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Children of Divorce: New Trends and Ongoing Dilemmas

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Currently, and for the foreseeable future, divorce occupies a persistent place in the social structure as a family transition that substantially impacts all members, not least ~~are~~ the children. In this child-centered chapter we will describe three major aspects of family relationships that exacerbate children's problematic development or shield them from the potentially more pernicious effects of divorce: (1) the child's relationship with the residential parent; (2) the amount and type of conflict between parents; and (3) the quality of access and relationship the child has with the non-residential, or less seen parent, typically the father. We will then introduce some of the new concepts and dilemmas mental health and legal professionals have encountered in recent years: parenting plans for young children, parent relocation cases, and child alienation from one parent.

Divorce as a Stressful Transition in Family Life

Divorce creates a number of stressors for family members (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006), and it is thus a potent risk factor for children. As compared to children with married parents, children with divorced parents have poorer academic achievement and higher school dropout rates, more behavioral and emotional problems, lower self-esteem, and more difficulties with interpersonal relationships (Amato, 1993, 2000; Kelly, 2000). Qualitative reports on the emotional costs children experience detail painful feelings and memories, and longing for more contact with fathers, over the course of childhood (Emery, 2004; Marquadt, 2006; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

Despite these risks, most children face 2–3 years of destabilization before adapting to the divorce, with few lasting detrimental effects (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). While almost all children experience distress from divorce, only 20–25% are at risk for developing

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emotional problems such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and conduct disorders (Emery, 2004). Thus, divorce does not condemn children to a life of problems and hardship but does elevate risk factors that are cause for concern (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006).

Age Differences in Adjustment

When parents ask at what age it is least harmful to their children to separate, the answer from existing research points to different risks at different ages, and the divorcing process and family relationships before and after divorce hold more weight than age and developmental stage in and of themselves.

Infancy and early childhood

Research examining the impact of divorce on young children, under 6 years of age, remains consistent in the types of difficulties portrayed for children, but inconclusive in the longevity of those difficulties. Since infancy through preschool is a sensitive and rapid time for cognitive development, young children may be at greater risk of developing a negative self-image, behavioral problems, and an inability to form positive attachments and relationships. Changes in the amount of time an infant spends with her or his parents, changes in her or his living environment and schedule, and changes in her or his primary caretaker(s)' emotional wellbeing may interfere with the infant's emotional development and ability to form and maintain secure attachments. For example, both Solomon and George (1999) and Clarke-Stewart et al. (2000) described infant-mother attachment problems in separated and divorced families, though both studies attributed the problems to other factors – parental conflict and the economic and emotional wellbeing of the mother – rather than the divorce itself.

Consistent with their developmental proclivities toward autonomy and regression demands, toddlers with divorced parents show greater fear of abandonment, regressive behaviors (often around toilet habits), distrust in others, frequency and immensity of tantrums, and a tendency to blame themselves (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Hermon & Bretherton, 2001). Pruett and Pruett (1999) found that children under the age of 6 often had inaccurate or vague information concerning the nature of the divorce and expressed concern about their relationships with both parents. Still in an egocentric stage of cognitive development, they were likely to think that their behavior caused the separation and clung to hopes that their parents would reunite.

Middle childhood

Children ranging in age from 6 to 12 experience stress in academic and social as well as emotional domains. Approximately one third of children who experience divorce

tend to suffer academically (Amato, 2001), particularly in reading, spelling, and math (Bisnaire, Firestone, & Rynard, 1990). Further, school-age children of divorce demonstrate more aggressive conduct than their peers from two-parent households, particularly within the first 2 years after parental separation (e.g., Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990). As the development of loyalty and passions for following the “rules of the game” are important characteristics of this age group, so these children may be especially prone to allying with one parent against the other (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Though statistical differences ~~in the groups~~ are modest (Amato, 2001), children may feel depressed even when functioning well in the outer world (Kliewer & Sandler, 1993). School-based interventions and group therapy tend to be the most accessible and relied-on methods of treatment for this age.

Adolescence

While older adolescents experiencing parental divorce have a more intimate understanding of what is happening between their parents, they also feel frustrated and powerless to make things better, turning to alcohol, drugs, and premature sexual activity, along with aggressive and delinquent behaviors, to express their upset (Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 2006; Kirby, 2002). Boundaries may blur with children becoming confidantes to their parents as the parents openly criticize their ex-spouse, discuss their own personal struggles, and consult their teenagers about parenting issues of younger children and household expenses while issuing the teens increased responsibilities in household duties and child care. Although maternal disclosure is more often associated with mother–daughter relationships, Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, Lee, & Escalante (2004) found a significant correlation between maternal disclosure and psychological distress for both sons and daughters.

Overall, studies show that adolescents experiencing parental divorce are more likely to have greater psychological distress and poorer self-esteem than adolescents from two-parent households (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), including difficulty trusting and higher conflict in their romantic relationships (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Jacquet & Surra, 2000), and a greater likelihood of divorcing themselves in adulthood (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). While a meta-analysis of relevant studies indicates that emotional problems manifest more strongly for older children, compared to academic problems for younger children (Amato, 2001), the academic problems that surface for adolescents may be compounded due to the more serious turn that schooling takes in older years, with concomitant risks for school dropout (Lansford, Malone, & Castellino, 2006; Simons & Associates, 1996).

Gender Differences in Adjustment

Early divorce research found that boys at various ages showed greater difficulty adjusting to divorce than girls in a variety of areas. More recent research with methodological

improvements is less clear about differing gender effects: there is modest support for boys' greater vulnerability, yet both genders show difficulties across various domains (Amato, 2001). Among younger children, boys exhibit more negative effects, for example, while among adolescents, girls seem to bear the brunt of the parental divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Further, Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella (2004) found that overnights with fathers, inconsistent parenting plan schedules, and having more caretakers were more difficult adjustments to make for toddler boys than for girls. Also, Johnston (1993) found that boys were more vulnerable to becoming embroiled in parental conflict than girls. It seems clear that gender differences in adjustment may favor one gender or the other depending on the age of the child and the involvement status of both parents; however, it should be noted that only a cluster of girls from divorced families show the development of exceptional competence following divorce (Hetherington, 1999), and it is girls who seem to actually benefit from overnights with their fathers at an early age (Pruett et al., 2004). Thus, being a girl may have some protective functions for younger children of divorce.

Relationship with the Residential Parent

For many adults, divorce is a period of personal identity reformation and rapid change in many aspects of their lives. The resulting parental disequilibrium may be manifested in temporary despondency or the longer-term development of alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). These symptoms are generally most intense during the first year post-separation, in which parents must learn to negotiate the economic, social, and emotional adjustments that divorce entails.

Throughout the transition, the primary or residential parent's mental health is of particular concern for the child. If the residential parent is experiencing mental health symptoms, other pre-existing risk factors may be stirred up, decreasing the healthier family functions that serve a protective function during and after divorce (Cowan, Cowan, Cohen, Pruett, & Pruett, in press), exposing children to further risks and complications. Mental health problems may also exacerbate conflict with the nonresidential parent (Whiteside & Becker, 2000).

The mental health and stability of both parents are a central ingredient in the maintenance of quality parenting, which is, in turn, one of the strongest protective factors for children of divorce, with evidence pointing particularly to the salience of the custodial or residential parent's relationship with the child (Forgatch, Patterson, & Ray, 1995; Hetherington, 1999). A strong and consistent link exists between authoritative parenting and positive child adjustment, a parenting style that involves consistent discipline, parental monitoring, and engaging in warm and open communication with children (Kelly, 2000; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). In addition to psychological stressors, the need for many residential parents to work outside of the home more hours than previously, and a lowered economic status of the family (especially among female-headed households), contribute to parents' decreased availability and effectiveness. Conditions outside of the

nuclear family also impact parenting quality after divorce, notably extended family involvement and conflict, and legal conditions such as the family's engagement in the adversarial court system versus alternative dispute resolution (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Parental Cooperation and Conflict

Parent conflict is widely recognized as a key risk factor for poorer overall development for children post-divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). While the majority of parents reduce their levels of dispute within 2–3 years, 8–20% of parents may continue to display high levels of conflict for a greater period of time (Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2006), exposing their children to attitudes and behaviors that undermine childhood development. Frequent or continuous conflict, especially ~~any~~ which places children as the central focus, occurs in the children's presence, or encourages children to declare their loyalty to one parent over the other, is associated with academic, behavioral, relational, and emotional problems during childhood and into adulthood (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Grych, 2005; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Parental conflict may also have indirect effects that negatively impact the family system, including the development of gatekeeping behaviors, often manifested in divorcing families as the residential parent's efforts to restrict the non-residential parent's access to and involvement with the children after divorce (Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007). It is important to note, however, that if parents are able to keep their children out of their conflicts, children are more likely to have levels of functioning that are similar to those of children whose parents had very little or no conflict (Grych, 2005). Even when parents engage in conflict, a child's relationship with a warm and caring extended family member or adult outside of the family, such as a neighbor, coach, or teacher, can help mitigate the negative effects of parental strife (Hetherington, 1999).

Some parents can cooperate on a child's behalf even when they disagree on major issues or values. Such cooperation facilitates the child's adaptation to the divorce, especially when making transitions between homes or activities. Such cooperation is especially important for positive paternal involvement since mothers are usually primary caretakers of the children after divorce, as described below (Pruett et al., 2007).

Non-Residential Parent–Child Contact and Relationship

Despite a general trend toward increased father involvement over the past generation (Cowan et al., in press), the traditional structure of primary child custody and residence with the mother continues to prevail in the majority of divorce situations. The corresponding reduction in father involvement, interest, and economic support over time (Baum, 2006; Kelly, 2006), and the lack of clarity surrounding paternal roles and responsibilities after divorce (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000; Minton & Paisley, 1996), may even result in a

complete loss of contact with fathers, viewed as one of the more negative effects of divorce (Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Johnston, 1993; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Early research on the relationship between father–child contact and children’s post-divorce adjustment focused on the frequency of contact as the critical determinant of the relationship and revealed only equivocal effects (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Yet as researchers began to explore the quality (rather than quantity) of father–child contact and involvement, studies consistently indicated that when fathers are attuned to and active in their children’s lives, children experience more positive psychological and social adjustment and perform better academically (Pruett, 2000). A healthy relationship between fathers and children could actually counteract some of the effects of parental conflict. Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that children who spent more time with their fathers post-divorce had better long-term relationships with them, even in families with high levels of conflict. Moreover, as time spent with fathers increases, especially in shared residential arrangements, parent conflict can decrease (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Bauserman, 2002).

A cautionary note must be added: father involvement in children’s lives is not always healthy or desirable. In situations of severe mental health problems, drug or alcohol abuse, family domestic violence, or child abuse, father access may be limited, supervised, or suspended as deemed appropriate in the child’s best interests.

While non-residential parents, as recently as 1980, often lost all relationship with their children post-divorce, the percentage of children who lose contact with their fathers 2–3 years after divorce dropped to 18–25% by the late 1990s (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Kelly, 2006). This trend has been aided by the development of a variety of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) procedures and post-divorce interventions supported and/or mandated in the legal system (Schepard, 2004). Mediation is one intervention widely implemented and researched with positive results (Beck, Sales, & Emery, 2004). Gradually, divorce and court-related interventions such as the Collaborative Divorce Project (Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005) are incorporating the interests and needs of fathers. These interventions typically are designed to encourage fathers to remain active in childrearing after divorce, to increase parenting skills and motivation, and to decrease parental conflict (also see Cookston, Braver, Griffin, deLusé, & Miles, 2007; Mincy & Pouncy, 2002).

Newer Issues of Which We Know Little Empirically

Parenting plans for young children

Along with the growth and expansion of joint custody statutes and litigation, attitudes and parenting practices have undergone a shift in favor of more varied patterns of custody and access. Parenting plans are the medium through which custody labels get operationalized into actual schedules regarding all decisions, including time spent with each parent. Parenting plans for young children are highly disputed (Pruett, 2005; Pruett et al., 2004) and quietly contested in the offices of therapists and mediators. Dilemmas

include at what age a child should begin regular overnights with a non-residential parent, how many transitions per week a child should reasonably be able to manage, and whether young children can split their time near equally in two households, to name a few. While little research exists in this area, available data suggest that a young child's adjustment to spending overnights in both homes will be a function of child characteristics and parents' ability to respond to their child's needs sensitively and collaboratively (Pruett et al., 2004; Solomon & Biringen, 2001).

Relocation/move-aways

In relocation cases, children who have experienced care and nurturance from two involved parents are faced with the loss of regular contact with one parent when the other one initiates a residential move in order to secure a better job, support a new romantic relationship, or live closer to extended family. In such situations, parents – and often a judge – weigh the potential attenuation in the non-residential parent–child relationship against the potential gains in life circumstances and satisfactions for the residential parent, and consider how the risks and benefits would trickle down to the child.

State laws on relocation vary widely, with some states declaring a presumption permitting relocation and others declaring a presumption that precludes it (Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2003). Currently, the majority of states favor a “best interests of the child” standard, with no presumptions attached (Elrod, 2006), though this direction is of little comfort to mental health professionals who work with the courts to determine the best interests of a particular child in a particular case.

Little to nothing is currently known about the effects of parental moves on the wellbeing of parents and children after divorce. Family relocations generally can have a negative impact on children's emotional adjustment and school performance, and there are indications that relocations are more difficult for children in divorcing than intact families (Austin, 2000), but research in this area is sorely needed to understand the impact on children of varying ages and their families.

Parental alienation

Parental alienation is a phenomenon associated with high-conflict divorce and custody disagreements. In this process, the child becomes hostile to one parent while strongly allying with the other parent, with alienation implying that the aligned parent intentionally created a wedge between the child and her or his other parent. While alignments are common in disputing families, such alignments cross over into alienation when the child's hatred of and/or withdrawal from the parent is unrelenting and out of proportion to the parent's behavior (Kelly & Johnston, 2001).

Research suggests that all family members make contributions to family dynamics that result in alienation of a parent (Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001). The goals of interventions targeting alienated children and their parents are to take the child's mutually exclusive views of each parent as “bad” or “good,” and help the child cope with distressing

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feelings and appraise their parents and the situation more realistically, while addressing relationships between all family members, treating the family system as well as the disenfranchised parent. Successful interventions combine strict contracts with families and support from the legal system for residential arrangements, enforcement of contact, and monitoring the well-being and safety of the child (Sullivan & Kelly, 2001).

Conclusions

No matter how normative divorce has become, the decision for parents to separate and divorce places children and their families at risk for both short- and long-term suffering. The field of psychology has made great strides in understanding what makes divorce difficult for children of all ages, and how to support family adaptation through various models of intervention. In addition to divorce counseling, psychotherapy, and family evaluation conducted separately from or in adjunction to legal actions, systemic policies and practices that support family adaptation have been developed, researched, and implemented in courts, schools, and communities throughout the western world. Some of the most common of these include: (1) school-based groups and interventions that help students stay on track educationally and socially (e.g., O'Halloran & Carr, 2000; Wolchik et al., 2002); (2) parent education that helps parents become aware of what their children need during divorce, and enhances parental communication, conflict management, and problem-solving skills (Cookston, Braver, Sandler, & Genalo, 2002; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, & Montes, 2001); (3) alternative dispute resolution strategies such as mediation that aim to maximize parental cooperation, minimize conflict, and reduce the financial costs of protracted and intensive involvement in the legal system (Pruett & Johnston, 2004; Schepard, 2004); and (4) quasi-judicial services such as parenting coordination in which mental health professionals mediate or arbitrate parental disputes related to day-to-day issues (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlík, 2004). The goals of these practices are to promote parent self-determination and child stability and adaptation during this family transition.

However, a great deal remains in terms of the development of mental health practices related to some of the newer, distressing trends in divorce law and social policy. Parenting plans for vulnerable children, relocation, and parental alienation are but a few of these lesser-understood areas. We have much to learn, and much work to do, to sustain the children and families for whom this transition will be one of life's critical tests, and support their capacity to rise above the pain toward greater self-understanding and relational competence.

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