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## Study on divorce's impact on kids did not examine cause, says MSF

It says child outcomes could be related to circumstances before, during or after divorce



The study found that children from divorced families are less likely to attain a university degree, earned less and are more likely to end up divorced themselves. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY



**Theresa Tan**  
**Senior Social**  
**Affairs**  
**Correspondent**

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The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has clarified that its landmark study on the inter-generational effects of divorce on children did not examine what caused the difference in outcomes for children of divorced parents and those of parents who stayed together.

Among other things, the study found that children from divorced families are less likely to attain a university degree, earned less and are more likely to end up divorced themselves.

This is compared with their peers whose parents remain wed.

A MSF spokesman told The Sunday Times: "The study did not examine what caused the observed differences in child outcomes.

"This means that the child outcomes could be related to circumstances before, during or after the divorce."

She added that the MSF intends to study the matter further to better understand the risk and protective factors that impact child outcomes.

It will also consult social workers, family counsellors, lawyers, the courts and families who have gone through a divorce, it said.

The MSF gave these replies yesterday in response to criticism from the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

Aware raised concerns that the study's methodology "masks important subtleties in the strength of family ties, income and others that may contribute to these outcomes".

Aware said in a Facebook post on Friday: "As the study stands, it makes a claim of strong correlation between divorce and seemingly negative outcomes for children, without considering other factors that may undermine this claim."

The MSF had said that overseas studies on divorce found that children whose parents were divorced potentially face negative consequences even into adulthood.

Its study, released on Tuesday, aimed to find out if children from divorced families here suffer long-term disadvantages and, if so, the extent of these disadvantages, which it calls divorce penalties.

The study examined the economic and marriage outcomes of 101,180 Singaporean children born between 1979 and 1981 when they were 35 years old.

This was done by studying the aggregated data from multiple sources of administrative and survey records. Of those studied, the parents of 8.8 per cent, or 8,880 people, divorced before the child celebrated his or her 21st birthday.

The MSF spokesman said yesterday: "The study matched children from divorced families with children from intact families on a range of observable demographic characteristics to ensure that we were comparing families of similar profiles."

She noted that the study reported child outcomes on average.

"This means that while, on average, children whose parents were divorced fared worse, there were some who did as well or better than their peers from intact families," she said.

"We are working with the social sector to strengthen marital counselling as well as divorce support."

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Researchers who were interviewed pointed out that the MSF study did not say that divorce causes long-term disadvantages suffered by the children, but divorce is associated with these disadvantages.

The study stated: "While the results might not strictly inform us of the causal impact of divorce, they provide an indicative sense of children's long-term outcomes associated with parental divorce, which would in turn help inform interventions for children when couples file for divorce."

Aware told The Sunday Times that other studies on divorce show that the child's reaction to divorce varies, depending on socioeconomic characteristics and the family's well-being.

For example, children whose parents stay wed but have high levels of conflict have been found to be no better off - and may even fare worse in some aspects - than children of divorced parents.

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Mr Kwan Jin Yao, who runs a website on social service research in Singapore, explained that in the past, researchers contrasted children from divorced families with those whose parents stayed wed.

He said: "But researchers have moved on and recognise that one cannot look at family structure (whether parents are divorced or married) alone, but they also have to look at the quality of the relationship between the parents themselves and the relationship between the parents and the child (to understand the impact of divorce on children)."

He added that it is also important to examine the support the child received after the divorce.

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