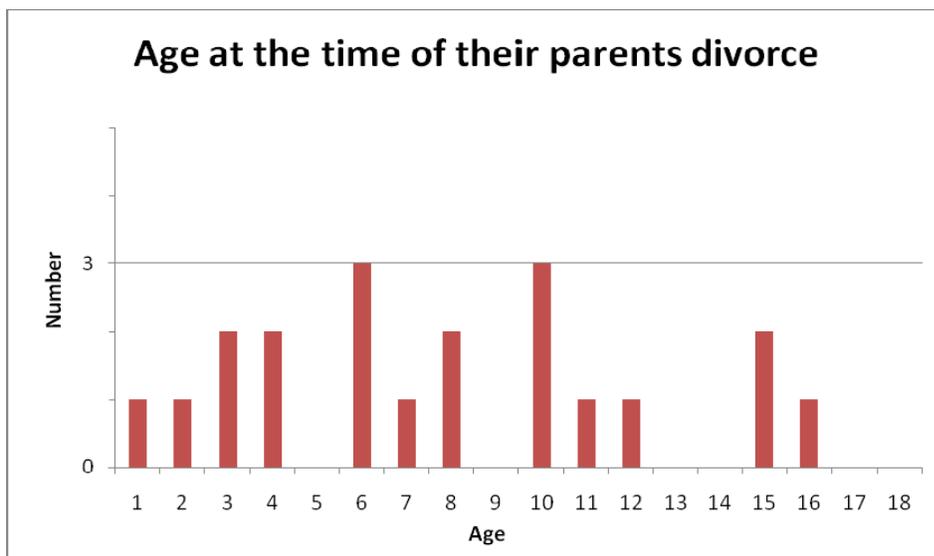
### 2. Youth Questionnaire

Graph 2.1 - What age bracket do you fall into?



Out of the twenty (20) participants surveyed, a majority of participants (55%) were aged between 17-18yrs. Reasons for this could be due to the convenience sampling methods used to select participants.

Graph 2.2 - What age were you when your parents divorced?



The average age of participants when their parents divorced was 7-8yrs. This could be due to a number of factors including:

- A parent/s believing their child is old enough to deal with the separation.

- The youngest child in the family may be 7-8yrs of age and parents may feel that older children will be able to support their younger siblings.
- Parents can no longer stay together and believe it's best to separate before the child reaches high school age.

**Table 2.1** - Before the divorce, how would you describe your relationship with your parents?

Feelings experienced	Number of participants
Close and happy	5
Good	5
Alright but not the best	2
Always fighting	3
Poor relationship with mother	0
Poor relationship with father	3
Unknown	2

Participants could select more than one response for the above question. A number of participants indicated that they had a close and happy or good relationship with their parents before the divorce.

3 out of the 20 participants surveyed indicated that they had a poor relationship with their father. Reasons participants gave for this included: *didn't really know my father, scared of my father, never got along with my father but was close with my mother.*

It was interesting to find that none of the participants indicated that they had a poor relationship with their mother. This could be due to having a small sample size of which may not have provided a true reflection of the wider population.

**Table 2.2** – What feelings did you experience when your parents divorced?

Feelings experienced	Number of participants
Sad	15
Confused	17
Worthless	1
Empty	1
Happy	1
Unknown	3

Participants could select more than one response for the above question. Majority of responses indicated that sadness and confusion were the most common feelings experienced when their parents divorced. Possible reasons for this could be that parents did not make their children aware of the reasons for the divorce (confusion) and that parental separation can bring about feelings of grief and loss for all family members (sadness).

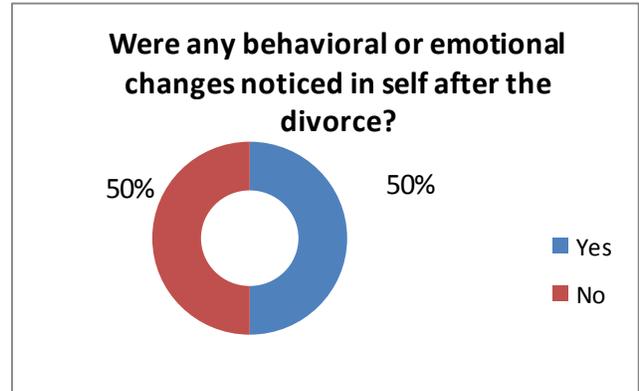
It was interesting to find that one participant indicated that they were happy as a result of their parents divorce. Possible reasons for this could include: the child feeling relieved that they no longer have to be a

part of the conflict, or the parents having a more positive relationship with each other as a result of the divorce.

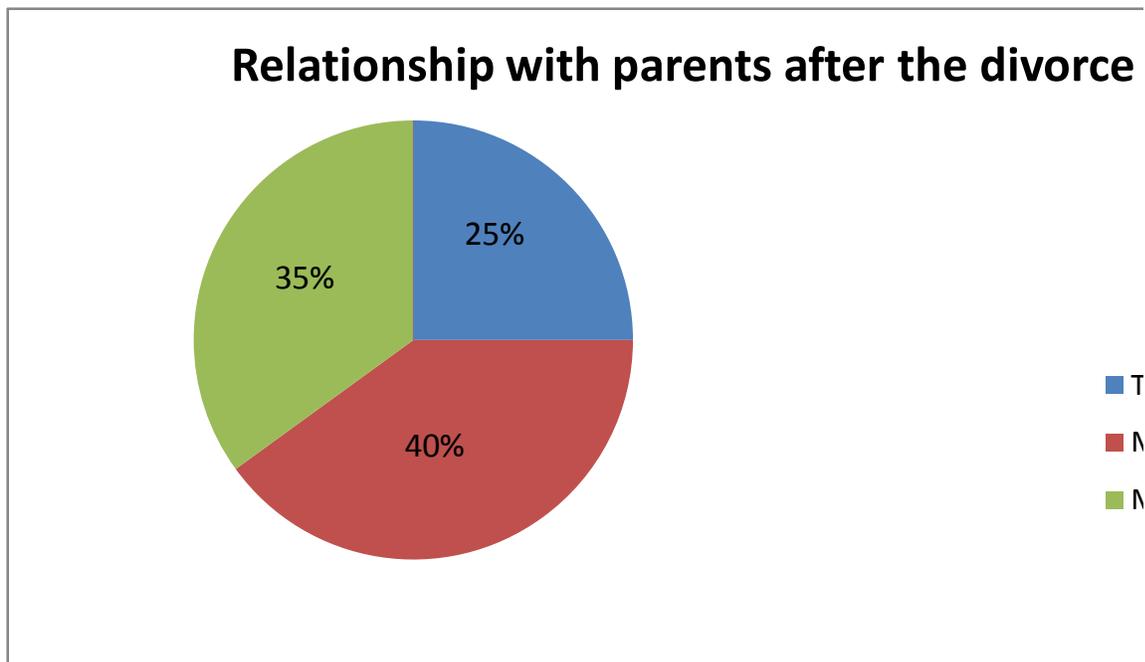
3 out of the 20 participants selected the response unknown; it was assumed that this was due to the participant being too young to remember how they felt at the time of their parents divorced.

**Graph 2.3** - Did you or have you noticed any behavioural or emotional changes in yourself such as distancing yourself from home, rebelling against your parents, trouble at school, lower self-esteem, low self-confidence or peer acceptance since your parents divorced?

As it can be seen in graph 2.4 half of those participants surveyed felt they had experienced behavioural or emotional changes since their parents divorce and half did not.

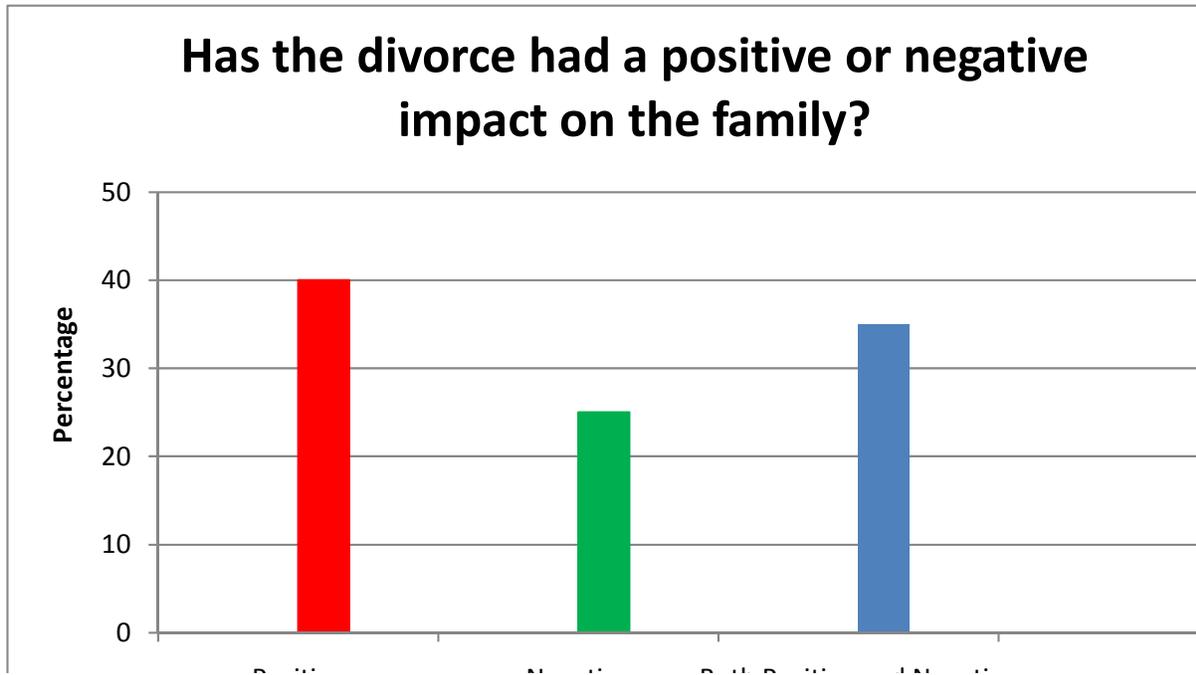


**Graph 2.4** - After the divorce, how would you describe your relationship with your parents?



Over a quarter of the participants indicated that there had been major changes in their relationship with their parents after the divorce. In addition to this another 40% indicated minor changes. Overall more than half of the people surveyed (75%) felt that their parents divorce had changed the relationship they had with their parents.

**Graph 2.5** - Do you think the divorce of your parents has had a positive or negative impact on your family?



Graph 2.5 shows that almost half (40%) of participants felt that their parents divorce had had a positive rather than negative impact on the family unit.

# Results

## Primary research

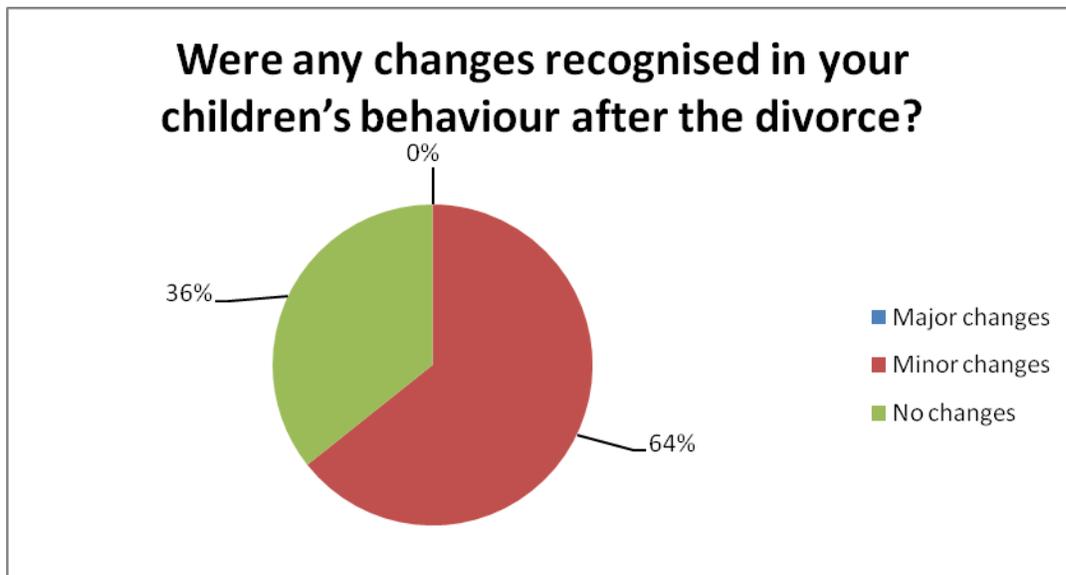
### 3. Parent questionnaire

Graph 3.1 - How long has it been since you and your partner divorced?



The data in graph 3.1 indicates that half the participants had been divorced for 6 years or more. There were only three participants who had been divorced for less than 2 years.

Graph 3.2 - Were any changes recognised in your children's behavior after the divorce?

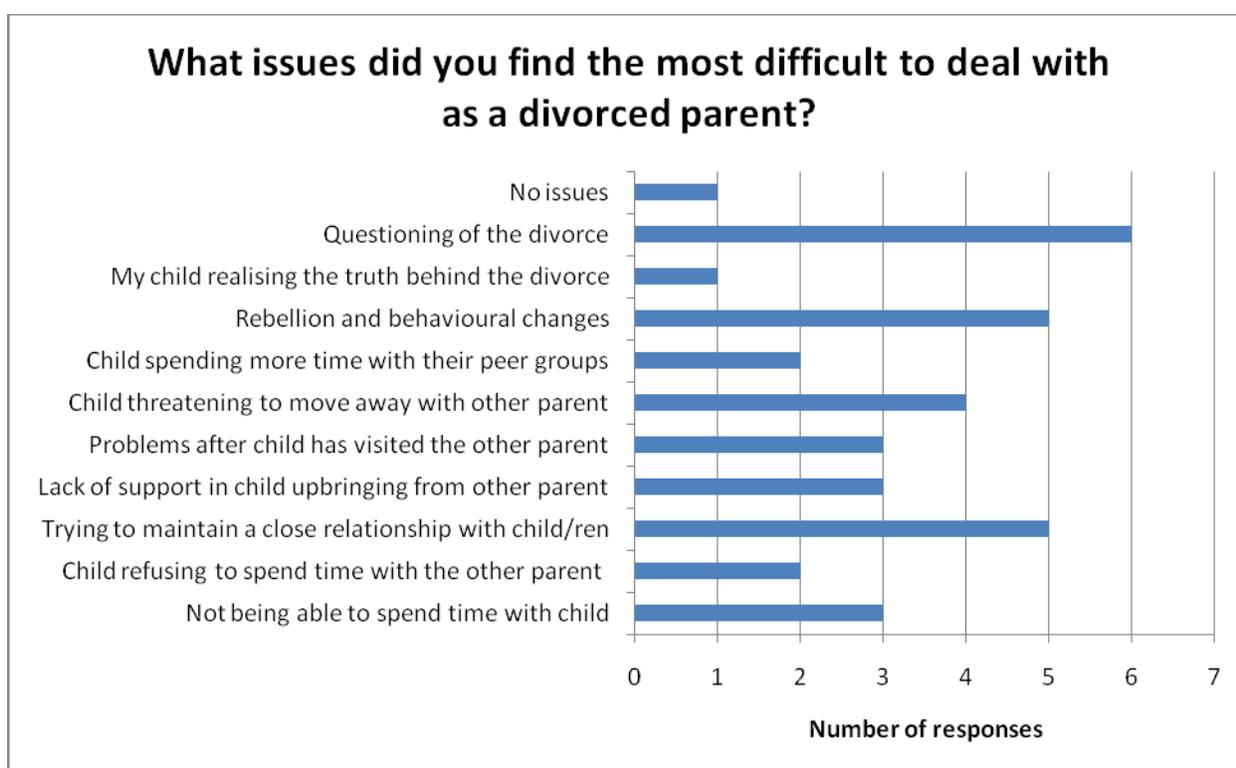


Those participants who indicated minor changes (64%) were asked to indicate the types of changes that they had noticed in their children after the divorce. Table 3.1 outlines the various changes that were recognised by parents.

**Table 3.1** – Minor changes in children’s behaviour recognised by parents

• Withdrawn	• Lack of trust
• Lacking confidence	• Anxiety
• Nightmares	• Mood swings
• School results dropped	• Trouble adjusting to new routines
• Anger	• Needing constant reassurance

**Graph 3.3** - What issues did you find the most difficult to deal with as a divorced parent?



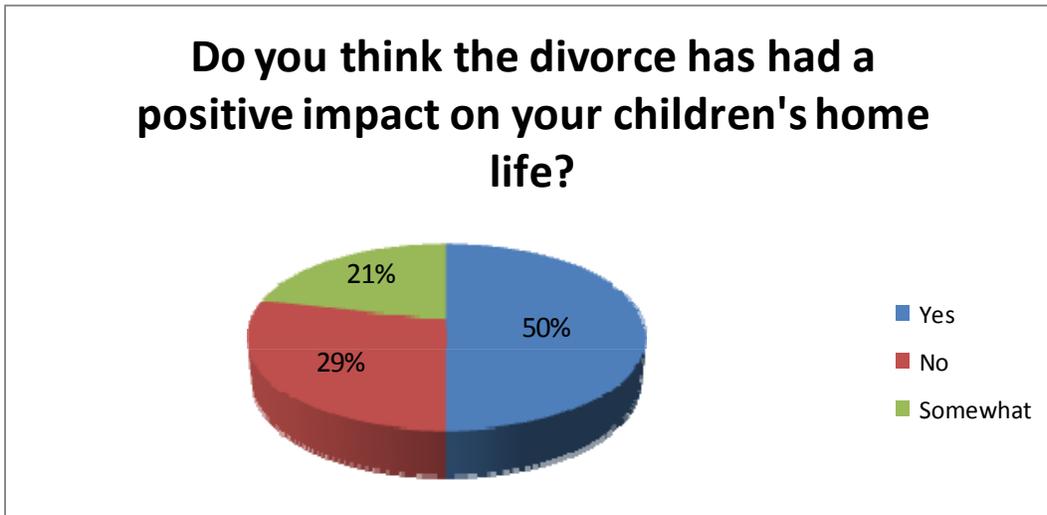
Participants could select more than one response for the above question.

More than half of the participants indicated that their child/ren questioning the divorce was the most difficult issue to deal with.

Rebellion and behavioural changes along with trying to maintain a close relationship with their child were also common issues faced by parents as a result of their divorce.

It was interesting to find that one participant indicated that there were no issues experienced.

**Graph 3.4** - Do you feel this divorce has had a positive impact on your children's home life?



29% of participants believed that their divorce had not had a positive impact on their children's home life, compared to 70% who believed it did have a positive impact.

# Analysis

Several sources of both primary and secondary data have been acquired to try to prove or disprove that a child's relationship with their parents is negatively affected by divorce. The primary results showed that young people and parents have varying ideas on how children and their relationships with their parents are impacted on as a result of divorce.

From the youth questionnaire responses it was discovered that 50% of those surveyed felt that their relationship with their parents was good, close or happy before the divorce. 75% of participants indicated that after the divorce their relationship had changed. Of those responses 40% indicated there were minor changes and 35% indicated major changes. Reasons were not provided however it could be suggested that 75% of parent/child relationships experienced some change as a result of divorce for the following reasons:

- As a result of one parent leaving the household the child may not be able to spend as much time with the absent parent.
- Resentment from the child towards one or both of their parents causing distance in the relationship.
- The child may feel abandoned by one or both of their parents leading to a lack of trust towards their parents for not being there for them.
- The child may blame themselves for their parent's divorce and feelings of guilt may change the way the child interacts with their parents.

Secondary data from source 2 supports these reasons, indicating that divorce can have significant impacts on children and the relationship they have with their parents; *Disruption in the family, such as divorce, not only has short-term effects on a child but long-term effects as well. Trust, loyalty and love are some of the many things a child will doubt within their relationships with their parents after divorce, as they feel as though they have been betrayed by both parents and in some cases abandoned.* (Charlish, 1998, p.40). Although the results from the parent questionnaire showed that parents did not recognise any major changes in their children, 64% of parents indicated that they recognised minor changes, which are outlined in table 3.1.

50% of youth participants also indicated that they had noticed either behavioural or emotional changes in themselves as a result of their parents divorce. Such things as rebelling against their parents, low self confidence, distancing themselves from home and trouble at school were the types of changes recognised by youth. Parents also noticed similar changes such as withdrawal, school results dropping and lack of confidence in their children. Data from graph 3.3 also supports this data showing that common issues faced by parents after a divorce include rebellion and behaviour changes in their children, and difficulty maintaining a close relationship with their children. Healey (2008) states that an adolescent can deal with the effects of divorce in many different ways. Older children, especially adolescents, show their grief in:

- becoming aggressive or naughty
- withdrawing themselves
- becoming 'clingy'
- change their eating patterns
- try to defend the parent who is being put down
- show anger and hostility in play with siblings, friends or parent/s
- show problems in their behaviour and get punished, which makes them feel worse

(Healey, 2008, p.28).

A majority of the changes indicated through both primary and secondary research suggests a negative impact on the relationships children have with their parents.

When asked to indicate whether the divorce had had a negative or positive impact on their family 40% of the young people surveyed indicated that it had had a positive rather than negative impact on the family unit. Parents were asked a similar question with regards to the impact on their children, resulting in 70% of parents indicating that the divorce had had a positive impact on their children. This supports the data from the youth questionnaire that divorce did in fact impact on children in a positive way. Possible reasons for this could be related to the results in graph 3.1 where the average time since their parents divorce was 6 years. There is a possibility that over time children have learnt to deal with the separation and therefore have overcome any difficulties or grief experienced from their parent's separation – '*time heals all wounds*'. This is also supported by data from the youth questionnaire presented in graph 2.1 and 2.2 that shows a 10 year gap since the divorce of their parents to the time they completed the questionnaire. Graph 2.1 shows the average age of participants being 17-18 years and graph 2.2 shows the average age of participants when their parents divorced was 7-8years. Upon reflection both parents and children alike may have dealt with any negative issues and now see the divorce in a more positive light.

It is evident that the primary and secondary research data collected for this research project has its limitations. A lack of qualitative data on the topic of divorce has resulted in only basic information being discussed. A lack of information could be due to ethical issues such as the sensitivity of divorce, privacy of those who did not wish to disclose personal experiences and laws preventing the questioning of young people on their private/home life. However more open ended questions in the questionnaires would have allowed for more qualitative data to be collected.

# Conclusion

It was expected that data collected from this research would be able to demonstrate that divorce does in fact have a negative impact on the relationships between parents and their children. Limitations in qualitative data impacted on the final conclusion. Secondary sources of data supported the hypothesis that divorce does in fact have a negative impact on children. However primary research indicated that although children experienced some negative behavioural changes after their parents divorce there was no conclusive evidence to suggest that these changes impacted negatively on the parent/child relationship. A lot of the changes indicated in the data such as lack of confidence, low self esteem and rebellion may simply be the result of adolescent growth and development. A large proportion of those surveyed for this research actually indicated that divorce had had a positive impact on the parent/child relationship. There was no conclusive data to support the notion that divorce had a negative impact on the child's relationship with their parents. It can therefore be concluded that the hypothesis 'a child's relationship with their parents is negatively impacted on by divorce' has neither been proved nor disproved by this research. However relative information was sourced in terms of feelings, reactions and needs of a child after experiencing their parents' divorce and it was found that most of the feelings and reactions were negative. It could be suggested from this data that the negative changes experienced by children after their parents divorce could in fact impact negatively on the relationship between the child and their parents. More research is required in order to validate this conclusion.

## Recommendations for future research

- **Reword the hypothesis** to 'A divorce influences the emotional development of a child'. The data collected from the questionnaires would have allowed for a more thorough analysis of this hypothesis.
- **Increase the sample size.** Having a larger sample size would have provided a greater amount of data in which to prove or disprove the hypothesis.
- **Locate specific secondary sources of data before determining the final hypothesis.** It was difficult to find secondary sources of data specifically related to the negative impacts of divorce on family relationships and as such the data sourced for the literature review was difficult to compare to the primary data that was collected.
- **Include more open ended questions in the surveys.** Including more open ended questions in the surveys would have allowed for more qualitative data to be collected. Making questions more direct would have also allowed more qualitative data to be gathered and this would have provided more of an insight into the research topic.

For example;

- Question 6 - After the divorce, how would you describe your relationship with your parents? By asking participants to give reasons for their response to this question more qualitative data could have been gained to support or disprove the research hypothesis.
- Question 7 - Did or have you noticed any behavioural or emotional changes in yourself such as distancing yourself from home, rebelling against your parents, trouble at school, lower self-esteem, low self-confidence or peer acceptance since your parents divorced? A number of people surveyed found this question confusing. Reasons for this include: the question had too many ideas in the one question, the question asked about two different things - behavioural and emotional changes, and there were no positive examples given. This confusion could have been avoided by removing the examples from the question and including them as responses, In addition to this removing the word emotional from the question or creating another question that asks about emotional changes separately would have provided more valid data and by including some positive examples of behavioural changes as responses participants would have been able to provide a much clearer indication of the changes experienced.

# Bibliography

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, (2008) "MARRIAGES, DIVORCES AND DE FACTO RELATIONSHIPS"  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/ABS@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/D5F4805AD4C3E03ECA2573D2001103E0?opendocument>
- Australian Institute of Family Studies, AIFS, (2009) Marriages and Divorces, Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics  
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/info/charts/divorce/divorcechildrendata.html>
- Lewis J., M.D. & Sammons B., M.D. (2000) Children and Divorce, "Divorce Through the Eyes of a Child" [Accessed 3/1/09] Last updated 2000  
<http://www.childrenanddivorce.com/id18.html>
- Charlish, A. (1998) "Talking Points, Divorce" London: Wayland Publishers, East Sussex
- Healey J. (2003) "Issues in Society, Marriage and Divorce". Volume 183. Australia: The Spinney Press, Rozelle
- Healey J. (2008) "Issues in Society, Separation and Divorce". Volume 282 Australia: The Spinney Press Thirroul
- Knight, A. (2002) "The Australian Integrated School Dictionary and Thesaurus", Oxford University Press, Victoria, Australia

# Appendix

The appendices for this IRP have not been included.