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Research Article

**EFFECT OF PARENTAL SEPARATION ON MENTAL HEALTH
STATUS OF CHILDREN OF AGE 6-16 YEARS, COMING TO
PSYCHIATRY WARD OF PUBLIC SECTOR HOSPITALS,
LAHORE**¹ Dr Talia Arshad, ² Dr Muhammad Arshad, ³ Dr Zimar Arshad, ¹Dr Ramsha Ghias, ¹Dr Aqdas Qayyum, ¹Dr Seerat un Nisa, ¹Dr Mashal Khan, ¹Dr Sahar Shakeel, ¹Dr Muhammad Ghufuran¹King Edward Medical University, Lahore²Fauji Foundation Hospital, Lahore³Medical Officer Basic Health Unit, district Gujrat.**Abstract:**

The trends in family composition have major implications in the life course of children and their mental well-being. A stable family is vital for sound development of the personality of children. Despite the increase in the trend of parental separation, there are few studies in Pakistan pertaining to the effects of parental separation on child health and even those do not provide a good insight. Therefore, it is a need of the hour to investigate these effects. For this purpose, a cross-sectional study was carried out among the children with such circumstances, of ages 6 - 16 years, visiting the psychiatry department of public sector hospitals of Lahore. A questionnaire was formulated and was filled by 98 participants. Analysis of the data collected showed that among these children, there is higher frequency of depression, violence, social, learning and moral deterioration. Most of them suffer from low self-esteem and have an increased tendency to self-harm. Thus the hypothesis that parental separation affects the mental health status of children negatively resulting in emotional and psychological disturbance was supported. So, there is a need of proper counselling of the children to make them understand the circumstances of separation. In addition to that, the platforms of print, electronic and social media should be employed to spread awareness on this subject. Public should be made aware of the drastic effects that an unstable familial environment brings to the mental well-being of children.

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INTRODUCTION:

Family plays a vital role in the sound development of children. If children loose contact with any one of the parents, due to any reason, they suffer a huge psychological burden due to drastic changes in their lifestyle. Children may be separated for long durations from a parent due to divorce of their parents or their parent may work overseas, or because one of them is deceased. The rate of parental separation has been increasing in Pakistan. In Lahore city alone, more than 100 separation cases have been registered in family court daily. In 2010, 40,410 divorce and separation cases were registered in family courts and 14,000 of them have been filed so far [1]. As per Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, 6% of the children younger than age 15 are living without their parents [2].

Parental separation comprises series of transitions that affect children much more than adults, leading to stages like depression, denial, anger. A Nigerian study on children of separated parents showed that they suffered from poor academic performance, anxiety and depression[3]. Such children have more hostility towards adults, withdrawal, inattention and aggression [4]. These children have greater increase of conduct problems than other children [5]. Divorce also leads to deterioration of health but it affects younger children more than the adults. Two-parent households can be disrupted for reasons other than parental divorce and death. International migration of one parent in order to obtain employment was associated with lower academic achievements in children left in home country [6]. A field study showed that children of separated parents are prone to depression, anxiety, hostility and less self-control in social situations [7]. Parental separation has negative effects on the children's school adjustment, the magnitude of these effects increasing with age and also leading to antisocial behavior [8]. A descriptive study in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa gave information about the domestic issues including parental conflict adversely affecting a child's educational attainment [9].

Most children are able to adapt to their new family structures if parents strengthen their social support system. Health care professionals may also assist the families in making adjustments to the new challenges. The parents should maintain a quality parent-child relationship. The trends in family composition have major implications for the life course of children and their wellbeing. More than half of the mental disorders begin before the age of 14 years and psychiatric disorders are among the leading causes disability in children of worldwide. Mental instability may lead to other diseases like cardiovascular disorders, diabetes

etc. By our research, we will measure the extent of effects on children mental status because of parental separation and mechanism of active coping to help reduce children psychological issues.

METHODOLOGY:

The study was conducted in the Psychiatry department of public sector hospitals of Lahore. In the duration from 21 March 2018 to 21 August 2018. The design of the study is retrospective Cross sectional. Sample size of 97 patients is estimated by using 97% confidence level, 10% absolute precision with the expected percentage of effect of parental separation on mental health status psychiatry ward as 40% [1].

$$n = \frac{Z_{21-o/2} \cdot p \cdot q}{d^2}$$

$Z_{21-o/2}$ = confidence level 95% = 1.96

p = prevalence 40%

q = 1 - p

d = absolute precision 10%

Sampling technique: Non probability sampling (purposive sample)

Sample selection:

Inclusion Criteria: children from 6-17 years.

Exclusion Criteria: those who refuse to give consent

Data collection procedure:

The analyses in this research are based on the data collected from children with the ages 6-16 years, divided into three age groups: 6-9, 10-13 and 14-16 years old. Data has been collected from patients coming to psychiatry department of different public sector hospitals of Lahore by using a questionnaire form, which is derived from "Ontario Child Health Study" that was previously used in Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development.

This questionnaire has been filled by the Person Most Knowledgeable of the child, who in most cases was the mother of the child. The data has been collected systematically for four weeks, i.e. the month of August 2017, from 10 am to 2 pm daily. Data collection procedure was simple and suitable. The specimen included were verbally informed about the study and its procedure and their consent was recorded in writing. The questionnaire form was filled either by asking questions from separated parents and then entering their answers in the form or by directly handing over the questionnaire forms to them so that they can fill it themselves.

Data analysis procedure:

- Data will be entered SPSS-2
- Quantitative variables like age will be presented as mean +SD
- Qualitative variable like gender will be presented as frequency and percentage

● Can't concentrate for long	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Can't sit still, is hyperactive	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Cries a lot	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Not as happy as others	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Unusual complaints of feeling tired	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Physically attack others	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Deliberately harms himself/herself	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Talks about killing self	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Gets in many fights	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Gets no pleasure from usual activities	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Has trouble enjoying himself/herself	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Steals at home	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Steals outside home	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Has difficulty making friends	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Does not play with other children	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Anxious or on edge	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Moody or irritable	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Angry or resentful	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Shy or timid	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Feels worthless or inferior	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Has difficulty interacting with others	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Defiant, talks back to others	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Blames others for his own mistakes	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Disobedient at school	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Lying or cheating	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Meanness to others	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Vandalism	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Repeats certain actions over and over;	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Has difficulty making decisions	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Overly upset when leaving loved ones	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Afraid of being alone	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● Changes in appetite	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN
● When anxious has disturbed sleep	NEVER	SOMETIME	MORE OFTEN

Please select the response (never,sometimes,often) that best describes the child now or within past six months.

Choose from the options; not at all, a little, a lot, for following questions.

■ How well does he/she get along with his/her grand parents and siblings?	not at all	A little	A lot
■ Does he have any hobbies or takes part in any sports?	not at all	A little	A lot
■ How much does he learn at school?	not at all	A little	A lot
■ Did his or her grades fall over the past 2 months?	not at all	A little	A lot

RESULTS:

97 questionnaires were filled by 97 participants. The children selected for this research were from 6 to 16 years old. Our study revealed that the children whose parents had been separated, due to any reason, remained sad and unhappy. 45.9% of them could not normally feel happiness as others, while 31.6% remained sad more often. These children cried a lot even on small things. 47.4% sometimes and 15.5% more often used to cry. Mostly 10-13 age group children belonged to this category.

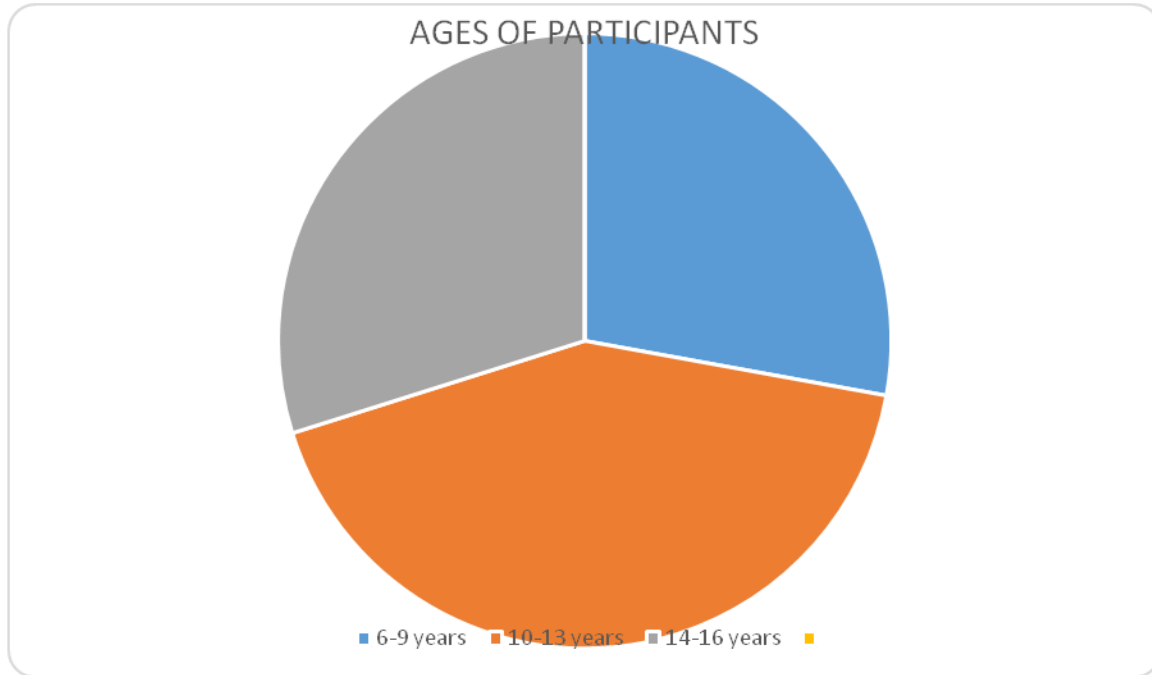
Separation of their parents brought anger in these children. 51% of the children sometimes remained angry while 25.5% of them felt anger more often, which lead 50% of the children into many fights. 14-16 years old children got more into fights than others. Many children, on the other hand, started harming themselves. 23.5% of the children sometimes and 9.2% more often deliberately harmed themselves. 23.5% of them had suicidal thoughts in mind and even talked about killing themselves.

Parents separation brought many negative changes to these children's personality. 45.9% of the children sometimes and 35.7% more often became moody and irritated. 25-50% of the children became disobedient

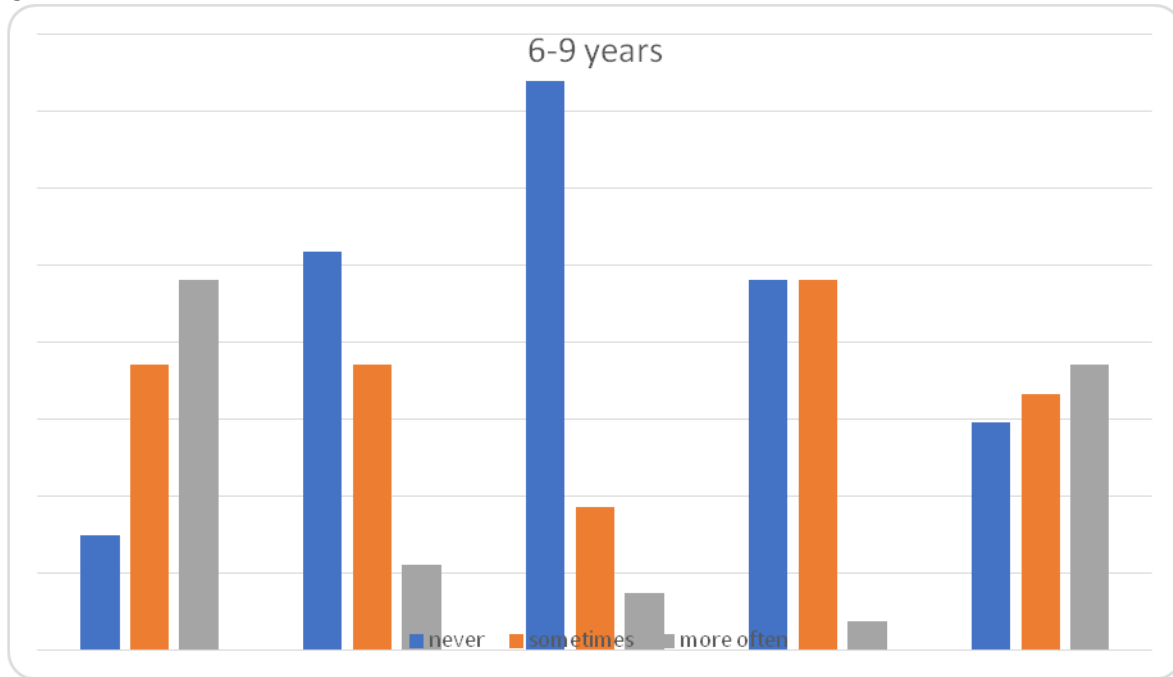
at school. 44.9% of them started lying and cheating. Meanness was added to the nature of 45% of the children. Many even started blaming others for their own mistakes. 10-16 years age group children belonged to this category. 18.4% of the children even started stealing while 9.2% made it a habit. Our data showed that many children became shy and timid. 6-9 years old children used to feel shy more often. 38.8% sometimes felt worthless and inferior. These children felt difficulty while interacting with others that's why they could not make friends easily. 33.7% sometimes and 21.4% more often felt difficulty in making friends.

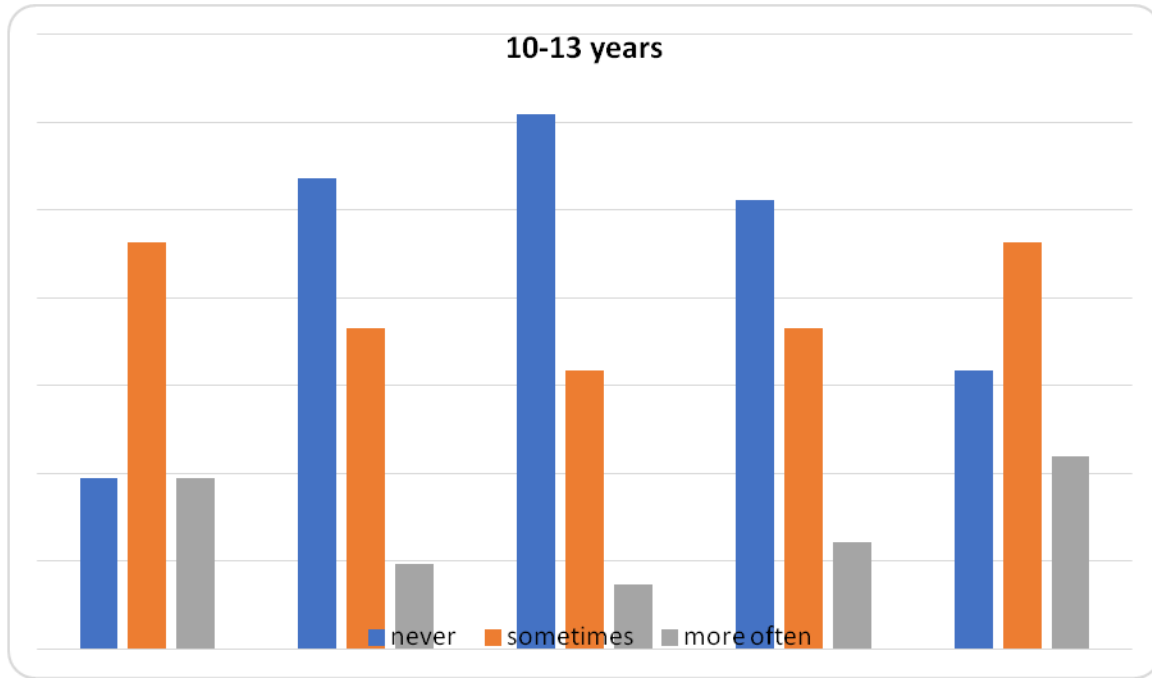
According to our research, 38.8% of the children were afraid of being alone. Most of these children belonged to 10-13 age group. They often got upset on leaving their loved ones. Our study disclosed that separation of their parents decreased the learning capacity of the children. 53.6% of them had a fall in their school grades over past two months. There was also a bad effect on the health of these children. 23.5%- 45.9% of them had changes in appetite. 33% sometimes and 34% more often had disturbed sleep. 10-13 years old children mostly faced these problems.

PIE CHART

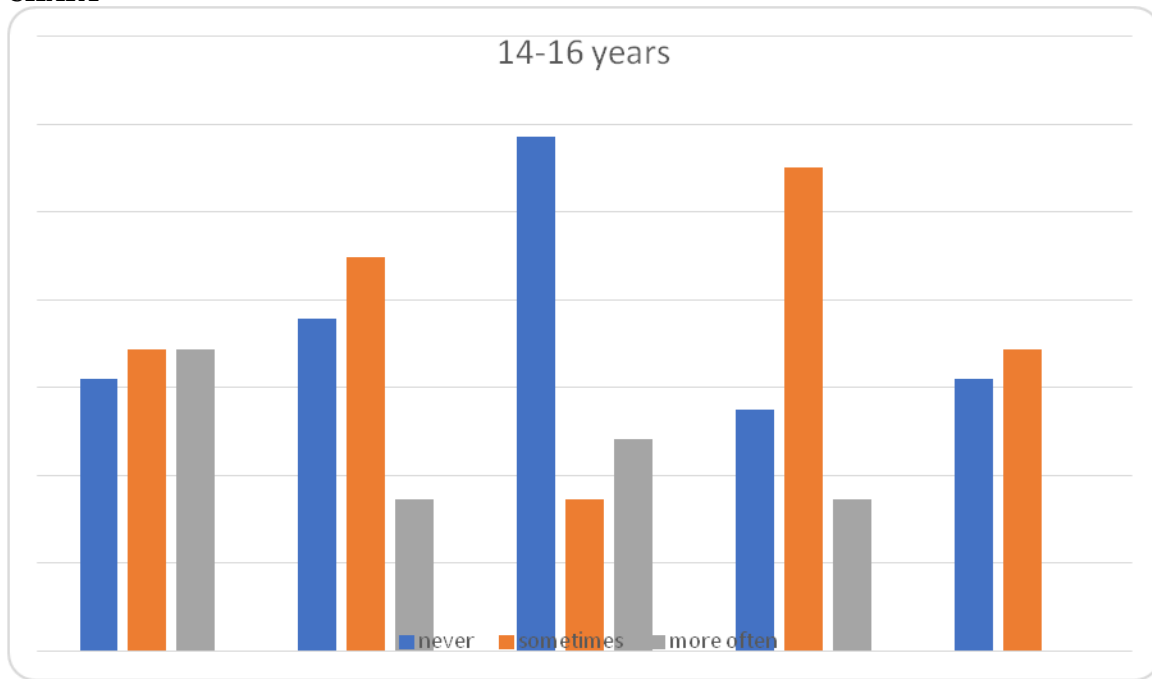


CLUSTERED COMPOUND BAR CHART





CLUSTERED COMPOUND BAR CHART



DISCUSSION:

Parental separation is a worldwide problem; even though its prevalence varies across different regions of the world. As per Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, 6% of the children younger than age 15 are living without their parents. It is an alarming

situation because in one-third of these cases, both parents are alive [2]. There are few studies in Pakistan pertaining to effects of parental separation on child health and even those do not provide a great insight. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to investigate such effects. The focus of this research is

to recognize the mental effects of parental separation as these are the hidden changes; physical aspects are always eminent and easy to recognize. We have used 38 variables associated with mental health in our testing. In our research parents of 36.08% were divorced, parents of 35.05% were abroad and parents of 28.84% were deceased.

Our analysis shows that most children (81.7%) become bad-tempered, moody or irritable as an outcome of parental disunion. This is in sharp contrast to an Albanian study carried out in 2015 in which 78% of the respondents felt relieved as they got rid of parental infighting [12]. However, a common thing exists between these two studies i.e. 33.7% of children in our inquiry have trouble in interacting with others. In Albanian study, 34% children never told anyone about parental separation [12].

An unexpected and terrifying aspect is unveiled in our study which must be brought into public notice immediately is that 30.6% of the children interviewed have suicidal thoughts because they were mentally tortured during their parent's fights. Moreover, almost a third of the children (32.7%) deliberately harm themselves. These aspects are hardly noticed by their parents or siblings. Only their best friends have some idea about it. It is quite possible that we have underestimated these figures and much more children who are the victims of parental discord have suicidal intentions. A Turkish study also highlighted that parental factors amplified the menace of suicide among young people [16].

Divorce introduces a great deal of stress into the lives of adults and children. According to a study, almost 10% of normal adolescents showed deterioration in health at some point in their lives; but in the case of kids with divorced parents, one-fourth of the boys and one-third of the girls showed declined in health. Parental death, like parental divorce was followed by decline in child's well-being.⁶ Two-parent households can be disrupted for reasons other than parental divorce & death. International migration of one parent in order to obtain employment was associated with lower academic achievements in children left in home country [6]. Moreover, there was also substantial increase in psychological problems among children [6]. Our research also shows similar results. In our study 66.4% have disturbed sleep, 69.4% have changes in appetite and 69.4% have unusual complains of tiredness. In addition, more than two-thirds (69.4%) have seen their grades falling over the past 2 months. Our current probe also demonstrates that almost two-

thirds (62.3%) of such children feel worthless or inferior. In addition, more than two-thirds (69.4%) have seen their grades falling over the past 2 months. This study has found 11.2% don't learn anything at school and 14.3% don't take part in sports or other activities. About 65.3% have difficulty in making friends and 62.2% does not play with other children and 51% are disobedient in school.

Other studies show children from divorced / separated parents showed lower self-esteem and conduct issues, lower academic test scores and school grades [18]. These children obtained less education, earned less income, had greater risk of depression and poor physical health [6]. They also had problems in their own marriages when they grew up as consequences of parental divorce persisted in adulthood [6]. Two USA articles published in 2014 measured child well-being status by adjusting for other variables like effects and causes of separation / divorce e.g. financial status, parental attitude etc [6,14]. However, our study didn't account for much of these variables as our primary objective was to explore the outcomes of parental separation as a whole.

LIMITATIONS:

Because most of the children who filled in the questionnaire for this study are students of private schools, there may be a selection bias. This study doesn't consider street children, child laborers, nature of parental occupation and hardly considers children in government schools. All these factors are highly likely to affect the outcome of this research especially in a developing country like Pakistan. For a better analysis, a wider study is needed which should compare the data with that of normal children.

CONCLUSION:

The hypothesis that parental separation would affect mental status of children negatively resulting in emotional disturbances was supported. So, there is a need of proper counselling of the children to make them understand the circumstances of separation. In addition to that, the platforms of print, electronic and social media should be employed to spread awareness on this subject. Public should be made aware of the drastic effects that an unstable familial environment brings to the mental well-being of children.

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