

This series of 10-year updates in child and adolescent psychiatry began in July 1996. Topics are selected in consultation with the AACAP Committee on Recertification, both for the importance of new research and its clinical or developmental significance. The authors have been asked to place an asterisk before the 5 or 6 most seminal references.

M.K.D.

Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To review important research of the past decade in divorce, marital conflict, and children's adjustment and to describe newer divorce interventions. **Method:** Key empirical studies from 1990 to 1999 were surveyed regarding the impact of marital conflict, parental violence, and divorce on the psychological adjustment of children, adolescents, and young adults. **Results:** Recent studies investigating the impact of divorce on children have found that many of the psychological symptoms seen in children of divorce can be accounted for in the years before divorce. The past decade also has seen a large increase in studies assessing complex variables within the marriage which profoundly affect child and adolescent adjustment, including marital conflict and violence and related parenting behaviors. This newer literature provides provocative and helpful information for forensic and clinical psychiatrists in their work with both married and divorcing families. **Conclusions:** While children of divorced parents, as a group, have more adjustment problems than do children of never-divorced parents, the view that divorce per se is the major cause of these symptoms must be reconsidered in light of newer research documenting the negative effects of troubled marriages on children. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2000, 39(8):963-973. **Key Words:** divorce, marital conflict, child adjustment, parent-child relationships, visiting, divorce interventions.

For 30 years, the event and process of divorce have been viewed as the major cause of the many observed behavioral symptoms and longer-term adjustment problems in children and adolescents whose parents are separated or divorced. Divorced families often have been viewed by the media, public, and mental health professionals as seriously flawed structures and environments, whereas the married or intact family was characteristically seen as a more positive and nurturing environment for children. There has

been a dramatic upsurge in the past 10 years in family research studying aspects of marriage and parenting that affect child adjustment and in longitudinal studies assessing children in both married and divorced families. This newer research, generally more large-scale and sophisticated in design and statistical analysis, provides us with a more complex understanding of the source of children's adjustment problems in both married and divorced families. Such studies have found that the adjustment problems of children of divorce can in part be accounted for by the experiences of these children within marriages that later end in divorce, and they bring into question the utility of much earlier divorce research that failed to assess predivorce variables and use comparison or control groups of children who had never experienced divorce.

This review will highlight the most important findings of the past decade regarding children's adjustment in the

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married family, particularly the high-conflict marriage, and child and adolescent adjustment in the postdivorce family. Interventions for divorcing families developed and adopted on a more wide-scale basis in the past 10 years offer positive alternatives to families going through the divorce process, and the effectiveness of these interventions will be briefly reviewed. All research findings reported in this review were statistically significant findings from large, carefully matched samples of divorced and never-divorced children, or from national survey studies involving thousands of families, with control for background or other relevant differences when appropriate. Divorce research has continued to focus primarily on families in which mothers have custody and fathers are the visiting parents, which represents the dominant postdivorce family structure. In the large national study samples, the number of families in which the father has custody has been described as too small to allow for the reporting of reliable findings.

The term *divorced children* rather than *children of divorce* has been used throughout the article for reasons of efficiency and to reflect the accepted use of this shorthand term in the marital and divorce research literature. Its use is not intended to imply that children are divorced from either parent.

MARRIAGE AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT

Marital Conflict

Marital conflict is a more important predictor of child adjustment than is divorce itself or postdivorce conflict (Buehler et al., 1998; Kline et al., 1991). Several large longitudinal studies found that as many as half of the behavioral and academic problems of children in marriages whose parents later divorced were observed 4 to 12 years before the separation. The symptoms were similar to those reported in divorced children: conduct disorders, antisocial behaviors, difficulty with peers and authority figures, depression, and academic and achievement problems (Cherlin et al., 1991; Elliot and Richards, 1991). Such symptoms were also more often found in children of high-conflict marriages than in children of low-conflict marriages (Vandewater and Lansford, 1998). Regardless of parents' marital status, a high level of marital conflict experienced during childhood has been linked to more depression and other psychological disorders in young adults, compared with those reporting lower levels of family conflict during childhood (Amato and Keith, 1991; Zill et al., 1993).

The presence of conflict and verbal disagreement between parents is not in itself a reliable predictor of child adjustment, and the threshold at which risk occurs in each family is unknown. Conflict between parents is common in resolving important child-rearing differences and financial disputes, and some parents and ethnic groups have a familial style of loud, argumentative discussions.

Research indicates that the intensity and frequency of parent conflict, the style of conflict, its manner of resolution, and the presence of buffers to ameliorate the effects of high conflict are the most important predictors of child adjustment. The severity of fighting has been documented in many studies to have a central role. High-intensity fighting is associated with more insecure attachments and anxiety in infants and toddlers. In older children and adolescents, severity of conflict had the largest and most consistent impact on children's adjustment, with intense conflict leading to more externalizing (disobedience, aggression, delinquency) and internalizing (depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem) symptoms in both boys and girls, compared with children experiencing low-intensity conflict (Cummings and Davies, 1994; Dadds et al., 1999).

Frequency of conflict, one of the earliest and most common measures used in marital research, has been demonstrated repeatedly to play a role, in that high-frequency conflict is linked to more negative effects on children, compared with moderate or low-frequency conflict in the marriage. However, in studying parental conflict styles as well as frequency of conflict, Buehler et al. (1998) found that overtly hostile conflict styles (physical and verbal affect and behaviors such as slapping, screaming, contempt, derision) were more strongly associated with externalizing and internalizing behaviors in children than either covert conflict styles or frequency of conflict. Covert conflict styles (passive-aggressive behaviors such as "triangulation" of child, resentment, unspoken tension) were linked to more internalizing symptoms in children (depression, anxiety, withdrawal). The more negative impact of overt hostile conflict styles was found in both boys and girls, and in married as well as divorced families. In addition, severe marital conflict that focuses on the child is more predictive of child behavior problems than is frequency of marital conflict or conflict that is not child-centered. These children express more self-blame, shame, and fear of being drawn into the conflict (Grych and Fincham, 1993).

Research has identified buffers that help protect children in high-conflict marriages, including a good relationship with at least one parent or caregiver, parental

warmth, the support of siblings, and for adolescents, having good self-esteem and peer support (Emery, 1999; Neighbors et al., 1993). Parental warmth diminished the effects of high marital conflict in girls, but did not serve the same buffering function for boys. Instead, parental warmth was directly associated with boys' positive outcomes, independent of marital conflict levels (Vandewater and Lansford, 1998). Preadolescents in high-conflict homes with close sibling relationships were found to be as well-adjusted as comparable youngsters in low-conflict homes (Jenkins, 1992). Furthermore, positive sibling support in high-conflict families in childhood was associated with more positive adjustment in late adolescence, particularly in self-esteem and social relationships, compared with those with low sibling support or only-children (Caya and Liem, 1998).

Direct and Indirect Effects of Marital Conflict

Efforts to understand what aspects of marital conflict create adjustment problems in children have led to the recognition that there are both direct effects on adjustment and indirect effects mediated through quality of parenting and parent-child relationships. *Direct* negative effects of high conflict include children's modeling of parental behaviors, failure to learn appropriate social interaction skills, and physiological effects (Cummings and Davies, 1994). Children incorporate repertoires of angry, impulsive, and violent behaviors into their own behavior as a result of observing their parents' responses to frustration and rage. Because parental examples of discussion of conflict, attempts at compromise, and resolution of conflict are generally absent in high-conflict marriages, these children do not learn social skills and control of aggression necessary for successful peer relationships. More recent research points also to disturbances in affective regulation or emotional arousal mechanisms in young children exposed to violent or repetitive severe parental conflict (DeBellis, 1997; Lieberman and Van Horn, 1998). Children respond to angry conflict and aggression with increases in heart rate and blood pressure, facial expressions of fear and anxiety, crying, postural freezing, and sometimes flight. With repeated exposure to severe conflict, this negative arousal of the physiological stress system appears to create cumulative difficulties in regulating emotional responses, resulting in anger and physical aggression when the child becomes emotionally aroused (Cummings and Davies, 1994; DeBellis, 1997).

High marital conflict *indirectly* affects child adjustment, mediated through the mother-child and father-child relationship. Persistent, intense marital discord, and marital dissatisfaction, pervasively undermines the quality of parenting, including discipline, parent-child aggression, and affective responses (Fincham et al., 1994). There is a spillover of negative affect, especially between parents and their cross-sex children (Kerig et al., 1993). Mothers in high-conflict marriages are less warm and empathic toward their children, are more rejecting, are more erratic and harsh in discipline, and use more guilt and anxiety-inducing disciplinary techniques, compared with mothers in low-conflict marriages. These more negative parenting behaviors and parent-child relationships are also associated with poorer social awareness and social withdrawal in the child (Belsky et al., 1991; Cummings and Davies, 1994; Fincham et al., 1994; Harrist and Ainslie, 1998; Kline et al., 1991).

Fathers in high-conflict marriages withdraw more from the parenting role and from their children than do fathers in low-conflict marriages. It is well established that mothers are gatekeepers of the extent of the father-child relationship, both during marriage and after divorce, and that mothers' attitudes toward fathers' parenting role affects the extent of fathers' parenting more than fathers' own attitude (for reviews see Doherty, 1998, and Pleck, 1997). Angry mothers in high-conflict marriages may exclude fathers from parenting functions as a retaliatory gesture and to preserve an arena of power within the marriage. In addition, fathers' parenting styles may be more tied to marital quality than are women's styles. Fathers in deteriorating marital relationships are more negative and intrusive with their children compared with mothers in poor marriages or fathers in satisfactory marriages (Belsky et al., 1991). Thus, for the child in the high-conflict marriage, the indirect consequence may be not only less father involvement, but more negative interactions with and feelings of rejection by the father. Finally, parents in high-conflict marriages are more depressed than those in low-conflict marriages, which is linked to more impaired family functioning (Keitner and Miller, 1990; Vandewater and Lansford, 1998).

Resolution of Conflict by Parents

The manner in which parents resolve their conflict has been determined to affect the impact of high conflict on children's adjustment. Chronic, unresolved conflict is associated with greater emotional insecurity in children.

Fear, distress, and other symptoms in children are diminished when parents resolve their significant conflicts, as opposed to no resolution, and when parents use more compromise and negotiation methods rather than verbal attacks (Cummings and Davies, 1994). The beneficial effects of these more resolution-oriented behaviors have been reported whether occurring behind closed doors or in front of the child.

Violence and Child Adjustment

Violence is more likely to co-occur in high-conflict marriages, has an independent effect on children's adjustment, and is significantly more potent in affecting adjustment than is marital conflict (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Jouriles et al., 1996; McNeal and Amato, 1998). Clinical research with preschool children traumatized by the earlier battering of their mothers demonstrates pervasive and differentiated negative effects on their development (Lieberman and Van Horn, 1998). Repeated exposure to violence is predictive of posttraumatic stress disorder in children, particularly when combined with other risk factors of child abuse, poverty, and the psychiatric illness of one or both parents (Ayoub et al., 1999; DeBellis, 1997; Kilpatrick and Williams, 1997). Observing or knowing about particular types of violence places children at even greater risk, in that threats to use or use of guns and knives are linked to more behavioral symptoms in 8- to 12-year-olds, compared with youngsters in families with spousal violence without knives and guns (Jouriles et al., 1998).

Compounding the effects of marital violence is the fact that there are higher rates of both child abuse and sibling violence in violent compared with nonviolent, high-conflict marriages. In a review of 31 studies, using a conservative definition of child abuse, the co-occurrence rate of abuse of children in samples of battered women was 40% (Appel and Holden, 1998). This is similar to other estimates that between 40% and 60% of children in all marriages with violence are targets of violence from mother, father, or both. It is not surprising that children in violent, high-conflict marriages have more symptoms than children in nonviolent, high-conflict marriages (Johnston and Campbell, 1993), who in turn are significantly more symptomatic than children in nonviolent, low-conflict marriages (McNeal and Amato, 1998). In a 12-year longitudinal study, marital violence, independent of nonviolent high marital conflict and parental substance abuse, was related in young adults to low life satisfaction, poor self-esteem, less closeness to mother, more psychological

distress, and more violence in their own relationships. Parental marital violence increased the odds of offspring relationship violence by 189% (McNeal and Amato, 1998).

DIVORCE AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT

Children of divorce, compared with children in never-divorced families, have significantly more adjustment and achievement problems. More recent studies, and studies with more sophisticated methodology, report smaller differences between these 2 groups than did earlier studies, and the magnitude of the differences is quite small. There is great overlap between groups of divorced and never-divorced children, with the majority of children of divorce falling within the average range of adjustment on standardized measures (Amato, 1994). However, aspects of the divorce experience clearly increase risk for many children, particularly for those who are at the high risk end of the bell curve as their parents separate and divorce (Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan, 1999).

Externalizing and Internalizing Problems

In numerous studies over the past 3 decades, divorced children have been reported to be more aggressive and impulsive and to engage in more antisocial behaviors, compared with matched samples of never-divorced children. They also have more problems in relationships with parents, peers, and authority figures. While some earlier studies reported that divorced boys had more externalizing problems than did girls, others have been more equivocal. In a nationally representative sample of 618 married and divorced-never remarried families assessed at 2 points in time, no gender differences could be linked to divorce (Vandewater and Lansford, 1998). Rather, in the overall population, boys had significantly more externalizing behaviors than did girls, regardless of family structure, including being suspended or expelled from school, getting in trouble with police, and running away from home. The study also did not support earlier reports that depression and anxiety were more common for girls than boys as a result of divorce. Hetherington (1999), on the other hand, points to the complexity of the gender-age-adjustment issue, in that adjustment and achievement in boys and girls after divorce were found to vary by age, time since divorce, type of parenting, and type and extent of conflict.

Economic, Social, and Physical Problems

Children often experience a substantial decline in their standard of living in the custodial home after divorce,

leading to greater economic instability and reduced access to resources that never-divorced children are more likely to have, including better schools and neighborhoods. Inadequate child support and weak enforcement policies are largely responsible for the decline, beyond the financial burden of supporting 2 households, although some of these families were poor before divorce. In 1992, 14% of white and nearly one-half of African-American households were below the poverty level after divorce, which was found to be more a consequence rather than cause of the divorce (McLanahan, 1999). Both African-American and white children from divorced households are less likely to be employed as young adults, although the rate is higher for African Americans. It is estimated that the economic problems of divorced households account for as much as half of the adjustment problems seen in divorced children (McLanahan, 1999).

Divorced children are more likely to use alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana than are never-divorced children. This is related to more reliance on friends and peer groups that use substances, less effective coping skills in divorced children, and impaired parental monitoring and parenting practices. Divorced parents also use more drugs and alcohol than do never-divorced parents (Neher and Short, 1998).

Divorced children are twice as likely to give birth to a child as a teenager, compared with never-divorced children or children who lost a parent to death (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). White females have a greater proportionate risk of early pregnancy than do African-American or Hispanic females, particularly if their predivorce background was more advantaged, although their overall rate is lower (McLanahan, 1999). Children of divorce also have more illnesses, medical problems, and physician visits and are 3 times more likely to receive psychological treatment, compared with never-divorced children (Zill et al., 1993).

Academic Achievement

Divorce has been associated with lowered academic performance and achievement test scores, although the differences between divorced and never-divorced children are modest and are reduced even further when appropriate socioeconomic controls are used (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). The school dropout rate of divorced children, particularly for white compared with African-American and Hispanic youngsters, is more than twice that of never-divorced children. Divorced children are also less likely to earn a college degree, in part because parental aspirations for educational attainment increase

for adolescents in never-divorced families but decrease for adolescents in divorced households (McLanahan, 1999). While a national survey study found that high levels of marital and family discord prior to divorce accounted for much of the link between parental divorce and measures of educational attainment (Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994), other research points as well to the reduced resources and lowered parental monitoring postdivorce as important factors (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Divorced children have poorer school attendance, watch more television, do less homework, and have less parental supervision of their school work, patterns that are primarily attributable to family disruption (McLanahan, 1999). However, when fathers are involved with the child's school and schoolwork after separation, there is less decline in academic functioning. Divorced children with more involved fathers are less likely to be expelled or suspended, get better grades, and like school better, compared with children with less involved fathers after divorce, and they do not differ significantly from children in married families in school performance and achievement (Nord et al., 1997).

Divorced Children as Young Adults

There appear to be significant consequences for some young adults who experienced divorce as children or adolescents (Amato and Keith, 1991; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Emery, 1999; Zill et al., 1993). Young adults whose parents divorced during childhood, compared with never-divorced children, have more pregnancies outside of marriage, earlier marriages (a risk factor for later divorce), poorer marital relationships, increased propensity to divorce, and poorer socioeconomic attainment (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Parent-child relationships also appear quite vulnerable, in that adult children of divorce show less affection for their parents, have less contact with them, and engage in fewer intergenerational exchanges of assistance compared with never-divorced adult children. This is particularly the case for the young adult and the noncustodial parent (Amato and Booth, 1996).

In a large longitudinal study of British families, among those young adults whose parents divorced between ages 7 and 16, there were escalating mental health risks as they moved into adolescence and young adulthood. These risks were not fully explained by their predivorce behavioral symptoms but were linked to aspects of postdivorce life, such as reduced opportunities and economic resources. However, by age 33, the vast majority of those with

childhood divorce were not distinguishable from those from never-divorced families (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995).

Overall, this decade of research supports the view that the long-term outcome of divorce for the majority of children is resiliency rather than dysfunction. Clearly, there is pain and distress associated with parental divorce for many, as distinct from psychological symptoms. For example, college students whose parents earlier divorced reported more painful childhood experiences compared with never-divorced college students, but they did not differ in measures of depression or anxiety (Laumann-Billings and Emery, *in press*). The lingering effects of divorce in adulthood are more in the realm of educational attainment, which may affect the occupational achievement and socioeconomic security of those who dropped out of school and entered early marriages and parenthood.

The risk-resiliency perspective is enhanced by assessing the experience of the young adult in the predivorce marriage. Young adults whose high-conflict parents divorced before they were adolescents were significantly better-adjusted 10 years later than were young adults whose high-conflict parents did not divorce. It is surprising that young adults from low-conflict families whose parents divorced earlier were less well-adjusted than youngsters from high-conflict families whose parents divorced (Amato et al., 1995). For preadolescents in low-conflict families, the divorce may have led to severe loss of economic and parental support, with no corresponding positive gain of significantly diminished conflict.

POSTDIVORCE FACTORS AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT

Adjustment of the Custodial Parent

Living in the custody of a mother with significant psychiatric or personality disorders after divorce, including depression and anxiety, is associated with longer-term impaired emotional, social, and academic adjustment (Johnston, 1995; Kline et al., 1991). After divorce, there is no buffering effect provided by the nonresidential parent when the child experiences erratic, hostile, or depressed parenting in the custodial residence. Most recent research has focused on parenting quality and parent-child relationships. When custodial parents provide appropriate emotional support, adequately monitor children's activities, discipline authoritatively, and maintain age-appropriate expectations, children and adolescents are better-adjusted compared with divorced children experiencing less appropriate parenting (Buchanan et al., 1996; Hetherington,

1999; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Neighbors et al., 1993). The influence of the visiting father diminishes as a factor in the child's adjustment and development after divorce (Kelly and Lamb, 2000; Lamb, 1999; Thompson and Laible, 1999), although research has not been conducted about the nature and extent of continuing influence of the father in shared physical custody situations.

Access to the Nonresidential Parent

Research in the 1990s continued to focus on fathers as the nonresidential parent because the number of children with nonresidential mothers remains extremely small. When mothers are the nonresidential parents, they visit more frequently, assume more parenting functions with their children, and are less likely to discontinue seeing their children over time, compared with nonresidential fathers (Depner, 1993). Children who live with fathers and visit mothers are more likely to be older than those in the custody of mothers, and the custody arrangements are more fluid (Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992).

Large-scale studies using a national database have generally found no relationship between frequency of father contact and child adjustment, with the exception of one study reporting a positive relationship between adolescent adjustment and frequent father contact (N. Zill and C.W. Nord, unpublished, 1996). It is apparent that frequency of visits does not ensure positive meaning in the father-child relationship, and these large-scale studies failed to assess the quality of the visiting parent-child relationship, including the strength of the emotional tie, the child's age, the length of time since separation, and other relevant predivorce variables. The strongest negative effects, for example, of fathers' departure on children's adjustment occur in the first 1 to 2 years after separation, and particularly for boys (Mott et al., 1997). Studies of father contact and child adjustment in the 1990s have assessed a wider range of relevant variables, including multiple dimensions of the father-child relationship, mothers' attitudes toward visiting, and levels of conflict, with different and more complex results regarding contact and child outcomes. A meta-analysis of 57 studies indicates that more recent studies of father-child contact provide stronger evidence of father impact on child adjustment than do earlier studies (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999).

Several major shifts and social trends consolidating in the 1990s are worthy of note. National and regional data indicate that the percentage of children with no contact with their fathers 2 years after divorce has decreased sub-

stantially in the past 2 decades (Selzer, 1991, 1998), with between 8% and 25% of children having no contact with their fathers by 2 to 3 years after divorce (Braver, 1998; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992). Higher levels of paternal involvement in the married family in the past 2 decades (Lamb, 1997; Pleck, 1997) has led divorcing fathers to seek more time with their children after separation, supported by more gender-neutral legal statutes and judicial decision-making. As a result, 35% of children are now seeing their fathers at least once per week and some several times per week (Selzer, 1998). It should be noted, however, that contacts between fathers and children decrease over time, as a result of relocation of either parent, remarriage, continuing high legal conflict, and gradual erosion in the father-child relationship.

The frequency and pattern of contacts between fathers and children after divorce are related to marital and post-divorce conflict and the amount of legal conflict. In almost all empirical studies of father contacts, data have been obtained exclusively from the custodial mother. When both mothers and fathers are interviewed, mothers underreport actual visit frequency and fathers overreport (Braver, 1998). Earlier research reported that fathers from high-conflict marriages visit their children less often and for smaller amounts of time. Similarly, mothers' hostility at the beginning of the divorce predicts less father visitation, including fewer overnight visits, 3 years later (Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992). Well-defined visiting schedules, including overnight visits, should be established and implemented immediately after separation, as such agreements or court orders are more likely to be adhered to over time (Kelly, 1994; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Zill and Nord, unpublished, 1996). Fathers' frequent complaints that mothers interfere with visiting also have some support. Mothers sabotage fathers' visits with their children between 25% (mothers reports) and 35% (fathers' reports) of the time (Braver, 1998).

The extent to which father involvement will impact child adjustment after divorce appears to be complexly linked to degree of conflict, type of paternal involvement, and maternal acceptance, as well as the regular payment of child support (Lamb, 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Pruett and Pruett, 1998). When parent conflict was low postdivorce, children's adjustment was more positive when there were high levels of father-child contact. When parent conflict was high, however, frequent contact was associated with poorer adjustment in sons, although not daughters (Amato and Rezac, 1994). Other studies have

indicated that mother-son acrimony increases more after divorce than mother-daughter acrimony (Hetherington, 1999); thus more frequent contact with fathers in high-conflict situations may create even more turmoil for boys in the custodial home. Maternal dissatisfaction about father visiting, however, was found more recently to be a stronger predictor of child well-being than conflict. When mothers were dissatisfied with high levels of father contact, children were less well-adjusted, regardless of whether conflict was nonexistent or moderate to high. It is unknown whether the dissatisfaction stemmed from fathers' behaviors and attitudes or mothers' internal psychological states, including continued anger about the divorce. Overall, custodial mothers in this large study were more likely to be satisfied when fathers were highly involved. Although conflict increased slightly with higher levels of involvement, it was a curvilinear rather than direct linear relationship. More than half of the mothers reporting conflict with the father were still satisfied with the level of fathers' contacts with the children, suggesting that some conflict is seen as a normative part of the ongoing activity of coparenting after divorce (King and Heard, 1999).

Research focusing on the quality of paternal involvement indicates that feelings of closeness with the child and active parenting of the father were more strongly associated with positive child outcomes than frequency of contact (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). When fathers assisted children with homework and other projects, listened to the children's problems, provided emotional support, and set limits authoritatively, children had more positive academic achievement and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems than children whose fathers less actively parented. Such results suggest that visiting schedules be established that permit both school week and leisure time involvement, including overnight visits, to enable sufficient time for real parenting activities that maintain meaning and attachment in the parent-child relationship (Kelly and Lamb, 2000; Thompson and Laible, 1999). Qualitative studies indicate that many visiting fathers retreat to weekend entertainment as the main activity with their children, which diminishes the longer-term importance of the father's role in the child's life (see Lamb, 1999).

Legal and Physical Custody Arrangements

Although earlier studies found no relationship, joint legal custody (shared decision-making) has been linked to children's well-being in recent research. Fathers with joint

legal custody were more likely to see their preadolescent children at least weekly and have them for more overnight visits, compared with fathers without joint legal custody. These findings remained significant after control for a number of preseparation variables including socioeconomic status, quality of relationship with the child, child-rearing responsibilities, and family composition (Selzer, 1998). And joint legal custody predicted fewer child adjustment problems as well as higher rates of father-child visitation compared with sole legal custody, after control for 28 predivorce variables, including parental adjustment and spousal conflict (M.L. Gunnoe and S.L. Braver, unpublished, 1999). Parents who reported very frequent disagreements in the marriage were more likely in this study to have joint legal custody, perhaps because both parents wanted to ensure their different opinions had a legal forum for expression after divorce.

Many early studies comparing children's adjustment in maternal sole custody or joint physical custody arrangements (joint custody defined as between 30% and 50% time with the father) reported that joint custody children were better-adjusted and more satisfied with their arrangements than sole custody children, but the use of small, nonrepresentative samples has been criticized. More recent and larger studies, with both community and mandatory mediation samples, find few differences in adjustment between children in sole versus joint physical custody other than higher parental income and education and regular child support payments among joint custody parents (Johnston, 1995; Pruett and Hoganbruen, 1998). A large-scale study reported that when conflict was low after divorce, adolescents in joint physical custody were better-adjusted, but not in high-conflict postdivorce families (Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992). The psychological health of the parents and the quality of parent-child relationships remain the best predictors of children's adjustment. Over time, many shared physical custody arrangements drift toward more traditional mother custody patterns, but with adolescents, custody often shifts from mother to father when youngsters are exhibiting behavioral difficulties (Buchanan et al., 1996).

In families with extreme and continuing high conflict after divorce, children with more frequent transitions and shared access were found to have more emotional and behavioral problems, particularly the girls, than children in sole custody situations (Johnston, 1995). While this often violent and disturbed sample of disputing parents represents the extreme, it is unknown what level of con-

flict is damaging to children in less turbulent shared custody arrangements, particularly if the transitions take place in neutral locations such as school or day care, eliminating the need for face-to-face contact between parents.

Parent Conflict After Divorce

Hostility between parents diminishes significantly after divorce, and 3 years later, between 8% and 12% remain in very high conflict (King and Heard, 1999; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992). When anger continues in one or both parents, parallel parenting in separate domains is a common outcome. Although cooperative parenting is clearly beneficial after divorce, the disengaged parents may function effectively in their parallel domains, and in so doing, enhance their children's adjustment.

Adolescents who are caught in the middle of their parents' disputes after divorce are more poorly adjusted than those whose parents have conflict but do not use their children to express their disputes. Children caught in the middle are asked to send hostile messages or requests to the other parent, are asked to spy on a parent, and feel the need to conceal their feelings and thoughts about the other parent. When parents have substantial conflict but avoid placing their youngsters in the middle, their children are not significantly different from youngsters in families with low conflict (Buchanan et al., 1991). Such findings emphasize the need for divorce interventions and legal processes that will promote cooperation and reduce ongoing conflict.

INTERVENTIONS WITH DIVORCING FAMILIES

The accumulating body of research on divorce and child adjustment, and widespread acknowledgment of the shortcomings of the adversarial system for constructively helping families going through separation and divorce, have led to the implementation of newer nonadversarial interventions designed to ameliorate the effects of the divorce process, divorce itself, and parental conflict. Although more sophisticated, second-stage research remains to be conducted (see Kelly, 1996), research findings from studies of the effectiveness of divorce education programs and divorce mediation are encouraging.

Divorce Education Programs

The number of court-connected divorce education programs has tripled in the United States between 1994 and 1998 (Geasler and Blaisure, 1999), some of them mandated by state law or local rule. Community-based programs offered on a voluntary basis also appear to be

attracting larger numbers of parents. Divorce education programs increasingly have used research knowledge about divorce, parental conduct, and child adjustment to shape their content. Some programs include parallel sessions for children of different age groups (Glenn, 1998).

The most common objectives of divorce education programs for parents are to inform parents about how children typically respond to separation and divorce, alert parents to the potential effects of continued high conflict and other harmful behaviors on their children's adjustment, describe positive parenting responses which facilitate children's adaptation to divorce, discuss adult adjustment to divorce, focus parents on their children's need for a continuing relationship with both parents independent of their own feelings and attitudes toward the other parent, and describe court processes likely to be experienced by the parents (Braver et al., 1996; Geasler and Blaisure, 1998; Shifflett and Cummings, 1999; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999).

Empirical research indicates that client satisfaction is quite high, even among those mandated to attend (Arbuthnot and Gordon, 1996; Geasler and Blaisure, 1998). While one study found relitigation rates to be significantly lower among parents in the education groups, compared with those in control groups (Arbuthnot et al., 1997), others found no difference (Kramer and Kowal, 1998; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). Participating in divorce education programs early in the legal process is more effective than doing so later, and high-conflict parents appear to benefit the most, suggesting the importance of mandating divorce education programs. Most studies have not measured actual changes in cooperation or conflict between parents, relying instead on parental reports. Several studies found that parents randomly assigned to the education programs indicated greater willingness to have the children spend more time with the other parent, more intent to cooperate, and less likelihood of putting their child in the middle of their disputes, compared with control group parents not participating in a program. Programs which focus on parent skill-building and learning new communication and conflict reduction behaviors are more effective in producing change in parents, compared with programs which are either more didactic or which use affect-oriented video components. It appears that programs incorporating video, skill-building demonstrations and exercises, discussion, handouts, and some didactic presentations are more effective than programs relying on just one format (Geasler and Blaisure, 1999; Kramer et al., 1998).

Divorce and Custody Mediation

Divorce mediation has provided divorcing couples with a powerful and effective alternative to the adversarial process, and both comprehensive divorce mediation in the private sector and court-connected custody mediation have increased in availability and utilization in the past decade. Empirical research in 5 countries and 2 decades of experience lead to the conclusion that custody mediation should be not only widely available but also mandatory as a "first step" effort toward settlement for all parents disputing custody and access before proceeding to more adversarial processes (Emery, 1994; Kelly, 1994, 1996). Satisfaction with the process is very high in both custody and comprehensive divorce mediation, even among those who fail to reach agreement. Divorcing men and women report being significantly more satisfied with mediation processes compared with those using adversarial processes to settle their divorce disputes. Mediation is efficient in time and expense, and effective even with angry clients. Settlement rates range from 50% to 85%, depending on the setting, content, and prescreening processes. Relitigation rates are lower, and compliance with agreements occurs at higher rates among mediated samples (Ellis and Stuckless, 1996; Kelly, 1996). When parents were randomly assigned to a mediation or adversarial process, they were significantly more likely to reach agreement prior to a court hearing, compared with the adversarial group. In contrast to the adversarial process, in which parents saw themselves as either winners or losers, in mediation, both parents were more likely to report that they had "won" and that they had been heard (Emery, 1994).

Custody mediation leads to more joint legal custody agreements than do litigated outcomes, even after control for differences between the groups, and in some jurisdictions, more expanded time with nonresidential parents (Kelly, 1996). Some studies found that mediation is associated with significantly less conflict between parents during and after divorce, and with more cooperation, child-focused communication, and offers of parental support to each other after divorce, compared with parents in the adversarial divorce process (see Emery, 1994; Kelly, 1996). Longer-term effects were found after random assignment to mediation or litigation for custody disputes. The nonresidential parents in the mediation sample, mostly fathers, were significantly more involved with their children at the 12-year follow-up than were nonresidential parents in the litigation sample (Emery, unpublished, 1999). None of the empirical research has supported the early claims advanced

by critics of mediation that women are disadvantaged by the mediation process in either custody or financial outcomes (see Kelly, 1996).

Mandatory mediation in the public sector requires protective policies for those unable or afraid to negotiate on their own behalf, including the routine utilization of screening, opt-out provisions for victims for domestic violence, separate sessions, use of support persons, and protective orders. To offer effective services, mediators must have specialized training in mediation, divorce, and custody matters, including child development and domestic violence (Kelly, 1994, 1996).

Given the empirical research to date supporting the efficacy of newer interventions, divorcing or separating parents should have available a hierarchy of programs or services in the public sector that address their particular needs and conditions. These should range from the voluntary and least coercive to those processes that are highly controlling and coercive. The most effective hierarchy will include parent education, self-help legal information and processes, divorce and custody mediation, attorney representation, custody evaluation, arbitration, settlement conferences, and judicial determination. Forums that present opportunities to reach settlement and move out of the adversarial system should be available at each step of the way, commencing immediately after separation, to reduce interparental conflict and enhance the possibility of effective parent communication. In circumstances of child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, violence, reduced mental capacity, and mental illness, less coercive processes may not be appropriate, and the adversarial system provides an effective process for protecting children and parents.

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