

# Does parental divorce/separation cause anxiety/depression in children with cancer?

¿El divorcio/separación de los padres causa ansiedad/depresión en niños con cáncer?

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## Dear Editor:

Family has been the fundamental building block of society in all cultures since ancient times. The most comprehensive centre of man's worldly life, and its mainspring, and a paradise, refuge, and fortress of worldly happiness, is the life of the family. Family is also the basis of the child's development and well-being <sup>[1][2]</sup>. However, parental divorces/separations have increased in recent decades. Children of divorced/separated parents have a higher risk of developing anxiety and depression <sup>[3]</sup>. On the other hand, anxiety and depression are very prevalent in children and adolescents with cancer, which is a great challenge for health professionals <sup>[4]</sup>. Herein, we discuss parental divorce/separation as a cause of anxiety/depression in children with cancer to attract attention to the importance of parental divorce/separation. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been reported about this subject in the literature.

An increasing number of children across the world experience family instability due to divorce/separation. Today, only about 60% of United States children live with their married, biological parents, a low second only to Latvi <sup>[5]</sup>. Parental divorce/separation is associated with an increased risk for child and adolescent adjustment problems, including academic difficulties (e.g., lower grades and school dropout), disruptive behaviors (e.g., conduct and substance use problems), and depressed mood <sup>[6]</sup>. Offspring of divorced/separated parents are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, live in poverty, and experience their own family instability. Risk typically increases by a factor between 1.5 and 2 <sup>[6]</sup>. The studies showed that the parents of children with cancer did not have a higher risk for divorce/separation than the general population <sup>[6]</sup>.

Children and adolescents diagnosed with cancer experience many problems and stressors in every sphere of life, which undoubtedly affects a high level of unmet needs. The main category of needs concerning the challenges faced by children with cancer was psychological and care problems. In the youth group, the needs were mainly related to education and social support <sup>[7]</sup>. Prevalence rates of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents with cancer was found to be 13.9% and 20.4%, respectively <sup>[4]</sup>. Common causes of anxiety in children with cancer are awareness of cancer diagnosis, medical procedures, local effects of treatment, physical complications associated with the treatment, uncertainty about the medical process, activity restrictions, hospitalization, falling behind in school, separation from family and friends, lose social relationships, and fear of death. Some of these factors also contribute to the development of depression in children and adolescents with cancer.

As in the general population, parental divorce/separation can also cause mental and psychosocial disorders in children with cancer. Therefore, it is important to take precautions to prevent parental divorce/separation and preserve family unity during difficult situations such as cancer. It has been shown that couples who are well

equipped with certain competencies such as communication skills, problem-solving abilities and coping strategies are less likely to experience a negative evolution of their marriage and are consequently less likely to divorce. It has thus been argued that preventing divorce may be possible by teaching couples such competencies at a relatively early stage in their relationship <sup>[8]</sup>. Additionally, there is good evidence that, through a combination of religious institutions and participant motivation, many couples could be aided by the increased availability of preventive interventions such as the prevention and relationship enhancement program <sup>[9]</sup>.

In conclusion, based on the literature data, we think that parental divorce/separation may be associated with an increased risk for mental health problems including anxiety/depression in children with cancer. Divorce/separation may cause anxiety/depression or exacerbate preexisting anxiety/

depression in children with cancer. Comprehensive and controlled studies should be performed on this subject. These studies will fill the gap in the literature and benefit health professionals in the management of children with cancer associated with psychological problems.

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