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Editors' Comment

Each year approximately one million children experience divorce in their families. How parents deal with the stress and the dilemmas of parenting that follow a divorce has a lasting impact on how their children grow and flourish. Divorce will always be an influence in children's lives, but parents can help children develop into competent, successful and loving adolescents and young adults. Although some children will continue to show stress-related effects of divorce, after a year or two the emotional prognosis for most children of divorced families is similar to that of the average child.

In this issue of the *NYU Child Study Center Letter*, we discuss the impact of divorce on children in terms of parental stress, developmental stage, and signs of emotional distress. Ways in which parents can help their children adapt successfully and live rich and rewarding lives are also discussed.

HSK/AG

Introduction

In the 1960s, 90% of American children lived with their biological, married parents, while today only 40% do.¹ The events that created this wide difference are three-fold. More infants are now being born to unmarried couples living separately or cohabitating. In addition, divorce laws changed dramatically in 1969 when California became the first state to pass legislation enabling spouses to separate without having to prove cause or harm. Within a few years, "no-fault" divorce laws took effect in most of the 50 states, thus making it possible to end marriages with greater legal ease. Finally, other social and economic shifts, including women's increased access to education

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and employment, as well as the emphasis both sexes place on sexual fulfillment, contribute to a culture that is increasingly tolerant of divorce.

These legal and social phenomena have resulted in tremendous changes in family arrangements over the last 30 years. Currently 45% of first marriages and 55% of second marriages end in divorce. Typically 84% of children reside with their mothers. The remarriage rates for women and men are 66% and 75% respectively, and even higher when cohabitation rates are considered³. Given the high frequency of failed second marriages, many children and adolescents experience more than one difficult transition in family life. African-American children are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white children to have their parents permanently separate; although their parents may form a new relationship, they are less likely to legally divorce, and hence to legally remarry.⁴

Much of the research on the impact of divorce on children occurs in a climate of controversy. Both sides claim the opposition either overemphasizes or underestimates the negative effect of divorce.² Further, the media typically exaggerate or simplify findings. Researchers agree, however, that a child's success is impacted by several factors, including parental distress and functioning, socioeconomic status, children's developmental stage and individual personality.

Parental distress

Marital separation is one of the greatest stresses a person can endure.⁵ For the first two years following the end of a marriage, health problems for the ex-spouses are at their peak, including psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Even those spouses who experience feelings of relief after the divorce describe pervasive guilt about, and fears around, their

children's future. Parental distress in itself is not necessarily harmful to children; it is the resulting diminished ability to provide consistency, authority and emotional attunement that is so crucial. Alcohol and substance use, often high during the first transitional months and years following a divorce, further interfere with parenting ability.

The many losses after divorce also contribute to a parent's stress. People report shock and grief at their changed status from married to single, and the loneliness and isolation must not be underestimated. The separated couple's support network, which may have included in-laws, other relatives, and married friends is now diminished. Even when marriages have been deeply damaged, divorced couples have described feelings of loss. They no longer have a spouse to share both the demands and the rewards of parenting. Moreover, although divorce is statistically common, parents still describe stigmatization and scrutiny from family, educators, mental health providers and acquaintances, factors which can lead to increased isolation.

Parental stress often stems also from diminished economic resources. Annual family incomes decline 25-45% for women and 10% for men, which often precipitates other changes in family life, including moves to a less costly residence, changes of schools, and cutbacks in typical expenditures.⁶

It is important to consider these challenges and the accompanying losses when considering the impact of divorce on children. Parents are children's greatest resource. When parents are hurting, parenting suffers. Unfortunately, it is precisely at this time of depletion that children need their parents most.



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Children's reactions Developmental Stages

Divorce means changes in the lives of children. Understanding the developmental tasks at different stages can help in understanding how divorce affects children.

Prior to 18 months, the main tasks of the infant and toddler are to develop a solid attachment to another person or persons and to achieve a sense of trust in their surroundings. Although infants and young toddlers are non-verbal, they respond to changes in their parents' moods which are communicated by changes in touch, voice tone, and physical contact. When daily contact with one parent becomes limited, there is a risk for an interruption in bonding for both the child and the parent.⁷

Preschool children (approximately 18 months to 5 years) are growing rapidly – intellectually, physically and emotionally. Their growing mastery of language enables them to learn to exercise self-control and express emotions verbally. They are still, however, preoccupied with their own needs. Although they have little understanding of the meaning of divorce, they know that life has changed dramatically. They are keenly aware of separation and can experience anger; some children express these feelings in tantrums.⁸ Separation anxiety, normally expected at this time, may be prolonged, and there may be a regression in skills the child had long since accomplished. For example, a child may experience bed-wetting or become overly clingy. The older, verbal preschoolers are interested in who will care for them and how the divorce will change their routine. "Is this a Mommy day or a Daddy day?" they may ask as they become accustomed to their new lives. In addition, the older preschoolers, whose sense of curiosity is expanding, want concrete details. They may interpret separation as a rejection and feel guilty that they may have caused it.

During the ages of 6 to 12, children's worlds expand as they attend school. They become concerned about friendships, fitting in and fear being perceived as different than their peers. Although they can talk about their feelings, many children try to hide them, believing the divorce is their fault or punishment for misdeeds. During this stage, there is a growing level of awareness and increased

capacity for empathy. Thus, school-age children are particularly vulnerable to issues of loyalty. They are able to perceive the subtleties of parents' hurt feelings as well as how they themselves may exacerbate these feelings. Unlike children from intact families, children of divorce become very sensitive to hurting their parents' feelings by appearing more or less allied with one or the other, fearing they may lose the other parent.

Like preschoolers and school-age children, teenagers also experience shock, anger and sadness in response to parental separation. Although they have more skills for coping with the changes in their lives, some teenagers may act out and test the limits. Issues of trust and loyalty abound, but the divorce may also be perceived as an intrusion. The teenage years are inherently filled with paradox; on the one hand, teens are dependent on their parents; on the other hand, they feel independent. Their specific job during this developmental stage is to separate from their parents by developing a sense of security and well-being that is distinctly their own. In many ways, the adolescent feels it is only safe to do this when parents are self-sufficient. Divorce may disrupt a sense of security and produce a premature independence.

The teenage years are also a time when adolescents voice their opinions quite intensely. They see things dichotomously; that is, all or nothing, black or white. This characteristic can be particularly challenging for parents during a time already fraught with complexity. Even for adolescents who had previously been functioning quite well, this stage can be a time when problems are heightened. Further, research suggests that the tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood, (the self-regulation of behavior, establishment of autonomy, academic and vocational achievement, and the formation of an intimate relationship) take longer for children of divorced parents.⁹

Throughout the life span family events can trigger a resurfacing of the loss and conflict related to the divorce. For example, parents' new partners, weddings and the birth of a child may stir up old conflicts around loyalty.¹⁰ As families grow to accommodate in-laws and new children, issues about belonging may also become heightened. Further, the illness or death of a parent can reawaken unresolved disappointments and old wounds.

Individual differences

The responses of individual children to their parents' divorce vary. It has been suggested that a child's individual temperament affects his or her adjustment. Children who are intelligent, socially competent, and responsible seem to cope best with marital transitions. Research shows that socially confident children are better able to make use of their social networks and available resources as they manage this time of loss and change.¹¹

Research has also been conducted with children from divorced families who have behavioral problems. It may appear that children in divorced families have more problems, but research results have shown that, compared to children of intact families, children in divorced families exhibited more behavioral difficulties even prior to the divorce.¹² The differences between children from intact families and divorced families are significantly reduced when earlier behavioral problems are controlled for.¹³ These results raise several questions to be further investigated: Were these children already affected by the diminished parenting that often results when couples are unhappy? Does having a child with behavioral problems make a couple more likely to divorce? That is, do adjustment difficulties in children cause increased marital difficulties, which can then lead to divorce? Or is there a genetic link between behaviors of a "problem child" and behaviors of an adult susceptible to divorce, i.e. lack of impulse control, poor self-regulation, excitability, etc?¹⁴ When helping children in the initial crisis and beyond, parents, educators and mental health professionals can best help children by keeping individual personality characteristics in mind.

How parents can help

Keeping in mind the above discussion of parental distress, developmental stages and the child's individual personality, parents can lessen the negative impact of divorce and promote satisfying, successful and full lives for their children in many ways.

Let the children know

Many parents in the process of separating or divorcing report great difficulty in deciding when, how and what to tell their children. The following guidelines can be helpful.

When to tell

It is recommended that both parents inform the children together. When this is not feasible, the parent to whom the children feel most emotionally attuned should inform them.

Parents should be available for several hours following the conversation to deal with the children's questions and reactions, should they arise. The children should be assured that it's not bad to feel angry, sad or upset. Parents should assume that the initial meeting is the first of many conversations.

Children should be told only when the decision to separate or divorce is final, and not when parents are in the process of making the decision. Preparing them for the possibility that the separation may happen in the future only makes children insecure and anxious.

While it may be difficult, both parents should present a united front when informing children of the divorce or separation.¹⁵ This sends the clear message that the decision is solid and lasting, and prevents the children from pressuring one parent to reconsider.

How to tell

Parents should use simple, direct language, and if necessary, particularly for young children, define divorce. For example, "We've decided to get a divorce, which means mommy and daddy won't be married any more, and we'll live in different places." Children frequently express concerns about how the divorce will affect their daily lives, and parents should be prepared to answer questions about children's living arrangements and routines. They may enumerate the situations in which the children's lives will not change. When parents do not know the answers to questions, it is better to say so, rather than to give unprepared answers or false promises.

The message should be clear that the divorce does not impact either parent's love for, or commitment to, the children, and that the parents, not the children, are responsible for the divorce.

What to tell

It is not helpful to explain in detail why the divorce is happening, or who is to blame. While the reasons for the divorce are very important to parents, children are rarely interested. Instead, they usually just want the divorce to disappear. However,

children sometimes do raise questions about why the divorce is happening, and there is controversy about how to respond. Judith Wallerstein, a longtime researcher on the topic of divorce, believes that when parents do not give adequate information about why their marriage failed they conjure up fantasies about the reasons, which then cause guilt and anxiety.¹⁶ She recommends that parents discuss the motivation for the divorce in age-appropriate language at each developmental stage, as children's capacity for understanding matures. On the other hand, others see potential dangers in giving children detailed explanations about the divorce. They are concerned that such explanations may be used as ammunition against ex-spouses, thus causing children increased angst and fueling loyalty conflicts. Therefore parents should determine what children need to know and what they don't need to know. It may be tempting for parents to share intimate details with older children. However, certain topics, such as sexual relations, emotional or physical abuse, are for the adults only, and sharing them with the children may inappropriately cross the parent/child boundary and burden the child.

During conversations it is advisable to explore if the children's questions are really requests for information, or rather an attempt at expressing more personal feelings. For example, if an eight-year-old questions "Why are you getting a divorce?" she may really be expressing a negative feeling rather than requesting information. Thus an appropriate response, aimed at validating her feelings, would be "I know you hate that we're getting a divorce," or "I know this is really sad."

Conversations with children should be child-focused. The goal is to insure that children's relationships to both parents are protected. Communications become problematic when children are overtly or covertly expected to agree with their parents' beliefs. It is tempting for parents to use discussions about the reasons for a marital break-up as an opportunity to voice their perspective and either alleviate their own guilt or inform about past

transgressions. But this sends a message to children that other people's feelings are of greater importance than theirs, and that their feelings are undeserving or too burdensome for parents to tolerate.

Reduce conflict and blame

There is a popular belief that children are better off when unhappily married parents part ways. The assumption inherent in this logic is that conflict decreases once the breakup occurs.¹⁷ Unfortunately, this is often not the case. In fact conflict often increases as parents negotiate custody and visitation arrangements, and when one spouse is more hurt by the dissolution of the marriage than the other. Although mental health professionals warn parents to avoid conflict and the resulting burden of loyalty dilemmas, for some couples conflict may be inevitable. Emotions run high, and issues regarding children can be especially consuming after a divorce. It is no easy task to maintain open and honest relationships with one's children without communicating anger and frustration. It is difficult not to mention grievances and to hold one's tongue – when the ex-spouse feeds the child gummy bears for dinner, when previously agreed-upon vacation arrangements are ignored, when the much-needed child support check is late again. The proscription against the expression of negative feeling about the other parent to the children, although difficult, is in their best interests.

When there is conflict, it is important for parents to recognize when their motives are fueled by anger and to deal directly with each other rather than through the children. It is also best to choose one's fights. Parents often complain about how children's time is spent with the other parent. The source of conflict may be around more permissive parenting issues, such as methods of discipline. While this may be inconsistent with the other parent's beliefs, parents have no authority to insist that the other parent do things differently. In fact, unless a child's safety is concerned, parents have very little power over the details of how the other parent chooses to conduct him or herself. It is helpful to keep this in mind, because while conversations about different styles may be helpful, fights usually are not. In addition, it is recommended that parents not conduct business and conversations about parenting during transition times such as dropping off or picking up the children.

Maintain routines before and after divorce

It is in the children's best interest to have similar rules in both homes in regard to limits and routines (e.g. bedtimes, chores and other regulations).¹⁸ Consistency is also best served when the two homes are located relatively close to each other so that the children are able to keep their friends, thus reducing change to a minimum. Children's social support networks are valuable in providing a sense of stability.

Another point to keep in mind is that contact should be maintained, when possible, with the families of both parents. When parents come from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures, it is especially important to include both cultures and rituals in a child's life.¹⁹ This ability to participate in and differentiate between situations enables children to accept their diverse cultural make-up. When such inclusive arrangements are not made, the risk is that the child may dissociate major parts of himself, which inevitably leads to shame or internalized self-hatred.

Recognize and respect children's positive traits from both parents

One major loss inherent in divorce is that children do not have the opportunity to experience their parents' open love and admiration for each other. Instead, there is the assumption that at least one parent had negative views of the other. When parents are openly enamored of each other, children value those aspects of themselves that are similar to those "worthy" aspects of their parents. Children resemble their parents physically and psychologically; they are often told "You look just like your father," "You have your mother's smile." They are better off when this identification is appreciated and cultivated, rather than ignored or chastised. Children's self-image is based on the images they have of each parent. Otherwise, like multi-cultural children reared following only one set of rituals, there is potential for children to dissociate aspects of their character or physicality in an attempt to neutralize loyalty dilemmas. For example, a son may avoid participation in Tae Kwon Do because his father was particularly skilled in the art, and any resemblance to him reminds his mother of her loss. Or a

daughter may feel ashamed of having her mother's tall, thin stature, as her father remarried a petite, athletic woman. Indeed it is an act of generosity and attunement when parents admire aspects of their children that may resemble the ex-spouse. This, in effect, gives children permission to love and respect aspects of themselves that stem from the other parent.

When to seek professional help

Divorce is a process, not a single event. Children may have difficulty at any time in the process – in their early years, adolescence, or in adulthood. Parents should be concerned if their child

- exhibits different or unusual negative behavior which lasts more than a few weeks;
- exhibits behavior more characteristic of a younger child;
- shows changes in frequency and intensity of behavior, especially aggression, sadness, antisocial activity;
- shows less pleasure and interest in activities previously enjoyed;
- shows a marked change in academic performance;
- is overly self-critical.

Parents may benefit from a support group with other adults undergoing divorce or separation. Similarly, children's sense of isolation can be lessened by participating in a group of children of divorced parents. For many families, short-term family therapy helps parents and children translate into language the unresolved feelings of loss and change commonly associated with this crisis. Further, efforts at maintaining consistency and discipline are supported. It is recommended that if family treatment is sought, sessions include children with only one parent at a time. In other words, the session should resemble the new family configuration, lest sessions perpetuate a child's symptoms or encourage fantasies of the couple reuniting. It may also be helpful for the ex-spouses to meet with a therapist, not for reconciliation counseling, but for co-parenting help. Seeking such assistance should not be viewed as evidence of a failure, but rather as an attempt at solution-building.

Conclusion

Although divorce is increasingly socially acceptable and legally available, stress results for all family members. Children's adjustment depends on the interaction of several factors: parental distress, socioeconomic status, developmental stage and individual personality characteristics. Children do best when their need to honor and admire both parents is protected. This generous goal – decency on behalf of children – is ultimately what promotes successful adjustment.

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550 First Avenue New York, NY 10016 (212)263-6226



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