

Post-Divorce Family Relationships as Mediating Factors in the Consequences of Divorce for Children

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In this study, the psychological structure of the family after divorce is seen as mediating the impact of divorce upon children. Divorce affects primary bonds with parents, presents challenges to conceptions of social reality, and creates stress which interferes with normal development. The effects of divorce upon child behavior (peer relations, stress, aggression, work effectiveness at school) were examined through two contrasting research strategies: 1) a comparison of the behavior of children in divorced and intact families, and 2) analysis of the association between family processes and child outcomes in intact and divorced families. Family processes examined were: (a) the affective relationships between the father and mother, (b) the affective relationships between the child and each parent separately, and (c) for divorced families, the amount of contact between child and non-custodial parent. For divorced and intact groups combined, the relationships among family members appeared to be more potent influences on child behavior than was marital status. The negative effects of divorce were greatly mitigated when positive relationships with both parents were

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maintained. The child's relationship with the non-custodial parent (father) was as important as the continuing relationship with the mother. Implications for research and for public policy are discussed.

The high rate of divorce in the United States has created a need for reliable data about the effects of family change on children. Although recent studies of the effects of divorce have begun to build a useful knowledge base, there are two features of most research in this area that limit its relevance for judicial decisions, public policy, and professional counseling. First, the design of many studies concentrates on differences between groups of children from divorced and non-divorced families. The focus is on the consequences of change in the structure of living arrangements and legal status of the group. Results of such studies provide little information about the quality of communication, trust, and emotional support that link family members to one another or about how such processes affect children.

A second drawback to many studies of divorce is that they do not include study of the psychological structure of families after divorce as a source of influence on children. Divorce and the absence of one parent are treated as major events that, presumably, account for a variety of outcomes in children. Although the design may include measures of child behavior long after the divorce has occurred, the possible contribution of post-divorce family relationships to these outcomes is seldom examined. Divorce changes the relationship between the parents, it does not end it. Psychological ties continue to connect all family members after the divorce papers have been signed. Even the absence of contact with a divorced parent may be seen as a form of relationship, invoking resentment or anger and feelings of deprivation.

The patterns of exchange that emerge after marriage dissolution differ greatly from one family to the next. They also often change after anger subsides, as new intimate relationships and friendships are formed, and as new jobs and support systems are found. Parents and children who were estranged by the conflict of divorce may be reconciled months or years later. The effect of divorce at any time after separation is a consequence of both the trauma of divorce and the subsequent alterations in the family emotional network. These post-divorce patterns presumably affect children, but their potential contributions to child outcomes are rarely examined independently of the divorce experience itself.

The effects of divorce could be examined in more depth if marital dissolution were viewed as a dramatic, often traumatic,

event that altered family relationships but did not end them. Such a research strategy would require more attention to family process variables. It would, ideally, also include designs to study families at various stages of development after divorce.

In the study described here, we have tried to identify some of the processes involved in divorce that could be expected to influence children's behavior. It combines the more traditional structural (group-difference) approach with one that attends directly to the effect of changes in family relationships.

FAMILY PROCESSES AND CHILD BEHAVIOR

The study had two major objectives: first, to compare the social and school behavior of children from divorced and intact families and, second, to examine the relationships among members in both types of family and the effect of such relationships upon children.

The major concept underlying the selection of variables was that the stress of divorce interferes with normal growth processes by absorbing the child's mental and emotional energy. The children of the study were nine to eleven years old. This is a period during which the salient developmental tasks are to build cognitive skills as a basis for further learning, and to gain social skills that prepare for positive relationships with peers. These tasks require effort; the sense of industry, of which Erikson speaks, is a central issue. Several aspects of the divorce experience may interfere with normal developmental progress and delay development of the child's ability to work and play effectively.

The threat of loss of a primary bond to the parent who is leaving is, of course, a fundamental aspect of the trauma of divorce. The emotional consequences for children—depression, anger, anxiety, withdrawal—are often severe. The stress created by separation is usually most severe in the year or two following divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). The extent to which it subsides after this time may be determined in part by the quality of interaction among family members after divorce.

The separation of father and mother often brings implicit or even explicit demands for allegiance by one or both parents. Such conflicting pressures for loyalty intensify stress. Continued antagonism between the parents may cause the child to be guarded in conversations with both, lest he or she reveal information that might hurt or anger either parent. Such conflict might escalate and provoke legal action by one or the other. A battle for the child's loyalty raises anxiety and places a burden of responsibility

upon the child for the welfare of the adults on whom she or he depends. As one child in our study commented, "After divorce you have to be really careful about your parents' feelings." Such premature shifting of responsibility to the child is one outcome of conflicts of loyalty. The child may be compelled to behave at a more mature level of interpersonal sensitivity and awareness than is reasonable at this stage of development.

Divorce disrupts the child's perceptions of social reality. It confronts the child not only with loss but also with the need to reorder internal representations of familiar external patterns. Concepts of roles of father and mother and perceptions of the permanence of relationships must be revised. The rationale for the divorce is usually not clear to children of this age. The news of separation may come as a surprise even if the child knows that the parents are unhappy. Divorce is a cognitive puzzle for the child, bringing dissonance and inconsistency to the child's social and affective world. To deal with loss and to rearrange the disrupted perceptions demand time and energy that must be withdrawn from the work of the schoolroom and from social interaction with peers.

Our conceptual model is thus based on a view of divorce as potentially interrupting the normal progress of development by threatening primary bonds, creating conflicts of loyalty that require developmentally inappropriate levels of sensitivity and thought, and disrupting internalized conceptions of social reality. These combine to absorb the mental concentration and emotional energy of the child. The degree to which the divorce is handled by parents in a way that minimizes these effects will help determine whether there are behavioral consequences for the child and how severe those effects will be.

These normal processes of development may also be interrupted by disharmony in intact families (Rutter, 1971). Similar stresses may be aroused by lack of emotional support by parents for one another or for the child and by conflict within the family. These stresses can have behavioral consequences for the child in an intact, but disharmonious, family.

Parental Discord

Divorce ruptures the relationship between the husband and wife and its impact upon their children depends on how well the parents keep such disruption from affecting other relationships within the family network. Cooperation and collaboration between the two adults, and their support of one another in their roles

as parents, helps preserve the bond between child and parent. Anger between parents and conflict around child rearing responsibilities perpetuate a state of emotional disequilibrium. These conditions may force the child to attempt to withdraw from both parents (a virtually impossible alternative) or to take sides. Such a set of conditions also gives the child opportunities to play one parent against the other. High levels of parental discord may keep the child constantly distressed and confused and make it difficult for him or her to organize perceptions of the new social reality.

Parent-Child Relationships

Affective interaction between the child and each parent is defined here in terms of its quality—the degree of positive and negative emotion that characterizes the relationship. Our definition covers the feelings of the child toward the mother and father separately, and the feelings of each parent toward the child. Other indications of the quality of the relationships are the openness of communication between each parent and child and the amount of child-oriented time they spend together.

The affective quality of the relationship limits or enhances the effectiveness of the parents in their socializing and nurturing roles, and affects the internalization of parental norms by the child. A close relationship with both parents increases the child's confidence that the conflict does not involve her or him, and that the primary bond with each parent will not be lost. This reduces preoccupation with the divorce, freeing energy for attention to social and school-related activities.

The Child's Contact with the Parent Without Custody

The absence of fathers from their families is often associated with a decrease in quantitative skills (Shinn, 1978) and inadequate development of sex-typed behavior (Biller & Bahm, 1971) in children, especially in boys. Such effects have also been reported in instances where the father lives with the family but is to some degree unavailable to the child because of his work schedule (Landy, Rosenberg, & Sutton-Smith, 1969). The explanation most frequently offered for the effects of paternal absence is the loss of the father as a model to the child. Although the potency of the father as a model is in part a function of his status in the family and his relationship with the child, the amount of direct contact between father and child apparently also plays an independent role.

Divorce and father absence for work-related causes, however, may be very different experiences for the child. The conflict of divorce may itself alter the relationship between parent and child. Also, the father of a divorced family is not necessarily out of contact with the child for extended periods of time. A father may have frequent and extended contact with his children, even if he does not have custody. The amount of contact between fathers and children is of particular importance as a source of influence on children's behavior.

THE RESEARCH PLAN

Two groups provided data for the study: 16 divorced families and 16 intact families. Families in both groups were selected on these characteristics: both parents were Caucasian; each had at least two years of college education; both worked at least half-time and had a child between the ages of 9 and 11 years, in the 4th or 5th grade in school, at the time of the interview. Approximately equal numbers of boys and girls were included in the divorced and intact groups. The divorced group had been separated from their spouses for two to three years. Most had been divorced (final decrees) for one to one-and-a-half years. In selecting our sample, we chose the date of separation—when the father physically left the household—rather than the date of the final decree of dissolution as the psychologically significant event for children. In all cases the mother had custody. The fathers had been present in the home until the child was at least six years old and had remained within close geographic distance so that visiting on a relatively frequent basis was feasible.

Divorced families were identified through court records and approached by letter and phone. This method of recruiting families provides a more representative group than do procedures that use only clinical or self-selected populations, thus reducing the possibility of systematic bias. Three families declined to participate, giving continuing disputes over custody as their reason. Intact families were recruited through contacts with children in classrooms in which the children of divorced families were enrolled. In this way, each child from a divorced family was matched with a child from a non-divorced family. This was intended to insure comparability of school environment and community background.

Children, both parents, and teachers were interviewed. For children, the interview included several tasks designed to elicit

information about concepts of family and family-related events. Information about school performance was obtained from school records and from teacher ratings. Interviews with family members included questions assessing family interaction in several areas. Each parent also completed a behavior checklist that described several aspects of the child's behavior, such as sociability, independence, and symptoms of stress.

Data from the interview and checklists were summarized by ratings made independently by two teams of three persons. The median value for inter-team reliability (Spearman's ρ) was .75. These team ratings were combined with checklists and teacher ratings to form composites of family process variables and child outcomes. Internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficients) of the composites had a median of .79. Detailed description of the instruments, rating procedures and scales, and reliability data are reported elsewhere (Hess & Camara, Note 1).

Three types of variables were of central interest: (1) *family type*—whether the family was divorced or intact; (2) *family process*—for both divorced and non-divorced groups the affective relationships between the child and each parent separately, the level of harmony between the two parents, and for divorced families only, the degree of contact between the father and child; and (3) *child outcomes*—social relations with peers (e.g., peer acceptance, friendship patterns, sociability); aggression; work style at school (e.g., preparedness, concentration, attentiveness, task completion, toleration of delay); and indicators of stress. Child outcome composites were formed primarily from teacher ratings and parent checklists. They are thus relatively independent of ratings of family processes, which were made by teams of staff members.

Our strategy for data analysis was (1) to compare children of divorced and non-divorced groups on the outcome measures; (2) to examine the correlation between *family processes* and child outcomes for the two groups combined, treating family type (whether divorced or not) as one of the variables; and (3) to examine the relationships among family members after divorce and the effects of these relationships upon child outcomes.

RESULTS

Comparison of Divorced and Non-divorced Groups

Following the traditional group-difference approach, our first analysis compared outcomes for children from divorced and

TABLE 1
MEAN RATINGS OF CHILD OUTCOMES, BY FAMILY TYPE AND SEX OF CHILD

Child Outcomes	By Sex of Child								
	Total			Boys			Girls		
	Divorced	Intact	Diff.	Divorced	Intact	Diff.	Divorced	Intact	Diff.
Stress	124	76	48*	138	69	69	110	82	28
Aggression	119	81	38	143	93	50	95	72	23
Social Relations	102	98	4	117	112	05	87	88	-01
Work Effectiveness	77	123	-46*	59	97	-38	94	144	-50

* $p < .05$

Note. The child outcomes were composites formed by combining Z-scores of individual ratings. The values of the composites in this table were transformations obtained by adding 1.00 to each Z-score composite value and omitting decimal points.

non-divorced families. The results show a familiar pattern. Even with these relatively small samples, there were significant differences between the types of families on child measures of stress and work effectiveness at school. Children of divorced families showed greater stress and less productive work styles (Table 1). Differences were in the expected direction for aggression (higher scores for children in divorced families). There were no significant differences in social behavior. Also consistent with other findings, differences between the divorced and non-divorced groups were greater for boys than for girls on stress and aggression (Hetherington, et al., 1978). On social relations and work effectiveness, the effect of divorce was similar for boys and girls (Table 1).

Relationship Between Family Processes and Child Outcomes

Despite mean differences on outcome measures between children of divorced and intact families, there was a great deal of overlap in the scores of the two sets of children. Some children of intact families, for example, showed more stress and aggression than many of the children from divorced families. The range of scores for stress indicates the extent of the overlap: the range for children in the divorced group was 48 to 236 (Mean = 124, S.D. = 55.2) for intact families it was 1 to 200 (Mean = 76, S.D. = 53.4).

Measures of parental behavior also show overlap. Despite the separation of the parents, the quality of interaction among members in divorced families is often not greatly different from that of many intact families. On such matters as communication between parents about child rearing, parental interest in and knowledge about the child's school and social life, and the amount of time parents spent with the child, *there was more variation within each group than between divorced and non-divorced groups.*

It is important, then, to examine the correlations between measures of family interaction and child outcomes and to compare process measures using marital status as an explanatory variable in mediating child outcomes. For this analysis, the 32 families (divorced and intact) were combined into one group and tests of the association between family process variables and child outcomes were examined without regard to marital status.

Results showed that family type or marital status, as such, was no more closely associated with child outcomes than were measures of family processes. For example, for the divorced and intact family groups taken together, the level of parental harmony was as closely related to child outcomes as was divorce (Table

TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS OF FAMILY TYPE AND PROCESS VARIABLES WITH CHILD OUTCOMES
(DIVORCED AND NON-DIVORCED GROUPS COMBINED)

Child Outcomes	Family Type (Divorced or Intact)	Parental Harmony	Mother-Child Relationship	Father-Child Relationship	Frequency of Father Visits (Divorced)	Duration of Father Visits (Divorced)
Stress	-.41**	-.55***	-.43**	-.44**	.22	-.35
Aggression	-.26	-.38*	-.47**	-.41**	-.06	.13
Social Relations	-.03	.18	-.05	.54***	-.19	.35
Work Effectiveness at School	.36*	.24	.37*	.40**	-.09	-.16

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Note. Divorced and non-divorced families were coded with values of 1 and 2, respectively. Hence, positive correlations between family type and child outcomes indicate higher mean values for intact families.

2). Although there was some variation in the magnitude of correlations between process variables and child outcomes, the level of association was comparable to the correlations of divorce status with outcomes.

The Relative Contribution of Marital Status and Process Variables

The data in Table 2 show that family processes are as closely related to child outcomes as is divorce, but they do not indicate the *relative* contribution of each. It is possible that divorce status is simply a proxy variable, an alternative indicator of the kind of interaction that is taking place within families undergoing divorce. Although divorce is obviously related to family processes that continue after dissolution, it is possible to make estimates of the relative impact of marital status and family processes to see if they have independent effects.

One way to view this problem is to consider two or more variables as sharing a contribution to child outcomes. Each, however, may also have a unique contribution to make. An estimate of their relative effect can be made by commonality analysis (Mood, 1971), which permits us to estimate the proportion of variance in a child outcome measure that is attributable *solely* to one variable or *solely* to another, as well as the proportion of variance attributable to both variables acting together. This procedure allows us to examine, in a rough fashion, the relative contribution of family type (divorced vs. non-divorced) and process variables. For such an analysis, obviously, the two groups must be combined and treated as a single sample of families.

The results of this statistical procedure are shown in Figure 1. The cross-hatched area in this figure represents the proportion of variance *shared* by family type and process measures (harmony; mother-child relationship; father-child relationship). The space indicated by P and T show, respectively, the *unique* contribution of these three process variables (P) and family type (T).

Process variables had a larger unique contribution to child outcomes than did family type (i.e., whether or not the family is divorced). For stress, much of the contribution to variation was shared (i.e., the commonality is high). This could mean that family type is a proxy variable for the interaction and relationships within the family at the time of divorce. In these data, divorce itself was not the best predictor of child outcomes. For example, the level of aggressive behavior in this group of 32 children was predicted much more efficiently by information about level of parental harmony, mother-child relationship and father-child

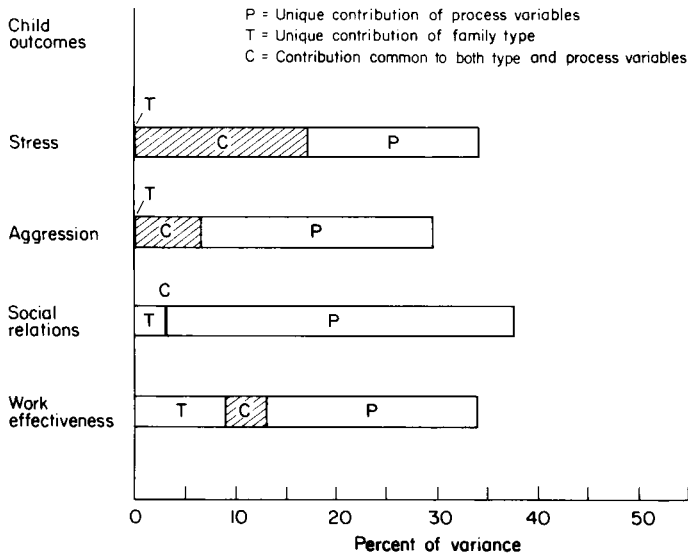


FIGURE 1

Unique and shared contribution of family type and process variables to child outcomes.

relationship than by knowledge about whether the family was divorced or intact. Information as to divorce was thus less useful in predicting child behavior than was information about family processes.

Variations among Families in Post-divorce Relationships

Families differ widely in the way they deal with divorce, but the extent of these differences and their implications for research planning have usually not been taken into account. The magnitude of these variations can be illustrated by three divorced families in this study. In family A, there was a great deal of antagonism between the two parents but both parents had close and positive relationships with the child. The conflict between the parents did not interfere with the child's interaction with the parent without custody. In family B, the relationships between the two parents and between each of them and the child were generally positive. In family C, the conflict between the parents was continuing, and there was little cooperation between them over their responsibilities as parents. The child in this family did not have a close relationship with either. Discord between the parents does not

necessarily determine the quality of the interaction with the child. This part of the post-divorce family system can be regulated to some extent by the action of the two parents.

Parental harmony vs. parent-child relationships as explanatory variables in child outcomes. We expected that the level of parental harmony would be the most powerful factor in predicting the effects of divorce on children. This turned out not to be the case. Parental harmony is obviously an important element in the family network, but in our data it was not the most significant. Since it was correlated with other process variables, however, the relative impact of harmony and parent-child relationships was examined by commonality analysis. In this instance, the analysis was conducted on the data from the divorced group only. (A comparable computation was done, using data from both groups. The results were generally similar to those shown in Figure 2.)

From this analysis, it appears that parental harmony is less important for most outcome variables than are the affective relationships that are maintained after divorce between the child

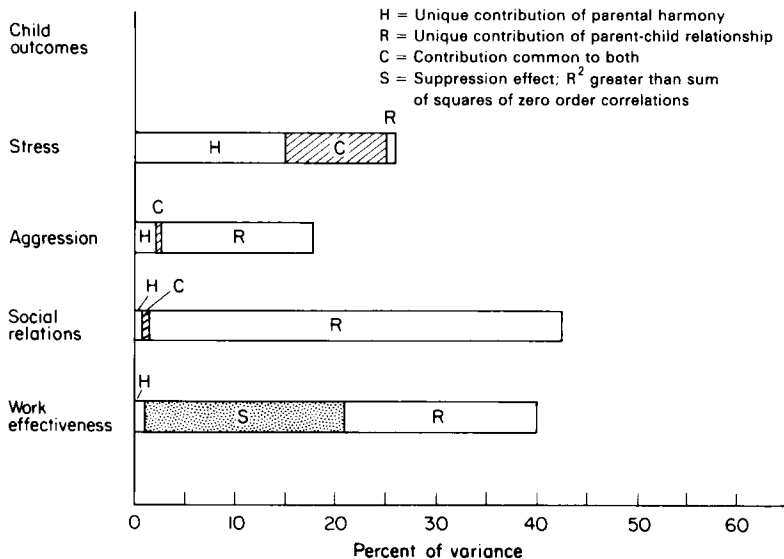


FIGURE 2

Contribution of parental harmony and parent-child relationship variables to child outcomes (divorced families only).

and his or her parents (Figure 2). Only on the measure of stress was parental discord most important. For other outcome variables, the unique effects of parent-child interaction were larger than the unique contribution of the level of harmony between the two parents. Apparently, it is the quality of relationship between the child and parents that is most crucial in divorced families.

The consequences of different configurations of parent-child relationships. The child's continuing relationship with her or his parents appears, from these data, to be the most powerful influence on the child's social and school adjustment after the divorce. A child of divorce may have a close relationship with either, both, or neither parent. The correlation between mother-child and father-child relationship measures was only .15. A question arises as to whether it is important, in terms of child outcomes, for the child to have a close relationship with both parents or whether a satisfactory relationship with either one might mitigate the effects of the marital dissolution.

The consequences of these different patterns were examined by a simple configurational analysis—a double median split technique. The group of children from divorced families was divided at the median on both relationship composites. Three groups of children were produced by this procedure: one that had positive relationships with both parents; one that had negative relationships with both; and one that had a positive relationship with one parent and a negative relationship with the other.

These three patterns had strikingly different impacts on children (Figure 3). Those who maintained positive relationships with both parents had lower scores on measures of stress and aggression, and were given more positive ratings on work effectiveness and social interaction with peers. Where both relationships were unsatisfactory, the effects were most severe. The negative effects of divorce can be greatly mitigated if positive relationships with both parents can be maintained; the child appears to benefit even if a positive relationship with only one parent can be continued. Although this analysis was limited to the children of divorced families, a generally similar pattern holds for intact families on aggression and stress outcomes.

Another aspect of the child-father interaction that deserves examination is the degree of direct contact between them. The contact between child and father was indicated by ratings on three measures: the frequency of visits, the duration of visits, and the frequency of other contacts.

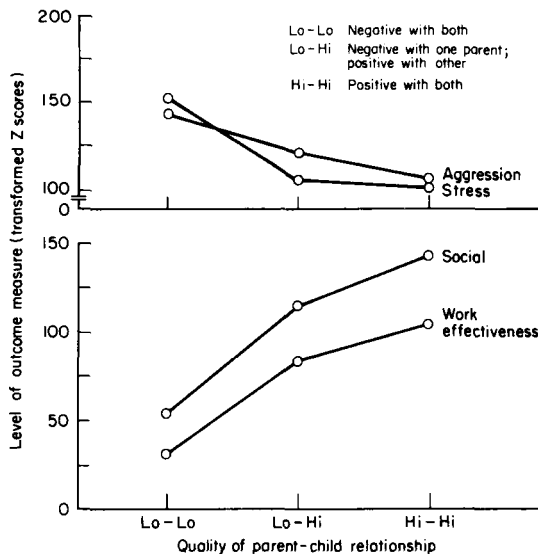


FIGURE 3

Child outcomes by three patterns of parent-child relationships (divorced families only).

The patterns and level of contact varied considerably among the divorced families of the study. For example, contact with the father varied by sex of child; boys saw their fathers more frequently, for longer periods, and were more often in touch with their fathers between visits. Some fathers saw their children every week and talked with them on the phone often. Others visited them infrequently and visits were not predictable. For some, the father's residence was a second home. Visits were for long weekends, holidays or other periods that gave the children the opportunity to become, for a short time, a part of the father's life and household. The children were given responsibilities around the house, not treated as guests. Another pattern was one in which the father picked up the children on an afternoon on the weekend, took them to the park, then to a restaurant, then delivered them to their homes—the "Disneyland father," as two of the parents in our study called it. The routine of the house—preparing meals, fixing items around the home and yard, mowing the lawn, repairing bikes, and such—were not occasions for interaction for these fathers. While the contact between father

and children may have been cordial, the children were kept at a distance from the father's new life.

For our group, the quality of the relationship with the father was related positively to duration of child visits but not to the frequency of visits. The amount of contact with the father was not highly related to child outcomes (Table 2). The extent of contact was apparently less important than other family process variables. The child's confidence, or lack of it, in the tie with the father apparently depended less on frequency of scheduling than it did on the quality of interaction that took place when they did meet. This aspect of the family network after divorce is extraordinarily complex and is affected by many factors—the child's schedule, the father's business demands, the mother's preferences, and the distance between the child's home and the father's residence. It seems, however, that the relationships between non-custodial fathers and their children can be maintained even with variations in such matters as distance, opportunity to visit, and the level of tension between the divorced parents.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

We draw several conclusions from the results of this study: 1) the effects of divorce are illuminated more completely by a research strategy that examines family processes than by one that only tests for differences between divorced and non-divorced groups; 2) the family relationships that emerge after divorce affect children as much or more than the divorce itself; 3) children's relationships to their parents are more significant with respect to this adjustment than the level of discord between parents; and 4) the child's relationship with the father without custody is of equal importance to his or her well being and separate from the relationship with the custodial mother. For children, the threat of divorce lies in disruption of relationships with the parents. Disruption in these primary bonds interferes with the child's developmental progress and presents both cognitive and emotional problems that may persist long after adjustments have been made in the routines of daily life.

These conclusions are tentative, given the small size of the groups we studied and the need for replication, but they have implications for at least three broad areas. The first is methodological. The traditional method of comparing groups has limited usefulness. More attention needs to be given to relationship variables. Studies also are needed on family interaction after

divorce, with follow-up studies that examine family psychological and social networks at several points in time subsequent to separation. The effects of marital dissolution should be examined across a wider range of behavior and across a longer time span.

The second implication touches the use of divorce studies as a source of wisdom for court decisions, public policy, and legislation. If, as our data suggest, the relationships that emerge after divorce are at least as important as the events of the divorce itself, much more specific information is needed about how such relationships are affected by public policy. Legislation and judicial practice are focussed on events of the dissolution and the procedures that determine custody, property, and visitation rights. They are less concerned with effects on family relationships. The efforts of attorneys, working in an adversary spirit, can escalate conflict between parents and draw children into divorce arguments. This can intensify anger, estrange family members, and create stress, impairing the relationships that emerge after divorce. Also, in some public schools, the noncustodial parent is excluded from access to information about the child from both the school records and conversations with the teacher. A policy that impedes rather than facilitates the relationships between the child and either parent aggravates the effect of the divorce.

The results also have implications for counseling families who experience divorce. The importance of the post-divorce relationship between the child and each parent separately, despite continued antagonism between the ex-spouses, gives both parents the opportunity to be effective in helping the child deal with divorce. A realization that the relationship with both parents is crucial may help parents avoid the temptation to use the children as weapons against one another in the dissolution struggle. They can come to realize that, despite temporary estrangement, relationships with their children will continue. Their own action can, in the long run, help determine what those relationships will become.

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