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ADD & ADHD Health Center

Divorce More Likely in ADHD Families?

Parents of ADHD Kids Nearly Twice as Likely to Split as Families without ADHD, Study Shows

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Oct. 24, 2008 -- Married couples who have a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are nearly twice as likely to divorce by the time the child is age 8 than are couples who do not have children affected by the disorder, according to a new study.

"We've known that ADHD kids can be very stressful for their parents," says William E. Pelham Jr., PhD, professor of psychology and pediatrics at the University at Buffalo and the study's senior author. "What this [new study] shows is that stress occurs in the marriage as well as in other aspects of the parents' lives."

Having a child with ADHD "probably causes a lot of arguments" between the husband and wife about how to handle the situation, Pelham tells WebMD. ADHD affects 5% or more of U.S. children, with symptoms including an inability to concentrate and follow directions, forgetfulness, and a tendency to daydream.

"If they don't get together on how to solve the problem, the child's behavior is not going to improve," he says. "The situation gets worse, and if those arguments don't get resolved, not only does the child's parenting not improve but the marriage worsens -- and almost a quarter of the families get divorced."

ADHD & Divorce

Pelham and his colleagues collected data from the parents of 282 teens and young adults diagnosed with ADHD in childhood who were part of a larger research study, the Pittsburgh ADHD Longitudinal Study (PALS). They also evaluated the parents of 206 teens and young adults without the disorder.

The parents answered questions about how long they had been married, their educational levels, and any history of depression, substance abuse, or antisocial behavior.

The child's birth date, not the date of the parents' marriage, was the starting point. The parents of children with ADHD had been married nearly five years before the child with ADHD was born and the parents of the children without ADHD had been married a little over five years before the child was born.

ADHD & Divorce: Study Results

Nearly twice as many parents of ADHD children had divorced by the time the child was age 8, the study showed. Although 22.7% of the parents with ADHD children had divorced by the time the affected child was 8, just 12.6% of parents whose children did not have ADHD had split by the time the child was 8.

Certain risk factors in the children and the parents made divorce more likely, researchers found. If the child had coexisting disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) or conduct disorder (CD), it boosted the risk. A father's antisocial behavior, such as having a DUI, boosted divorce risk, as did a discrepancy in the amount of education between partners, such as a mother having a low level and a father a high level.

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