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## Adolescents with a childhood experience of parental divorce: a longitudinal study of mental health and adjustment

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### Abstract

\*\*This is a prospective Norwegian study of a group of adolescents with an experience of parental divorce or separation ( $n = 413$ ) and a comparison group without this experience ( $n = 1758$ ). Mean age at T1 was 14.4 years and mean age at T2 was 18.4 years. Parental divorce was prospectively associated with a relative change in anxiety and depression, subjective well-being, self-esteem, and school problems. Considering boys separately, parental divorce was prospectively associated only with school problems. Among the girls, divorce was prospectively associated with all variables. The effect of divorce on relative change was partially mediated by paternal absence.

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### Introduction

#### *Children of divorce*

Despite all the practical and emotional challenges associated with parental separation and divorce, the long-term effects on the children have proved to be small. Most of these children live

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good lives and manage well (Emery & Forehand, 1994). Still, it is well documented that children of divorce are at an increased risk of various adjustment problems in both childhood and adolescence, and even in adult life. The range of problems include withdrawal, anxiety and depression, social problems, thought problems, attention problems, delinquent behaviour and aggressive behaviour (Liu et al., 2000; Harland, Reijneveld, Brugman, Verloove-Vanhorick, & Verhulst, 2002). As a group, children of divorced parents have lower levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social support and less efficient coping styles (Kurtz, 1994). Follow-up studies show that children of divorce still display more adjustment problems such as anxiety and depression, low well-being, and school problems in early (Hetherington, 1993) and mid-adolescence (Størksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, n.d., 2004). Other researcher have found a lower self-esteem (Bynum & Durm, 1996), a poorer self-concept (Studer, 1993), and a risk of conduct disorder, mood disorder and substance abuse disorders in adolescent offspring of divorced couples (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1994). A longitudinal study found elevated levels of depression in women with divorced parents, and, in both genders an increased risk of frequent job-changing, premarital parenting and marital breakdown in adults of divorced parents (Rodgers, 1994).

Parallel to the general finding of small to moderate group differences, there has also been found greater variability in adjustment among children with divorced parents than among children from non-divorced families (Hetherington, 1993; Størksen et al., 2004). This probably reflects the diversity of outcomes after parental divorce (Amato, 2001). There might also be reason to expect different reactions to divorce in the same individuals over time. Hetherington (1993) demonstrated that 6-year-old girls appearing to have a good adaptation to divorce displayed delayed effects in early adolescence. There has also been found an emerging gender difference during adolescence in the relationship between internalizing symptoms and parental distress and discord. Among early adolescents there were no gender differences in the association between internalizing symptoms and parental distress and discord. By mid-adolescence, though, parental distress and discord became significantly associated with internalizing symptoms among girls, but this association was not seen among boys (Crawford, Cohen, Midlarsky, & Brook, 2001). Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae (1998) found that—even after adjusting for initial levels of emotional problems—a parental divorce occurring when the child was between 7 and 22 years old had a negative effect when the subjects were in their 20s and early 30s. These results indicate a growing gap over the years between children of divorce and other children. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been conducted that focus on children of divorce and relative change in various domains of adjustment during mid-adolescence.

### *The Norwegian culture: welfare system and divorce rates*

In 2004, the Human Development Report, which is published annually by the United Nations, ranked Norway as the best place in the world to live. A high percent of women are in work—almost 70% of all Norwegian women—partly because of good social systems (Statistics Norway, 2004). When a women gives birth to a child, she is permitted a one-year leave from work with close to full payment.

The Norwegian Government has provided special laws and regulations as an effort to counteract the negative effects of divorce on children. Newly separated couples are offered family

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