

# Empathy and Forgiveness in Adolescents Experiencing Parental Divorce

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**Abstract**— Adolescence is a critical developmental phase often marked by significant challenges, particularly for individuals experiencing parental divorce. This situation frequently leads to considerable emotional impacts, including disruptions in adolescents' capacity for forgiveness. Forgiveness is defined as the process of letting go of pain, anger, and resentment toward someone perceived to have caused emotional harm. Conversely, empathy is understood as the capacity to comprehend, share, and experience another person's emotional state or experience from their point of view. The present study aims to examine the relationship between empathy and forgiveness among adolescents who have experienced parental divorce. A total of 40 adolescents with divorced parents participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling. Additional contextual variables were included in the analysis, such as the adolescent's current living arrangements, whether the parents have remarried, the duration since the divorce occurred, and the age at which the adolescent became aware of the divorce. These variables were categorized into low, moderate, and high levels for analytical purposes. Data were analyzed using Pearson's product-moment correlation. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between empathy and forgiveness ( $r_{xy} = 0.539, p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ), indicating that higher levels of empathy are associated with greater capacity for forgiveness. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2 = 43.9\%$ ) suggests that empathy accounts for approximately 43.9% of the variance in forgiveness. The remaining 56.1% may be influenced by other factors, such as the offender's response, personality traits, relationship quality, and religious commitment.

**Keywords**— Adolescents, Parental divorce, Empathy, Forgiveness.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is characterized by specific developmental features that distinguish it from both earlier and later life stages. During this period, the role of parents as monitors becomes especially important, including overseeing adolescents' activities and maintaining the quality of the parent-child relationship within the family (Santrock, 2016). Ideally, individuals desire a harmonious and intact family environment, free from interpersonal conflict among its members (as cited in Munandar et al., 2020). However, in reality, not all families achieve this ideal. Increasingly, families are facing separation and divorce. Divorce is the termination of a marital relationship, often due to persistent conflict or mutual agreement that the relationship cannot be sustained. According to Hurlock (2018), divorce occurs when a husband and wife can no longer resolve their marital disputes, often resulting in emotional suffering for the entire family. Nugroho (2023) emphasizes that divorce can have negative consequences for all involved parties, including the divorcing couple, extended family members, and, most significantly, the children. Adolescents, in particular, are often

deeply affected. Santrock (2016) notes that adolescents from divorced families are more vulnerable to adjustment difficulties, academic challenges, lack of social responsibility, school dropout, substance abuse, and early sexual activity compared to those from intact families.

Parental divorce is often experienced by adolescents as a distressing and painful event. In many cases, adolescents report experiencing more emotional pain than their parents. When individuals feel hurt, mistreated, or wronged, their emotional well-being is often compromised. One adaptive response to the psychological impact of parental divorce is the process of forgiveness. McCullough et al. (2020) define forgiveness as a transformation in one's motivational system—marked by decreased motivation to avoid or seek revenge against the offender, and increased motivation to act with goodwill, even toward those who have caused harm. The severity of the emotional injury often correlates with the duration required to reach forgiveness. According to Thompson et al. (2015), the goal of forgiveness is to extend compassion not only toward others but also toward oneself and painful life circumstances. Empathy, in this context, is regarded as a significant contributing factor to the capacity for forgiveness.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McCullough et al. (as cited in Farhanindya & Rista, 2019), forgiveness is defined as a change in a person's motivational system characterized by a reduced motivation to seek revenge or avoid the offender, and an increased motivation to show goodwill and make peace with the offender, despite the hurtful actions committed. Forgiveness is also described as an individual's willingness to release hatred, negative judgments, and emotional indifference toward someone perceived to have inflicted harm, thereby fostering feelings of compassion, generosity, and even love toward the offender (Enright et al., as cited in Dewi & Nurul, 2017). Gani (as cited in Azra, 2017) conceptualizes forgiveness as the process of releasing pain, anger, and resentment caused by another person's harmful behavior. This emotional pain is gradually relinquished through a process that may take a considerable amount of time. When such pain is fully released, the individual has reached a state of forgiveness. Forgiveness is thus considered a state of mind, encompassing specific thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

McCullough and Witvliet (2015) identified three key traits associated with individuals who are more likely to forgive: agreeableness, emotional stability, religiousness and spirituality. In line with this, Flanigan (as cited in Enright &

North, 1998) outlined several behavioral indicators of forgiveness, including: the absence of lingering hatred toward the offender, a sense of neutrality or comfort during interactions with the offender, partial restoration of trust, and the achievement of reconciliation or the release of resentment. McCullough (2000) also proposed three aspects of forgiveness:

- a. Avoidance motivation: Refers to the tendency to avoid the person or situation that caused emotional pain. After successful forgiveness, this avoidance tendency typically diminishes. Individuals become less inclined to avoid both physical and psychological contact with the offender, and may instead be open to maintaining or repairing the relationship.
- b. Revenge motivation: Individuals who have forgiven are less driven by the desire for revenge. Forgiveness involves relinquishing the urge to retaliate or wish harm upon the offender. This reduction in anger and vindictive intent reflects a shift toward emotional regulation, peace, and reconciliation, promoting mental well-being.
- c. Benevolence motivation: Represents the final stage in the forgiveness process, characterized by a positive orientation toward the offender. This may include acts of kindness, empathy, or efforts to restore the relationship—even if the harm remains in memory. This motivation reflects a desire to foster harmony and healing rather than perpetuate conflict.

Worthington and Wade (as cited in Muthe et al., 2013) identified several factors that influence forgiveness, including empathy, offender response, personality traits, relationship quality, religious commitment, and rumination. Empathy, in particular, is considered a critical factor. According to Goleman (as mentioned in Nugraha et al., 2017), empathy is the capacity to comprehend and value others' feelings and challenges, to see things from their point of view, and to accept how they see the world. Cohen and Strayer (as cited in Putri, 2019) similarly describe empathy as the capacity to share in another's emotional experience and to comprehend their feelings and perspectives.

According to Davis (1994), empathy comprises four aspect components:

- a. Perspective Taking – The cognitive ability to adopt another person's point of view, which is associated with greater openness, fairness, and social functioning, and supports healthier interpersonal relationships.
- b. Fantasy – The tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into fictional situations, such as identifying with characters in stories, which fosters emotional understanding even without direct personal experience.
- c. Empathic Concern – The affective component of empathy involving feelings of sympathy, compassion, and concern for others, particularly those in distress, which motivates prosocial behavior.
- d. Personal Distress – A self-focused emotional response to the discomfort of others, often experienced as anxiety or unease during interpersonal encounters. Unlike empathic concern, this aspect may hinder helping behavior due to emotional overwhelm.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design, aimed at examining the relationship between variables. The population consisted of adolescents aged 16–18 years residing in District X, North Sumatra Province, who had experienced parental divorce. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling. According to Sugiyono (2019), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected based on specific criteria to ensure the data obtained are more representative. The sample comprised 40 adolescents who met the following inclusion criteria: adolescents whose parents were divorced, residents of District X, aged between 16 and 18 years, and willing to participate in the study. Data collection was conducted using psychological scales, specifically an empathy scale and a forgiveness scale, both of which were developed based on the Likert scale method. The empathy scale was constructed based on the four dimensions of empathy proposed by Davis (1994), as adapted in the study by Rizky (2022), namely: perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. The forgiveness scale was developed using the three dimensions of forgiveness proposed by McCullough (1998), which include avoidance motivation, revenge motivation, and benevolence motivation, and was adapted from the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale–18 (TRIM-18), as utilized in the study by Amajida et al. (2023). The data were analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25.0 for Windows.

### IV. RESULT

#### 1. Normality Test

The normality of the data distribution was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk Test. A significance value  $p > 0.05$  indicates that the data are normally distributed. The results are presented in the following table:

TABLE 1. Normality Test Results

Variable	SW-S	Sig	Information
Empathy	0.975	0.504	Normal
Forgiveness	0.981	0.719	Normal

Criterion: If  $p > 0.05$ , the data distribution is considered normal.  
Information :

- SW-S : Shapiro-Wilk Statistic
- Sig : Significance Value

#### 2. Linearity Test

Linearity was tested using the F-test. The relationship is considered linear if the  $p$ -value for Deviation from Linearity exceeds 0.05. The results are summarized below:

TABLE 2. Linearity Test Results

Correlational	F	P	Information
Empathy and Forgiveness	1.587	0.186	Linier

Criterion: If  $p > 0.05$  (Deviation from Linearity), the relationship is considered linear.

Information :

- F : Linearity Coefficient
- P : Significance Value

3. Hypothesis Testing – Pearson Correlation Analysis

The hypothesis was tested using Pearson’s Product-Moment Correlation. The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between empathy and forgiveness, with a correlation coefficient  $r_{xy} = 0.539$  and a significance level of  $p = 0.000$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the research hypothesis is accepted: there is a positive relationship between empathy and forgiveness. The coefficient of determination  $r^2 = 0.439$ , indicating that empathy contributes 43.9% to forgiveness. The remaining 56.1% may be explained by other factors not examined in this study.

TABLE 3. Correlation Hypothesis Test Results

Statistics	Coefficient ( $r_{xy}$ )	P	Koef.Det. ( $r^2$ )	BE%	Information
X-Y	0.539	0.005	0.439	43.9%	Signifikan

Criteria: if  $P(\text{sig}) < 0.05$  then there is a relationship

Information:

X : Empathy

Y : Forgiveness

$r_{xy}$  : Correlation coefficient between variable X and variable Y

$r^2$  : Coefficient of determination of X on Y

p : Probability of error (significance level)

BE% (*Standardized Effective Contribution*): The percentage of empathy’s effective contribution to forgiveness

4. Hypothetical and Empirical Mean Analysis

a. Hypothetical Mean

The empathy variable consists of 35 items formatted using a 4-point Likert scale, where each item ranges from a minimum score of 1 to a maximum score of 4. The hypothetical mean is calculated as follows: Hypothetical Mean (Empathy) =  $\{(35 \times 1) + (35 \times 4)\} : 2 = 87.5$ . The forgiveness variable consists of 16 items, also using a 4-point Likert scale with the same scoring range. The hypothetical mean is: Hypothetical Mean (Forgiveness) =  $\{(16 \times 1) + (16 \times 4)\} : 2 = 40$ .

b. Empirical Mean

Based on the data analysis: The empirical mean for the empathy variable is 104.90. The empirical mean for the forgiveness variable is 49.78.

c. Interpretation Criteria

The condition of empathy and forgiveness among adolescents with divorced parents is assessed by comparing the empirical mean with the hypothetical mean, taking into account the standard deviation (SD). A higher empirical mean than the hypothetical mean indicates that the tendency or level of the variable (e.g., empathy or forgiveness) is relatively high in the studied population.

TABLE 4. Summary of Hypothetical and Empirical Means

Variable	SD	Mean		Information
		Hypothetical	Empirical	
Empathy	11.553	87.5	104.90	High
Forgiveness	7.328	40	49.78	High

Following their parents’ divorce, the majority of adolescents reside with their mother (42.5%), followed by those living with a guardian (22.5%). Approximately 15% of

adolescents live with their father, while 10% live with a sibling and another 10% live independently. Overall, 57.5% of adolescents live with a biological parent (either mother or father), while the remaining 42.5% reside with guardians, siblings, or on their own.

TABLE 5. Description of Subjects Based on Who They Live With

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Father	6	15,0	15,0
Mother	17	42,5	57,5
Sibling	4	10,0	67,5
Guardian	9	22,5	90,0
Lives alone	4	10,0	100,0

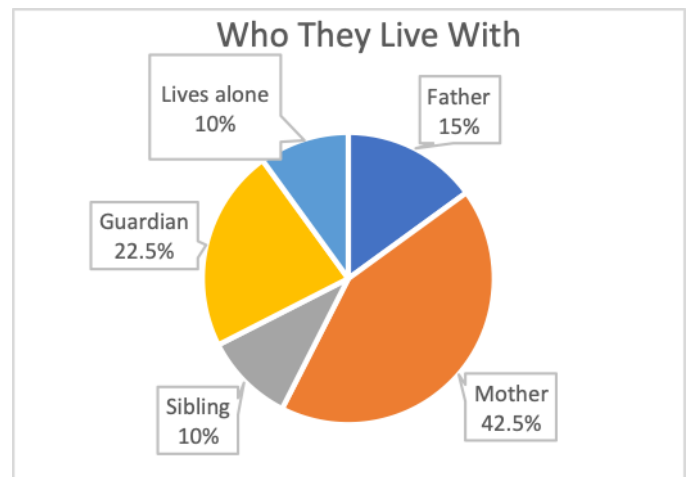


Figure 1. Percentage Distribution of Subjects Based on Current Living Arrangements

TABLE 6. Categorization of Forgiveness Scores Based on Living Arrangements

Category	Low	Medium	High
Father	0	2	4
Mother	1	7	9
Sibling	0	2	2
Guardian	0	2	7
Lives alone	0	0	4
Total	1	13	26

Adolescents living with their mother predominantly exhibit forgiveness in the high category, followed by the moderate category, with no individuals falling into the low forgiveness category. Adolescents residing with their father, siblings, or guardians generally display forgiveness levels within the moderate and high categories. Notably, no adolescents living with their father, siblings, guardians, or independently fall into the low forgiveness category, suggesting that living arrangements influence adolescent developmental outcomes.

TABLE 7. Description of Subjects Based on Whether Parents Have Remarried After Divorce

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Already	33	82,5	82,5
Not yet	7	17,5	100,0

The majority of parents (82.5%) have remarried following divorce, indicating a significant tendency to form new

relationships. Meanwhile, 17.5% of parents have not remarried, suggesting that although remarriage is the dominant choice, a minority of parents opt not to enter into new marital relationships.

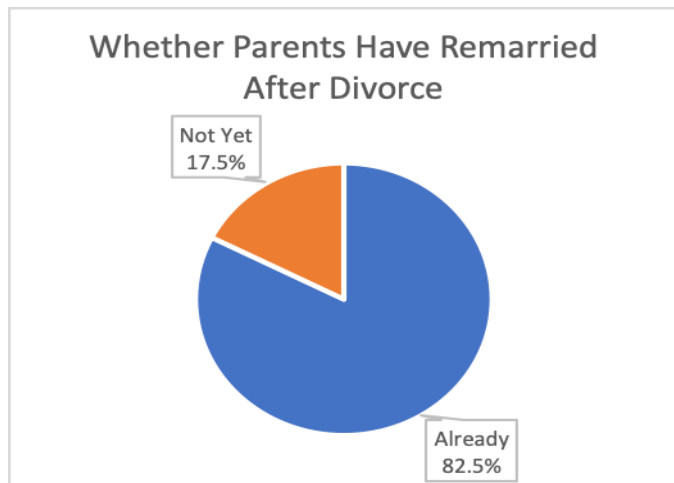


Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of Subjects Based on Whether Parents Have Remarried After Divorce

TABLE 8. Categorization of Forgiveness Scores Based on Whether Parents Have Remarried After Divorce

Category	Low	Medium	High
Already	1	12	20
Not yet	0	1	6
Total	1	13	26

The majority of adolescents exhibit forgiveness in the high category, regardless of whether their parents have remarried or not. However, the group whose parents have remarried shows a more varied distribution, with some adolescents falling into the low and moderate forgiveness categories.

TABLE 9. Description of Subjects Based on the Duration Since Parental Divorce

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-4 Years	27	67,5	67,5
5-9 Years	5	12,5	80,0
10-13 Years	8	20,0	100,0

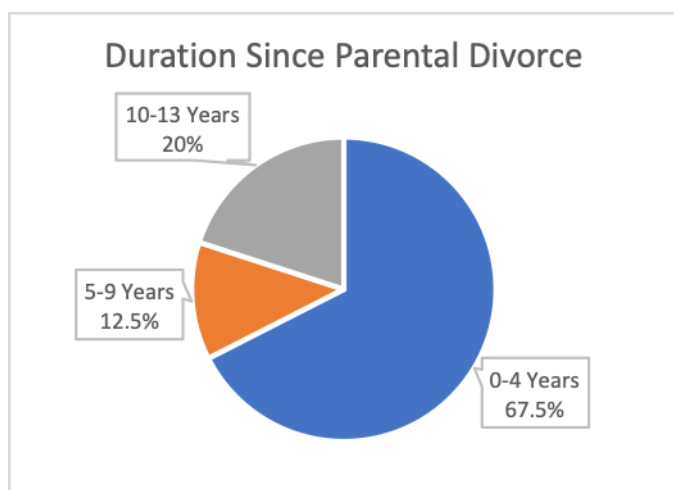


Figure 3. Percentage Distribution of Subjects Based on Duration Since Parental Divorce

The majority of parents of the adolescents have been divorced for a relatively short period, specifically less than 10 years, with the largest proportion in the 0–4 year category. Adolescents experiencing a longer duration since parental divorce (10–13 years) tend to have had sufficient time to adapt to the situation.

TABLE 10. Categorization of Forgiveness Scores Based on Duration Since Parental Divorce

Category	Low	Medium	High
0-4 Years	0	11	16
5-9 Years	0	2	3
10-13 Years	1	0	7
Total	1	13	26

The majority of adolescents are classified within the high forgiveness category (26 adolescents), followed by the moderate category (13 adolescents), with very few in the low forgiveness category (1 adolescent). No adolescents fall into the low forgiveness category within the 0–4 years and 5–9 years groups, while most are categorized as high forgiveness in these time frames.

TABLE 11. Description of Subjects Based on Age at Awareness of Parental Divorce

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
5-9 Years	11	27,5	27,5
10-14 Years	12	30,0	57,5
15-18 Years	17	42,5	100,0

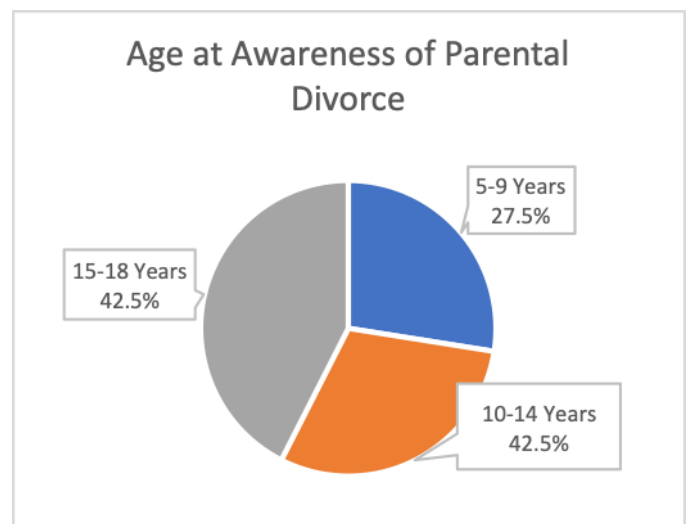


Figure 6. Percentage Distribution of Subjects Based on Age at Awareness of Parental Divorce

The majority of adolescents became aware of their parents' divorce during adolescence, with the largest proportion between ages 15–18, followed by those who learned of it at a younger age, specifically between 5–9 years old.

TABLE 12. Categorization of Forgiveness Scores Based on Age at Awareness of Parental Divorce

Category	Low	Medium	High
5-9 Years	1	1	9
10-14 Years	0	5	7
15-18 Years	0	7	10
Total	1	13	26

Based on the age at which adolescents became aware of their parents' divorce, the majority exhibit forgiveness in the high category (26 adolescents), followed by the moderate category (13 adolescents). No adolescents in the 10–14 years and 15–18 years age groups fall into the low forgiveness category. However, the 5–9 years age group includes some adolescents with forgiveness levels in the low and moderate categories, while the 10–18 years groups are predominantly classified within the moderate and high forgiveness categories.

## V. DISCUSSION

The hypothesis test results showed a correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of 0.539 with a significance level of  $p = 0.000$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating a significant positive relationship between empathy and forgiveness. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) was 0.439, meaning that 43.9% of the variance in forgiveness can be effectively explained by empathy. This finding is consistent with Struthers (2015), who found that empathy enhances forgiveness ability. Similarly, Lange (2018) identified empathy as a strong predictor of forgiveness. The remaining 56.1% of forgiveness variance is influenced by other factors not examined in this study, such as the offender's response, personality traits, relationship quality, and religious commitment.

These findings also support Enright's (2007) theory emphasizing the importance of empathy in the forgiveness process. Simorangkir (2019) found that empathy contributed 29.2% as a predictor of forgiveness, while Alawwiyah (2020) demonstrated that empathy affects an individual's willingness to forgive those who have caused harm.

Mean score analysis further revealed that adolescents who experienced parental divorce had high levels of empathy, with an empirical mean of 104.90, exceeding the hypothetical mean of 49.78. This suggests that most adolescents have forgiven their parents' divorce and accepted the decision.

Parental divorce significantly impacts adolescents' psychosocial development, particularly empathy, which in turn influences forgiveness. Additional analyses showed most adolescents lived with their mothers post-divorce, while others lived with guardians, fathers, siblings, or alone. This aligns with Luthar & Ciciolla (2016), who found maternal attachment plays a crucial role in adolescents' empathy development post-divorce. Warm, responsive parenting helps adolescents understand others' perspectives, especially in social and family contexts (Miklikowska, 2016).

Parental remarriage after divorce also affects adolescents' perspectives. Most parents remarried, potentially providing emotional stability or becoming new stress sources. Sorkhabi & Mandara (as cited in Peristiano et al., 2020) found remarriage can have positive effects if the new family environment is supportive but may increase stress if conflicts arise, requiring adolescents to develop empathy to adapt.

Duration since divorce influences adolescent forgiveness. Most adolescents in this study exhibited higher forgiveness, especially those with longer post-divorce durations (10–13 years). Dewi (2012) noted that time facilitates emotional recovery in children of divorced parents. Amato (2014)

similarly found that, over time, adolescents develop more adaptive coping mechanisms to adjust to family changes.

The age at which adolescents learned of the divorce also impacts empathy and forgiveness. Older adolescents tend to better understand and accept the situation, empathize with family members' emotions, and forgive more readily than younger children, who may experience emotional confusion (Lansford, 2019).

This study's findings align with characteristics of individuals unable to forgive, as described by Putri et al. (2024), who noted such individuals often feel anger, sadness, stress, anxiety, and depression, sometimes accompanied by hostile behaviors like avoidance.

According to Bono and McCullough (2016), forgiveness is a process involving benevolent intentions toward offenders despite prior hurt. Forgiveness not only removes resentment but also fosters healthier relationships.

Forgiveness has significant positive impacts on well-being. In contrast, inability to forgive leads to revenge urges and negative mental health consequences such as increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Nihayah et al., 2021). Worthington et al. (2005) demonstrated that unforgiveness leads to prolonged stress and worsened trauma, while forgiveness acts as a buffer, promoting positive emotions and reducing stress reactions.

Moreover, Worthington and Scherer (2004) emphasized forgiveness's role in improving resilience and physical health by influencing hormonal balance and the nervous system, highlighting its holistic benefits.

Empathy motivates forgiveness by enabling individuals to understand offenders' feelings and perspectives, facilitating forgiveness and mitigating unforgiveness's negative health impacts. Essentially, greater empathy corresponds with higher forgiveness capacity (McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 1997). Helmut & Nancy (2021) further supported a positive relationship between empathy and forgiveness among adolescents aged 16–18 years. Overall, this study reinforces empathy as a crucial factor in fostering forgiveness in adolescents experiencing parental divorce.

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