

School as the Second Home for Children: The Protective Factors of Parental Divorce in Chinese Middle Schools

While extensive research has documented the negative impacts of parental divorce on child development on average, significant heterogeneity exists in how children adapt to such family disruptions. A critical yet understudied factor in this variation is the moderating role of school environments, where children spend a substantial portion of their time outside home. A key methodological challenge arises from the lack of random assignment to schools and classrooms, which complicates causal inferences about teacher and peer influences. Leveraging China's randomized classroom assignment policy in middle schools, this study employs natural experimental conditions to identify the protective effects of teacher support and peer relationships on children from divorced families. Analyses employing school fixed-effects models reveal that children of divorced parents exhibit lower academic achievement, heightened behavioural issues, and increased depressive symptoms compared to peers from intact families. However, these adverse outcomes are significantly attenuated when children receive robust support from teachers and peers, with the most pronounced buffering effects observed in behavioural improvements. These findings underscore actionable pathways for policymakers: while preventing parental divorce at scale may be impractical, targeted school-based interventions—such as fostering supportive teacher-student relationships and peer networks—hold promise for mitigating the psychosocial and academic risks faced by this vulnerable population.