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## CHAPTER 51

# Children and Divorce

H. ELIZABETH KING

Nearly one million children a year in the United States will experience their parents' divorce (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1992). It appears that 50% to 60% of American children will live in a single-parent household, typically headed by mothers, for some period of their life. Almost three-quarters of the fathers and two-thirds of the mothers will remarry (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Because the rate of divorce is 10% higher for second marriages than for first marriages, many of these remarriages will also fail (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), particularly those involving once-divorced women. Almost half of all the children whose parents divorce will be in a stepfamily within four years, and the rate of divorce for remarried families in which children are present is 50% higher. Statistics vary from country to country, but divorce has become commonplace.

### THE PROCESS OF DIVORCE

There are significant difficulties in most families prior to divorce. The decision to dissolve a marriage, particularly one involving children, is typically reached only after years of unhappiness and conflict. Separating or divorcing adults are significantly distressed. Children are exposed to unhappy, if not depressed, parents with an impaired ability to provide a happy, supportive home environment.

In some cases, helpless and frightened children have viewed unhappy scenes, rage attacks, or losses of control by one or both parents. Parents often model behaviors that, when exhibited by the child, are of great concern to parents, schoolteachers, and mental health professionals alike. The extent to which the divorced parents can achieve a harmonious coparenting relationship is a crucial factor in children's postdivorce adjustment.

The postdivorce adjustment period for parents can be lengthy. Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1977) noted a two-year course of emotional adjustment postdivorce for both mothers and fathers. Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) reported that many parents had not yet adjusted to the divorce two or three years later. The length of time parents are consumed with their own emotional reactions is significant, causing them to have reduced parenting capacities.

The divorce process also entails many changes in family roles and relationships. Changes in the family structure and the child's loss of time with both parents are inevitable. Each parent is coping with new responsibilities and an altered lifestyle. In most families (70% to 90%), the children will reside primarily with the mother. Most women who must cope with new financial demands and less free time find the challenges of being a custodial parent exhausting. Children are faced with two losses: (1) the father no longer resides with the child; and (2) the

mother is not as available physically or emotionally. Fathers find themselves living apart from their children and must create a new relationship in circumstances that may feel artificial and constrained. Not only are parental roles changing, but parents are also adapting to a new relationship with each other.

## CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO DIVORCE AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

### WALLERSTEIN'S LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) conducted the first major large-scale longitudinal study of children and their parents after divorce. Their findings indicate that the initial reactions of children of all ages include distress, sadness, and anger. This reaction is expressed in behaviors typical for the developmental stage of the child, but regression is frequent. After the initial disequilibrium, a period of adjustment occurs during the next two to three years. Their work indicated that child factors most related to short-term and intermediate adjustment included sex, age, developmental level of the child, and child temperament. Quality of life in the single-parent home, quality of parenting, interparental cooperation, and the social support system of the child were the external factors noted to significantly impact the child's adjustment to divorce.

Wallerstein (1984, 1985, 1986, 1987) conducted a 10-year follow-up of the children in her original study. Children who were preschoolers at the time of divorce had no memory of their intact family, but they felt that divorce was an important aspect of their lives. These children had an intense awareness of their father, regardless of the amount of contact with them. One-third of the children had irregular visits (extended vacations or five times a year) with their father, and one-fourth had one contact a year at most. During adolescence, many of these children attempted to reach out and reestablish a relationship with their father.

School-age children at the time of the divorce were concerned with issues of loss, particularly loss of their father and the protective family unit. Forty percent of the children had tried living with their father, and 25% moved into the father's home permanently. For those who still resided with their mother, fewer than 10% had no contact with the father. The frequency of visits was not important to

the long-term outcome for boys or girls; however, the quality of the father-son relationship was significantly related to the psychological outcome for boys. One-third of the teenagers were viewed as doing well at the 10-year follow-up; however, half of the boys and one-fourth of the girls had moderate to clinical levels of depression and had difficulties in relationships.

Adolescents at the time of the divorce, who were young adults 19 to 28 years of age at the time of the follow-up, were generally undereducated. Only 50% were in school at follow-up. Of the 50% out of school, 30% were unemployed. Only 66% were attending or had graduated from college or graduate school, in contrast to the 85% rate of the graduates from their high school. Lack of finances was the major factor in failure to attend college. Two-thirds of the fathers failed to assist with college tuition regardless of financial circumstances. Two-thirds of this group felt that their childhood or adolescence had been burdened by the divorce, and fully one-third of the women were having problems in heterosexual relationships as adults.

Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) provided 25-year follow-up data on the children who were between 2.5 and 6 years of age at the time of the divorce. This group was viewed as the most vulnerable because of their needs for physical care and emotional nurturance. A great part of their childhood was spent in a single-parent or stepfamily. The 26 preschoolers who were in the initial study were 27 to 32 years of age at follow-up. Half of the sample were involved with serious drug and alcohol abuse. Although 25% of the fathers refused any further support when the children were 18 years of age, and only 6 of the 26 received full financial support for their higher education from parents or stepfathers, over 40% received a college degree.

Relationships with fathers were less stable than expected in spite of little interparental conflict. The fathers' interest in their children had fluctuated widely as a function of vocational issues or romantic relationships. Remarriage was prevalent. The stepmothers' attitude and the presence of children within the new family were powerful influences on the fathers' contact with and financial generosity to their children. When fathers were unable to adapt to or understand the child's changing needs, visits deteriorated. Young adolescent girls appeared especially problematic for their fathers.

Intense anger at their father was expressed by a subgroup of children who were forced to maintain a

strict schedule of visits in spite of the child's changing developmental and social needs. None of the children who had a rigidly enforced court-ordered visitation schedule or unmodified arrangement had a good relationship with their father in adulthood. These children objected to their lack of input about their lives. They felt they had less freedom or control over their lives than did their peers. This failure of parents (and the legal system) to acknowledge these children's changing developmental requirements was a major problem.

Although largely clinical in nature, Wallerstein's work and subsequent articles have humanized the children of divorce, and she has provided a better understanding of the additional coping tasks faced by these families. The lack of control groups limits the conclusions that can be drawn, and these findings may overpathologize the children of divorce. Societal changes have reduced the stigma of divorce, increased awareness of the importance of addressing higher education in divorce decrees, and focused attention on the important role of fathers in their children's development. Although many past problems might be mitigated and current divorces may be less destructive, the child's interpretation of divorce and the negative psychological consequences remain.

#### KALTER'S THEORETICAL MODEL OF DIVORCE IMPACT

Kalter (1987) has offered a helpful theoretical model of divorce as a process with two developmental components, one within the child and one within the unfolding developmental process of the divorce. Kalter contends that divorce can potentially interfere with three key developmental achievements in children. The first is the capacity to modulate aggression. The child's feelings of hurt, created by one parent's departure, are defended against by anger or aggression. Maladaptive models of conflict resolution are presented to the child by the parents, and parental attempts to model self-control frequently fail. Children may undercontrol or overcontrol angry feelings. Some children may act out with noncompliance and aggression. Excessive inhibition of aggression may occur in other children who feel inadequate or unaccepted.

The child's ability to emotionally separate from his or her parents is a second key developmental task. The feeling of firm psychological and emo-

tional acceptance at home is necessary to become independent and feel secure in leaving home. Fathers often serve as a bridge for independence and autonomy. In single-parent homes, the children often feel less secure and confident about separating.

The third task Kalter (1987) notes is that of development of gender identity. Divorce with frequent father absence often means the lack of a positive masculine role model for boys' gender identification. Girls may feel abandoned and rejected and view their feminine role model, the mother, as rejected as well. The distant or absent father cannot assist the girl in valuing her femininity, nor is he available to assist her in learning feminine behaviors.

Kalter's assertion that divorce complicates children's positive gender identification has been supported empirically. Many of the girls in Wallerstein's (1985) group were having significant difficulties with heterosexual relationships in young adulthood. Hetherington (1972) reported that adolescent girls from divorced homes had more negative attitudes and more conflicts with their fathers and also had more heterosexual activity than did girls from intact families or girls whose fathers had died. Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, and Chen (1985) suggested that the sexually precocious behavior of girls from divorced families might be in part the result of a devalued sense of femininity. Low feminine self-esteem may be caused by the father's absence and the resulting failure to confirm the girl's femininity and make her feel valued. In their follow-up study of the same girls, Hetherington et al., (1977) found that daughters from divorced families married younger, had a higher incidence of pregnancy at the time of marriage, and had a higher divorce rate than daughters of widows or daughters from intact families. Girls from divorced homes also had the most negative perception of their father, husband, and men in general. In a large study of Finnish children age 16 to 22, Palosaari, Aro, and Laippala (1996) found depression more common among the offspring of divorced families. Moreover, the long-term impact of divorce among girls was mediated via low self-esteem and lack of closeness to the father. When the girls had a close relationship with their father, no excess risk of depression was noted. This study also supported Kalter's hypothesis that fathers assist girls in separating from their mothers.

It does appear that the loss of the father as a role model for boys and as a facilitator of developing self-esteem and comfort with sexual identity for

girls can be very problematic. It is less clear how much contact is needed to ameliorate these problems. At the present time, it appears that the loss of sufficient contact with the father postdivorce is likely to impact boys most significantly during the latency years, and that their problems will largely be academic or behavioral. The difficulties for girls appear to be related to self-esteem, depression, and heterosexual relationships and are most likely to emerge during adolescence.

## FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT TO DIVORCE

### AGE

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) contend that preschoolers are at greatest risk for problems postdivorce. They spend the least amount of time in the nuclear family, are often confused about family events, and may blame themselves for the divorce. In addition, preschoolers do not understand the abrupt and multiple changes or losses and are likely to experience much loss or abandonment because they are also least able to reach out and obtain support from others. Allison and Furstenberg (1989) and Zill, Morrison, and Coiro (1993) found preschoolers more likely to develop long-term problems in social and emotional development. Confounding variables such as length of time since divorce and remarriage, as well as factors such as father access and conflict, make conclusions about age effects impossible. Findings supportive of a "vulnerable period" in childhood for the parental divorce were reported by Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, and Vitaro (1997). They followed 1,316 children from divorced, never remarried families from the end of kindergarten until the beginning of adolescence. They used parent and teacher ratings and controlled for preceding behavioral predispositions while in the intact family. Children who experienced their parents' divorce before the age of 6 exhibited comparatively more behavioral problems than children whose parents divorced later. Early childhood divorce was linked to increases in anxiety, hyperactivity, and oppositional behavior during later childhood.

Adolescence is another vulnerable period. Adolescents in divorced families are likely to become involved in alcohol abuse and sexual acting-out and show symptoms of depression (Wallerstein &

Corbin, 1989). Hetherington (1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) notes that in contrast to the 10% of adolescents in intact families, 25% to 33% of adolescents in divorced and remarried families become disengaged from their families. Hetherington and Jodl noted that adolescents spend little time at home and avoid communication, interaction, and activities with family members. Disengagement may be a positive solution to a disruptive or conflicted family situation, or it may result in antisocial behavior and academic problems in adolescents (Hetherington, 1993).

### GENDER

Earlier reports suggested that divorce was more harmful for boys, but recent data suggest inconsistencies. Some researchers suggested that boys respond to divorce with externalizing behaviors such as conduct disorder, and girls internalize distress, which results in depressive symptomology (Emery, 1982); however, both male and female adolescents from divorced families show higher rates of depression and conduct disorder than do those from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Although both males and females are likely to become teenage parents, girls are more likely to drop out of school, and pregnancy has more adverse consequences for them (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

### PARENTAL FUNCTIONING AND PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

As is true for intact families, the mental health and parenting skills of the parents and the quality of the parent-child relationship are strongly related to the child's well-being in divorced families. Parents who divorce may have problems in relation to their children as much as 8 to 12 years prior to divorce. Parenting difficulties include irritable, erratic, and nonauthoritative behaviors (Amato & Booth, 1996; Block, Block & Gjerde, 1986). Some of the behavior problems noted in children of divorce may be a function of genetics or child-rearing practices rather than the divorce itself. Additionally, children have been found to have poor adjustment prior to divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Block et al., 1986; Cherlin et al., 1991). When research has controlled

for child problems occurring before the divorce, the differences between divorced and intact families were significantly reduced (Cherlin et al., 1991).

Wallerstein (1986) found that chronic anger or psychopathology in the custodial parent was related to poor outcome for the child. In her study, the quality of the relationship of the child with both parents was important. The child's relationship with the mother was related to short- and long-term outcomes. The relationship with the father was related to long-term outcome.

Child temperament, including irritability, reactivity, and adaptability, are important to consider. Difficult children create more problems in families and may elicit more rejection or negative behaviors from parents or other adults. Adaptable, easygoing children who have a sense of humor are temperamentally better prepared to weather any family crisis and are better able to elicit support from others (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

#### ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES

Divorce is associated with a marked decline in income for households in which mothers retain custody. Forty-three percent of divorced custodial mothers have an annual income of less than \$10,000 (Hernandez, 1988). Most divorced women lack the education, skills, and job experience to successfully compete in the economic marketplace and they cannot support their children comfortably. Kalter (1987) reported that 33% of the children of divorced parents live at or below the poverty level. Of the remaining 67%, many experience wrenching economic changes. This financial disruption may in part be a result of the fact that large proportions of fathers fail to pay child support (Haskins, Schwartz, Akin, & Dobelstein, 1985).

Economic changes postdivorce result in changes in residence, school, and neighborhood. New neighborhoods are seldom of the same socioeconomic status as the previous one, and the schools may be poorly financed with inadequate resources (e.g., books, magazines, computers). Most children are conscious of the decreased socioeconomic level and may feel stigmatized by their reduced economic circumstance.

Studies have noted that such sudden downward shifts in socioeconomic status are frequently correlated with child adjustment difficulties (Hetherington, 1979a, 1979b; Hodges, Wechsler, &

Ballantine, 1979). Other studies have shown that when family income is statistically equated, differences between rates of behavior problems in children from divorced and from intact families are eliminated (Colletta, 1979; MacKinnon, Brody, & Stoneman, 1982). Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, and Hunt (1978) found that those children with the most pronounced behavior difficulties following divorce were from homes with severe economic loss immediately following the divorce.

Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and McLoughlin (1983) reported that without controls for income, children in divorced families scored significantly lower than children in intact families on 27 of 34 outcome measures. When income levels were controlled, the differences shrunk to only 14 of the 34 outcome variables. The authors concluded that children from divorced homes do more poorly, particularly with regard to academic issues, in large part because they are economically disadvantaged.

Social and legal changes in child support guidelines and women's increased advancement in the workplace have made an impact on the economic situation. Although the economic picture may be improving for mother-only families, the changes are not sufficient. Most recent data indicate that poverty rates for mother-only families in 1989 were 43%. The contrast to father-only families is stark: Those families had poverty rates of only 18%. Fathers heading families have mean personal incomes almost twice that of mothers heading families: \$24,000 to \$13,000 in 1989 (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). In a recent review, Bianchi, Subaiya, and Kahn (1997) found that custodial mothers experience the loss of 25% to 50% of their predivorce income in comparison to only 10% for custodial fathers.

#### PARENTAL CONFLICT

Many children of divorce witness a continued conflictual relationship between their parents. Several investigators have proposed that the most important mediating variable associated with divorce and child adjustment is this conflict. There is evidence to suggest that parental conflict, not parental separation, is the major factor responsible for postdivorce child maladjustment.

Whitehead (1979) studied children's responses to family discord and separation. The results suggested that discord is more detrimental than separation and that antisocial behavior associated with

marital tension is more likely to be exhibited at school by boys. Hess and Camara (1979) found that the level of parental harmony, mother-child relations, and father-child relations were better predictors of aggressive behavior than divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Hetherington (1989) noted that parental conflict was a critical mediating variable for child problems postdivorce. The finding that parental conflict, not divorce, is the underlying factor causing most long-term behavior problems in the children of divorce is prevalent in the literature (Hess & Camara, 1979; Jacobson, 1978; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Kurdek & Fine, 1993; Leupnitz, 1982).

When conditions of high conflict continue with divorced parents, frequent contact with non-custodial parents may exacerbate children's problems. Johnston, Gonzales and Campbell (1987) and Johnston et al. (1989) found that children in high-conflict, frequent contact situations were depressed, withdrawn, and uncommunicative. This situation was particularly adverse for girls' adjustment.

Longitudinal studies suggest that divorce improves the adjustment of children removed from conflictual marriages, but harms children removed from nonconflictual marriages (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). Maccoby and colleagues contend that the type of conflict is also important. Their studies (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) demonstrate that conflicts involving the children are the most detrimental to the children's well-being.

#### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THREE FACTORS RELATED TO CHILD OUTCOME

Amato and Keith (1991a) conducted a meta-analysis of 92 studies involving over 13,000 children to evaluate three central notions frequently used to explain the negative impact of divorce on children: parental absence, economic disadvantage, and family conflict. Their analysis states that contact appears to operate in a complex fashion, with factors such as sex of child and parent, relationship of child and parent, and relationship between parents playing significant roles. The impact of economic disadvantage was an important factor causing the children of divorce to fare poorly. Economic decline

accounted for some, but certainly not all, of the negative consequences of divorce. The family conflict perspective was most strongly supported. The majority of studies relating postdivorce conflict with children's well-being found a significant association between conflict and a child's problems. The data support the notion that conflict between parents is a critically important variable underlying children's problems postdivorce.

#### SUMMARY

In Amato and Keith's (1991b) review, more than two-thirds of the studies found that children with divorced parents had lower levels of well-being than did children from intact homes. They note, however, that the effect sizes in the literature are weak rather than strong. Further, they contend that the negative implications of parental divorce for children's well-being have become less pronounced since the 1950s and 1960s. They argue that the adjustment of children from divorced or remarried families is similar to that of children from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington, 1989). Most of these children do not have problems and will become normal, competent individuals (Emery & Forehand, 1994).

Other authors assert that children of divorce are more vulnerable to problems in adjustment and more likely to have problems with academics, self-esteem, social skills, and behavior. As adolescents, the children of divorce are more likely to exhibit behavior problems, drop out of school, become sexually active, and have social problems (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington et al., 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). There is disagreement as to the size of divorce-related effects on children's adjustment. Some researchers view these effects as modest (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Others note that the children of divorce are twice as likely to have problems as children from intact families (Hetherington, 1989, 1991a; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Zill et al., 1993).

The complexity of the many factors contributing to children's difficulties postdivorce is discussed in detail by Hetherington et al. (1998). They conclude that conflictual family relationships between parents, parents and children, and siblings are a

significant factor. Other factors—the individual vulnerability of parents and/or children; family composition, parental absence; stress, including socioeconomic factors; and parental distress leading to problematic parenting—also play a role. Some may have a direct effect, others, such as parenting abilities, are mediated through the impact on the family process, but all appear relevant to children's adjustment postdivorce.

## TYPES OF CUSTODIAL ARRANGEMENTS

### MOTHER CUSTODY

Approximately 84% of children reside with their mothers following divorce (Seltzer, 1994). The mother's relationship with her children changes dramatically. The vast majority of divorced women work full time, and preschool children often feel abandoned postdivorce. Placement in a day-care facility often results in multiple illnesses for at least the first year. Also, many mothers resent or feel unhappy working even if highly trained. Additionally, studies suggest that divorce and maternal employment have a negative impact on the environments of preschool children. MacKinnon et al. (1982) reported that preschool children in mother-headed divorced households experienced less stimulation than children from intact households even when family income was controlled. Eighteen months later, children from mother-headed households were receiving more stimulation at follow-up than at the initial assessment, but they continued to receive less cognitive and social stimulation than children in married households.

Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1977, 1979) found that although the divorce group improved over two years postdivorce, differences still existed in the social behavior of children from divorced and married households. Immediately after divorce, there is often a period of disruptive or maladaptive parenting characterized by irritability, coercion, diminished communication, less affection, and inconsistency in control and monitoring (Hetherington, 1991a, 1991b, 1993; Simons & Johnson, 1996). Hetherington (1991a) noted that the parenting of divorced mothers improves over the course of two years, but remains less authoritative than that of nondivorced mothers. Problems in control and

coercive exchanges between divorced mothers and sons may remain high.

Santrock and Warshak (1979; Santrock, Warshak, & Elliott, 1982) compared the social development of children from father custody, mother custody, and intact homes. Observation of parent-child interactions nearly three years postdivorce found mother-custody homes were associated with girls being less demanding and more mature, sociable, and independent than boys. Father-custody boys were mature, warm, and independent; however, girls in father custody were less warm, mature, sociable, and independent. The authors conclude that custody by the same-sex parent is related to more positive social behaviors for children. Support for the same-sex hypothesis was also noted by Camara and Resnick (1989). Other studies indicate that the same-sex custodial parent has greater influence on the adjustment of adolescents in divorced homes (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Kurdek & Fine 1993).

Positive adjustment in children and adolescents is typically found with custodial mothers who have close relationships with their children. Supportive, authoritative mothers who exert firm, consistent control and supervision and who are warm are generally associated with children's positive adjustment (Bray & Berger, 1993; Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody, & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington, 1989, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Maccoby et al., 1993; Simons & Johnson, 1996). During adolescence, there is a notable increase in conflict between mothers and their daughters (Hetherington, 1991a; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Low levels of parental supervision were noted by Demo and Acock (1996).

### FATHER CUSTODY

Father-headed families are the fastest growing family type in the United States (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Fathers who seek custody of their children are often more involved and capable; therefore, custodial fathers are a very select group of fathers who are more likely to be child-oriented than most fathers. Custodial fathers report less child-rearing stress, better parent-child relations, and fewer behavior problems in their children than do custodial mothers (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Furstenberg, 1988). Fathers, however, appear to have more problems with communication,

self-disclosure, and monitoring of their children's activities (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Furstenberg, 1988; Warshak, 1986), in particular, with monitoring adolescent behaviors, especially those of daughters (Maccoby et al., 1993).

Clarke-Stewart and Hayward (1996) reported on a recent study of 187 school-age children. Children in father-custody were doing better than children in mother-custody in terms of psychological well-being, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and exhibition of "deficient problem behaviors." This advantage was most clear for boys, but true for both sexes. The authors note the advantages of the custodial fathers: higher income, fewer children, and a better emotional support system. Additionally, the authors note that the noncustodial parent, the mother, continued to be involved with the children. Further, although children in the father-custody group were doing better than the children in mother custody, children in mother custody who had high levels of contact with their father were functioning equally as well. This study provides support for the notion that fathers can be excellent custodial parents. Equally important are the findings that involvement with both parents was a critical factor in good adjustment for boys and girls regardless of custody arrangement.

#### NONCUSTODIAL MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Although noncustodial mothers are less competent than custodial mothers in monitoring and controlling their children's behavior, they are more effective in this than are noncustodial fathers (Furstenberg & Nord, 1987; Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993). Overall, noncustodial mothers are more active and supportive in response to the needs of their children than are noncustodial fathers (Furstenberg & Nord, 1987; Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987). Children report talking more with their noncustodial mothers than to noncustodial fathers.

In a study by Clarke-Stewart and Hayward (1996) comparing mother-custody and father-custody homes, the role of the noncustodial mother in children's adjustment was critical. Noncustodial mothers remained more involved with their children than did noncustodial fathers. This finding of continued emotional closeness occurred despite the fact that there was no difference between the noncustodial parents in the amount or kind of contact.

Further, children in father custody who had a negative relationship with their noncustodial mother had poorer psychological well-being than children whose relationship was good. No similar findings occurred with regard to noncustodial fathers.

#### NONCUSTODIAL FATHERS AND CHILDREN

For most children of divorce, their relationship with their father alters significantly. For many children, the relationship is lost. In Hetherington et al.'s (1977) two-year longitudinal study of divorced fathers, almost 20% of the fathers decreased their visits over time, and complete loss of contact did occur in some cases. In a national survey of children between 11 and 16 years of age, Furstenberg and Saltzer (1983) indicated that almost half of the children of divorce had not had any contact with the visiting parent during the preceding five years. Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, and Zill (1983) found that the loss of the relationship with the father occurs at separation and escalates over the period of separation. For children whose parents had divorced seven years previously, 33% of the children saw their fathers two to three times a year or less and 37% did not see their fathers at all. There appeared to be a high correlation of lack of father contact with remarriage of either parent. These data indicate less frequent father-child contact than reported by Wallerstein (1986; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989), but may be more representative.

The postdivorce parenting behavior of fathers is less predictable from their predivorce behavior than is the case with mothers (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Noncustodial fathers appear less likely than nondivorced fathers to monitor or control their children's behavior or to participate in tasks such as homework (Bray & Berger, 1993; Furstenberg & Nord, 1987; Hetherington, 1991b). Perhaps because of the limited access to their children and the desire for contacts to be positive, most noncustodial fathers have more of a companion relationship than a traditional parenting relationship with their children (Furstenberg & Nord, 1987; Hetherington et al., 1979).

Frequency of contact of noncustodial fathers is usually unrelated to adjustment in children (Amato & Keith, 1991b). Quality of the parental relationship with the child appears most important (Amato, 1993; Emery, 1988). Factors that impact the father's ability to maintain a good relationship include the

father's interest in the child, his ability to focus on the child's needs and to appropriately alter activities, the ability of the mother to support the child's relationship with the father, and the lack of parental conflict.

#### PARENTS WITH JOINT CUSTODY

Joint custody has become a frequently used post-divorce arrangement in the past 20 years. It is believed to be an advantageous arrangement because it (1) continues the active involvement of both parents, (2) encourages child support payments because of this involvement, and (3) provides relief from child care for both parents, thus improving their quality of life. The lack of consistent operational definitions regarding joint custody complicates any discussion or assessment of this arrangement. Further, the profound differences between families who voluntarily enter this arrangement and those who enter it reluctantly (via mediation or custody evaluations) and those on whom it is enforced (litigation) make assessment problematic. The literature is far from conclusive.

Initial studies of joint custody involved highly educated, upper-middle-class families with fewer than three children who voluntarily chose the custodial arrangement. These studies focused on parental adjustment and parental satisfaction with different forms of custody, and found that both parents maintained active roles in the lives of their children and were satisfied with the arrangement (Ahrons, 1980; Arbabanel, 1979; Grief, 1979; Rothberg, 1983; Steinman, 1981). In a critical review of the research literature, Benjamin and Irving (1989) found that only 5 of 21 studies provided any data about the children.

Leupnitz (1982) compared children from maternal custody, paternal custody, and joint custody families on a variety of psychological measures and found no differences based on type of custody. Similar findings were reported by Leupnitz (1986), Wolchik, Braver, and Sandler (1985), and Kline, Tschann, Johnston, and Wallerstein (1989). Although Shiller (1986a, 1986b) reported that boys in joint custody had fewer behavioral difficulties and were less distressed than boys in sole maternal custody, the joint custody parents had less current parental conflict than the parents in the sole custody group; therefore, the reason for differences in child outcome was unclear.

Johnston (1995) reviewed five major custody studies: Kline et al. (1989), Maccoby and Mnookin (1992), Pearson and Thoennes (1990), Johnston et al. (1989), and Johnston (1992). Johnston found few, if any, differences in child adjustment as a function of custody type. She noted that one-third of the joint custody children drifted into the primary care of the mother. Those families remaining in a joint custody arrangement typically had parents who were more educated and financially stable.

A small minority of divorcing parents remain in ongoing conflict for two or more years (Johnston et al., 1989; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), and this conflict has a detrimental impact on children, particularly in situations where children experience frequent access (as in joint custody). Those arrangements are associated with more emotional and behavioral disturbances among children, especially girls (e.g. depressed, withdrawn, aggressive, somatic complaints, and peer problems). Johnston et al. (1989) noted that the most problematic arrangements appear to be court-ordered joint custody arrangements.

#### CONCLUSIONS REGARDING CUSTODY/PARENTAL ACCESS

Few, if any, consistent differences in the adjustment of children in different custody arrangements were noted. The actual physical custody and visitation arrangements were less important than the quality of the ensuing family relationships. Good adjustment for children was highly related to the parents' psychological functioning and the quality of the parent-child relationships. A warm, supportive relationship with a custodial parent who is able to maintain consistent expectations and appropriate monitoring of the child protects the child's development (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1992; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990).

Children benefit from regular predictable access to both parents, but access patterns should be influenced by the child's developmental needs and must be responsive to development and social needs. Child adjustment is enhanced by a stable support system, including school, social activities, and peers. Frequent transitions between homes and/or high degrees of access to both parents in situations of high conflict is detrimental and likely to result in emotional and behavioral problems in boys and girls.

Successful joint physical custody arrangements typically involve parents who are better educated and have higher incomes (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). The logistical difficulties and level of parental involvement and commitment require flexibility, accommodation, and determination on the part of both parents. The child's characteristics are important. The child must have sufficient adaptability so that transitions between homes are not confusing or distressing. There is a tendency over time for self-selection in the custody arrangement best suited for the individual family. Children in joint residential arrangements often drifted back into the primary care of the mothers. Children who remain in the joint care of their parents do so because the arrangement suits them and their parents.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

Many types of interventions are available and have been utilized with children and parents who are divorcing (Benedek & Benedek, 1979) or who have divorced. Advice to the separating parent, individual psychotherapy with the child (Gardner, 1976; Tessman, 1978), and children's groups (Kalter & Rubin, 1989; Stolberg & Walsh, 1988; Wilkinson & Black, 1977) are among the most popular interventions. Some therapists advocate a strategy of family therapy with the single-parent unit. Kalter (1984) describes conjoint mother-daughter treatment. The choice of intervention strategy for clinicians will be a function of the particular family situation, the needs of the child, the child's age and developmental level, the parents' concerns about the children, their openness to therapy, and their ability to resolve continuing conflict with each other. Indirect intervention in the form of bibliotherapy can be useful as well.

### INTERVENTION WITH PARENTS

#### *Predivorce Counseling with One or Both Parents*

The decision to separate is difficult, and many parents request assistance in making decisions regarding custody, patterns of visitation, and communication of the news of the separation to the child. Custodial recommendations are to be avoided

unless the professional has conducted a custody evaluation. Discussions about custody or visitation arrangements should focus on the child's stage of development as well as personality, temperament, and current relationships. It is often helpful to review for parents that infants or preschoolers have difficulties with separation and lack a concept of time. Parents should be encouraged to make arrangements that facilitate the child's relationship with both parents but do not tax the child's coping abilities. It is useful to suggest that different schedules or patterns of access will be needed during the child's changing stages of development. Issues that are typical for children when their parents separate, such as regressive behaviors, should be addressed and normalized. Difficulties and transitions should also be anticipated and coping techniques discussed with both parents. Collaboration between parents should be encouraged.

Parents often need assistance with when and how to inform a child of the impending separation. Lengthy, confusing, adult-oriented discussions or "blaming" talks should be avoided. Parents should be helped to monitor their distress and to explain the separation without intense expressions of anger toward each other. Parents should be encouraged to inform others such as pediatricians, school, and neighbors of the separation. Children benefit from having support from neutral adults during this period of crisis.

Recommendations should include the avoidance of additional stress. Changes such as moving into a new home, going to a different school, obtaining a new housekeeper, or placing children in day care should be avoided or postponed if possible. Divorce, like any other crisis, is best dealt with in a manner that maximizes the child's coping skills. This most frequently occurs when children are in familiar surroundings and can utilize their already established social support systems.

#### *Postdivorce Counseling*

The focus of intervention with recently separated parents is typically twofold: the clinician must be supportive and helpful to the parents regarding their personal difficulties and problems in adjustment and, equally important, must provide constructive and helpful guidance regarding the child. Education about divorce from the child's perspective and typical reactions of children to stress is a major component of such counseling. Parent coordinators are

being used more frequently in difficult or high-conflict situations. The professional is asked to assist the parents in determining appropriate decisions for their child in varying custody and visitation arrangements. These decisions include length of vacations, transition arrangements, school choices, and discussions about relocation. Obviously, the professional must be sensitive to issues of child development, as well as able to use strategies for couples in counseling and mediation. Therapists often find articles or books regarding divorce useful in terms of educating parents about the divorce process. *Surviving the Breakup* (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), *The Parent's Book about Divorce* (Gardner, 1979), *Divorced Dads* (Shepard & Goldman, 1980), and *Second Chances* (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989) are four that are helpful.

#### INTERVENTION WITH CHILDREN

Children are seen in brief psychotherapy to assist their recognizing the reality of the separation and divorce, dealing with the loss of the intact family unit, resolving their fears that the divorce is their fault, and detriangulating from the parental discord that so frequently accompanies separation and divorce. In addition to providing a safe and supportive atmosphere for grieving, the child often needs permission to express the anger and rage experienced as a result of the divorce or separation. Children may fear abandonment and will be relieved to learn that the noncustodial parent does not plan to leave them.

Some children experience overwhelming and immobilizing feelings that can damage their self-esteem and self-concept. The therapist should be reassuring and focus on repairing the damaged self-esteem. Additionally, the therapist can often assist the child in recognizing that these negative feelings of sadness and powerlessness are appropriate in such a situation.

Books such as *The Boys' and Girls' Book of Divorce* (Gardner, 1970), *What Every Child Wants His Parents to Know* (Salk, 1973), and *The Dinosaur's Divorce* (Brown & Brown, 1986) have proved to be very successful with school-age children and adolescents. Johnston and Roseby's (1997a) *High-Conflict, Violent and Separating Families: A Group Treatment Manual for School-Age Children* is an excellent resource for clinicians dealing with this population.

#### School-Based Child-Directed Groups

Child groups conducted in schools are a relatively new area of intervention that appears to be a very useful modality for assisting children of divorce in understanding their situation and preventing or reducing psychopathology. The Divorce Adjustment Project: Children's Support Group (CSG) (Stolberg & Garrison, 1985), the subsequent spinoff, Children of Divorce Intervention Project (CODIP) (Pedro-Corrall & Cowen, 1985), and Kalter and Rubin's (1989) school-based support groups are similar. The focus of these groups is (1) to help children understand divorce-related events, thereby reducing their anger, frustration, and self-blame; (2) to help children adapt to the changes in their lives; and (3) to help build internal controls in the children by teaching them problem-solving skills and cognitive-behavioral strategies. Groups provide peer and adult support to the children and help normalize the divorce process.

#### SUMMARY

Successful interventions range from traditional play therapy to nontraditional family therapy and innovative children's groups in schools. Therapists' knowledge of the short- and long-term effects of divorce on parents and children, as well as the salient age and gender variables, is critical. Finally, anyone conducting therapy with divorced parents or children from divorced homes needs to recognize the most predictable problematic factors: (1) reaction of the child to the loss of the intact family, (2) ongoing parental discord, and (3) reaction of the child to deprivation of a relationship with the noncustodial parent. The particular strategy of intervention is less important than the therapist's ability to provide emotional support to the parent and/or the child while dealing with the preceding factors. Clinicians will find excellent resources in *Children of Parting Parents* (Tessman, 1978), *Psychotherapy with Children of Divorce* (Gardner, 1976), *Children of Divorce* (Wolchik & Karoly, 1988), and Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) *Second Chances*. Kalter's articles "Conjoint Mother-Daughter Therapy" (1984) and "Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children" (1987) are also valuable resources. Therapists who elect to work with parents who are conflicted postdivorce will find *Impasses of Divorce* (Johnston & Campbell, 1988), *Caught in the Middle*, (Garrity & Baris, 1994),

and *In the Name of the Child* (Johnston & Roseby, 1997b) useful resources.

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