



Divorce and separation

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Divorce and Separation

Synthesis

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

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How important is it?

The rise in divorce has followed an international trend in the last few decades. From 1960 to 1980 alone, the divorce rate in industrialized nations has more than [doubled](#). An increasing number of children from [cohabiting](#), non-married couples are also likely to experience parental separation. These sociodemographic changes affect [millions](#) of children

The effects of divorce and separation may be particularly important for children [under 4](#) as rapid developmental changes in the cognitive, emotional, and social domains take place in early childhood. Thus, disruptions in this period can have lasting consequences on the child's well-being and adjustment in later years. It is estimated that [eradicating](#) the detrimental impact of divorce on children could lead to a 30% reduction in rates of mental health difficulties in young adults, a 30% decline in teenage pregnancies, and a 23% cutback in school dropouts.

What do we know?

Children's experiences of separation and divorce

Divorce and separation often lead children to experience intense [emotions](#). Misinterpretations about the divorce and loyalty conflicts are also experienced by many, although few discuss their thoughts and feelings with their parents. Children who experience divorce may have more [difficulties](#) than children from two-parent families. Indeed, in the short term, divorce has been associated with decline in academic achievement, self-concept, and overall adjustment problems. Although [most](#) children from divorced parents do not suffer any long-term consequences, some children may experience difficulties in [adolescence](#), such as mental health problems, substance abuse, delinquency, and teenage pregnancy. Problems may even persist into [adulthood](#), as they tend to have more economic, emotional, health, and relationship problems.

The age at which children experience the divorce should be a primary concern to address their needs adequately. In the early years, [infants](#) function best with parents who are reliable, responsive and sensitive to the infant's personal traits. Given that their sense of time and memory is not yet mature, babies must spend time frequently with both parents so that strong attachment relationships can develop. As children get older, the amount of time they spent with each parent becomes less

crucial, though each parent must continue to be [actively involved](#) in their child's education, discipline, play and care.

The effects of overnight stays with the nonresidential parents also fluctuate depending on the age of the child. Compared to infants with very few [overnights](#), children under 2 who have regular overnights showed difficulties in stress regulation, while two- and three-year-olds also exhibit more separation anxiety, aggression, and eating problems than toddlers with less overnights. In the preschool years, children with overnight stays share a more positive relationship with the second parent and are better adjusted than children without overnights.

Risk and protective factors involved in the consequences of divorce

Several risk factors, most involving the [quality of parenting](#), can worsen the negative impact of divorce on child development. The early stages of divorce represent a stressful period for parents, which often impairs parenting. Parents are typically less patient, consistent, and warm with their children during that period. Child monitoring, positive exchange and gentle discipline are also likely to diminish. Other factors that have been found to [exacerbate](#) the adverse effects of divorce include poverty, disorganized home arrangements, [lack of contact](#) with the nonresidential parent, and parents suffering from mental health problems. In addition, exposure to [high parental conflicts](#) is likely to affect children of all ages, but is particularly damaging to children under 4.

Fortunately, the harmful effects of divorce can be attenuated by a number of [protective factors](#). For instance, children of cooperative and authoritative parents who minimize their child's exposure and involvement in conflicts and who provide a stable and organized home environment are much better equipped to cope with the separation. Close ties with siblings and members of the extended family also lead to better adjustment.

What can be done?

Given that many of the adverse effects of divorce can be explained by parenting, parents can play a central role in facilitating the child's adjustment to the new family arrangements by:

1. Being [emotionally sensitive to their child](#) during transitions to different households;
2. Learning how to [deal with conflicts](#), maintain warm and loving relationships with the child, and prioritize the child's needs;
3. Maintaining stable and consistent [schedules](#) in young children to foster the child's sense of security and progressively allow these schedules to become more flexible as the child becomes older;
4. Practicing effective [co-parenting](#) (working as a team rather than as adversaries), or in case of intense conflicts, parallel parenting (minimizing the contact between parent);
5. Showing frequent [reassurance of love](#) through words, and affection;
6. Setting and enforcing clear limits and guidelines;
7. Encouraging open communication in day-to-day activities in which parents actively listen and acknowledge their child's emotions without judgment;
8. Taking some time before getting involved in new relationships so that children get used to the changes associated with the separation;
9. Minimizing the number of changes children face and clearly explain these changes;

10. Agreeing on how [major issues](#) will be decided and resolved;
11. Taking care of themselves to improve their parenting abilities.

Recommendations also extend to the elaboration of optimal and flexible [parenting plans](#) that support children’s needs at all ages, and allows children access to both parents. These tend to be more successful when they are elaborated in mediation than in court, and include agreement on time spent with each parent. From birth to the toddler years, careful [separations of short duration](#) are appropriate but overnight stays are not recommended unless the infant has already developed a strong attachment security to the nonresidential parent. In the preschool years, children can be separated from the first parent for longer periods of time.

Several [programs](#) exist to help children and parents cope with divorce and separation, including child-focused interventions that emphasize on stress management, expression of feelings and interpersonal resources; and parent-focused programs that discuss relationship quality, discipline, emotion regulation, and [coparenting](#). Given the success of these programs, [brief, community-based interventions](#) must now be put in place on a large scale to increase [access](#) for parents and children. Alternatives to formal court proceedings such as mediation should also be readily available to all parents.

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Consequences of Separation/Divorce for Children

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed dramatic changes in family life in all industrial countries.¹ The increase in the divorce rate in the second half of the 20th century was striking; in fact, the divorce rate more than doubled in most Westernized countries from 1960 to 1980.² The increase in divorces has been particularly consequential for children, as millions of them have experienced parental divorce. Moreover, recent increases in non-marital births, driven largely by rising rates of childbearing among cohabiting couples, have also resulted in a greater number of children experiencing the separation of their never-married parents.³ Because cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages, many children who are born into these unions also will experience the dissolution of their parents' union when the cohabiting relationships end.⁴

Subject

Numerous studies have found that parental separation and divorce is associated with a range of negative outcomes for younger children and adolescents across various domains.⁵⁻⁷ Parental separation/ divorce is associated with academic difficulties, including lower grades and prematurely dropping out of school, and greater disruptive behaviours (e.g., being oppositional with authority figures, getting into fights, stealing, and using and abusing alcohol and illegal drugs). Children and adolescents who experience the divorce of their parents also have higher rates of depressed mood, lower self-esteem, and emotional distress.

Parental divorce is also associated with negative outcomes and earlier life transitions as offspring enter young adulthood and later life. Children of divorce are more likely to experience poverty, educational failure, early and risky sexual activity, non-marital childbirth, earlier marriage, cohabitation, marital discord and divorce. In fact, emotional problems associated with divorce actually increase during young adulthood.⁸ Understanding the magnitude of these problems and the causal mechanisms through which divorce influences these behaviours, therefore, has important social consequences.

Problems

First, research needs to specifically identify the magnitude of the effects of divorce because so many other risk factors frequently co-occur with parental separation. So, the

question is how large are the differences between offspring who do and do not experience parental separation? Second, it is difficult to examine the causal effects of parental separation/divorce on offspring adjustment because researchers cannot use random assignment. As such, researchers must consider and test both causal and non-causal mechanisms that could explain why parental separation/divorce is associated with problems across numerous areas of functioning.

Research Context

Research on parental separation/divorce is now using more representative samples, utilizing stronger research designs to test competing theories, including measurements of offspring functioning before and after the separation, and better assessing of multiple domains of functioning.^{5,9} These advances are enabling researchers to answer questions that are important for public policy.¹⁰⁻¹¹

Key Research Questions

Three research questions will be addressed here:

1. What is the magnitude of the effects associated with parental separation?
2. Are the associations between parental separation/divorce and offspring functioning causally related to the experience of marital transitions or due to factors that both increase marital disruptions and offspring functioning?
3. To which extent are the associations causal and what are the specific environmental factors that mediate (or explain) the associations?

Recent Research Results

Parental separation/divorce is associated with approximately a one-and-half to two-fold increase in the risk for impairing outcomes in the offspring, such as dropping out of school or experiencing their own divorce.¹² Yet, a majority of offspring who have experienced a parental separation do not experience these serious outcomes. The magnitude of the effects are typically described as small to medium by social science researchers,¹³ meaning that parental separation is associated with increased risk but parental separation/divorce is not the largest or most important risk factor when considered by itself. It is important to note, however, that many offspring of separated/divorced parents experience many distressing thoughts and emotions, regardless of whether they have diagnosable problems.¹⁴ A recent meta-analysis, a study that combines numerous studies on a topic, also has found that the differences between offspring who have and who have not experienced parental divorce have increased since the 1980s.¹⁵

There are two main and competing explanations for the increase in problems seen among children of divorce. The first, the causal hypothesis, suggests that divorce itself harms children and causes their subsequent problems. In contrast, the selection hypothesis emphasizes that divorced parents are different from those who do not divorce and that these differences lead both to divorce and to later adjustment problems in the children. Research studies have used numerous designs to test the causal and selection factors. For example, genetically-informed approaches,¹⁶⁻²¹ studies that help rule out genetic and environmental selection factors, and longitudinal studies with measures of offspring

functioning before and after the separation^{8,22-23} suggest that risk factors specifically associated with parental separation/divorce are responsible for most of the increased risk of psychological, academic and social impairments.⁵⁻⁶

Recent research has focused on identifying the family processes that specifically account for (or mediate) the association between parental divorce and offspring impairment. The research has highlighted the role of ongoing (or perhaps increased) parental conflict after the divorce, poorer parenting before and after the separation, subsequent economic stressors, lack of contact and meaningful parent-child interactions with the nonresidential parent, and increased residential mobility.^{5-7,24} The research suggests that these family processes account for most of the increased risk associated with parental divorce. There is strong support that targeting these processes will consequently reduce the problems seen in offspring of separated/divorced parents.

Research Gaps

Future research needs to examine the causes and consequences of multiple family transitions,⁹ especially into and out of the ambiguous status of not married but not divorced.⁵ More research is necessary to understand the diversity in responses (heterogeneity) to parental separation/divorce.⁵⁻⁶ For example, are such transitions worse for families from lower socioeconomic levels, where separations and divorce are more prevalent?²⁵ Also, what risk and protective factors, including child-specific factors, are important? Furthermore, there are enormous gaps in the research on interventions for divorcing/separating couples.²⁶ An important next step for the field is to translate the enormous amount of social science research on the causes and consequence of divorce into empirically supported interventions that reduce the psychological, academic and social impairments associated with parental separation. More rigorous research, especially studies that randomly assign families to different interventions, is absolutely essential.²⁷

Conclusions

Parental separation/divorce is associated with increased risk for numerous psychological, academic and social problems throughout the life-course. Experiencing parental separation is associated with roughly a two-fold increase on average, but an overwhelming majority of children and adolescents do not exhibit impairing problems after parental separations. In other words, recent research highlights an increased risk for negative outcomes but parental divorce separation does not necessarily doom a child to have major, impairing problems. Children and adolescents who experience parental divorce, however, frequently experience great emotional distress during the separation and afterward. Recent research that uses numerous designs to test the underlying causal mechanisms suggests that the increased risk for impairing problems is not due solely to selection factors (risks that increase both parental separation and problems in the offspring). Rather, ongoing conflicts between the co-parents after the separation, problems with poor parenting, financial difficulties resulting from the separation, and loss of contact with the non-residential parent help explain the association between parental divorce and offspring functioning.

Implications

Policymakers, scholars and professionals are currently engaged in a debate about the importance of marriage and the consequences of divorce. Many researchers and commentators point to the “small” effects found in studies of divorce and the fact that an overwhelming majority of people from divorced families do not have significant or diagnosable problems. Other professionals have pointed out that small effects, when multiplied by the millions of people who experience parental separation/divorce, constitute a very serious public health problem.

Debates about how to improve the lives of children frequently propose initiatives that focus either on (a) cultural and legal policies to strengthen marriage or (b) programs that focus on economic, social and psychological resources to improve the lives of families. A strict dichotomy, however, fails to recognize that family structure, family processes and contextual factors influence and interact with each other. Families are more likely to flourish in environments where marriage is strong and where families have access to the material, social and psychological resources they need. Thus, public policy reforms should take a comprehensive approach toward reducing the risks in children’s lives, including parental separation/divorce.

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How Parents Can Help Children Cope With Separation/Divorce

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(Published online June 27, 2011)

Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

Each year, millions of children around the globe face family disruption, and in many countries, divorce rates are rising.¹ Children experience divorce deeply and personally, and the potential for negative short- and long-term consequences is considerably higher for children whose parents divorce than for those from non-divorced families. While parental divorce poses significant risks for children that warrant concern, research shows that these outcomes are not the same for all children, nor are they inevitable. There are many factors that can reduce risks and promote children's resilience.²

The three biggest factors that impact children's well-being during and after their parents' separation or divorce are potentially within parents' control: the degree and duration of hostile conflict, the quality of parenting provided over time, and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Underlying these, of course, are parents' own well-being and ability to function effectively. By learning how to manage their conflict, parent effectively, and nurture warm and loving relationships with their children, parents can have a powerful, positive effect on their children, even as they undergo multiple difficult changes in their own lives.

Subject

The importance of parents' roles and skills in helping their children to cope with divorce cannot be overemphasized because it is primarily parents who can mitigate or reverse potentially serious negative outcomes for their children.

The impact of divorce on children is well documented. Most react to their parents' divorce with painful emotions including sadness, confusion, fear of abandonment, guilt, misconceptions, anger, loyalty conflicts, worry and grief. Many children experience feelings of loss when one parent moves out of the family residence, when a beloved pet is left behind, or even when they are with one parent and miss the other.² In situations of intense conflict and domestic violence, children may have a sense of relief. Their reactions may vary depending on their ages, but nearly all children share a universal worry: "What's going to happen to me?"

In addition to revealing these difficult emotions, research also has shown that negative short-term consequences for children after divorce include decreased academic achievement, poor psychological adjustment, social and emotional adjustment, and negative self concept.³ Their physical health is compromised, too, especially in situations of high conflict.⁴ Meta analyses show a heightened risk of long-term consequences for a significant minority of children into adulthood, including a poorer sense of well-being, lower socioeconomic status, poorer physical health, weaker emotional ties to their own parents – particularly their fathers – and a higher risk of divorce in their own marriage.⁵

Problems

Parenting through divorce presents particular challenges because it is often difficult for parents to know what their children really think or feel about the changes in their family. For a variety of reasons, most children talk very little about their parents' divorce and their own complex feelings surrounding it.²

Another challenge for most parents is to focus on achieving parenting goals when the multiple changes in their lives that precede and follow divorce cause enormous stress – indeed, divorce is second only to death of a spouse as a major source of stress.⁶ In addition, for many parents, grieving the end of their marriage and managing their own painful, raw emotions make it doubly difficult to focus on their children's expanded needs.

For some parents, continuing their hostility is a problem with enormous potential to damage their children. Unfortunately, this is sometimes fueled by a legal process that may feed their view of themselves as adversaries and focus on blame and retribution rather than on children's best interests. Ongoing conflict also erodes effective parenting, which in turn contributes to children's emotional and behavioural problems.

Despite these difficulties, many parents find ways to make their children's needs a top priority and learn to parent effectively so that their children can focus on the priorities of childhood – learning and growing – rather than on being their parents' caretakers or mediators.

Research Context

There are several valuable areas of research that contribute heavily to our understanding of how parents can help their children cope with separation and divorce. At the very heart of the issue is research on the risk and protective factors that put children in jeopardy of negative short- and long-term consequences or provide supportive buffers that help them thrive. Other fruitful studies focus on which strategies are most effective in managing conflict and which parenting skills contribute to children's growth and development. Studies of preventive intervention programs have yielded abundant data, not only the effectiveness of the program models, but also in increased understanding of how children experience their parents' separation, divorce, conflict and parenting processes. The fields of child development and brain research also contribute to developing approaches to

parenting through divorce that are developmentally appropriate and foster children’s resilience.

Key Research Questions

Among the many areas of research that contribute to understanding how to parent effectively through divorce, these are some of the most critical questions:

- 1) What are the factors that put children at risk for negative short- and long-term outcomes, and what are those that help to protect them?
- 2) What constitutes effective parenting that helps children to thrive in the wake of divorce or separation?
- 3) Along with effective parenting, how can parents foster a warm, strong parent-child relationship?
- 4) How can parents learn to understand their children’s hidden feelings and concerns?
- 5) How can parents best protect their children from damaging conflict?
- 6) What do evidence-based interventions for children and parents bring to our understanding of how parents can help children cope with divorce?

Recent Research Results

Much can be done to prevent long-term problems and foster resilience in children. Research provides a foundation that enables us to refine our understanding of exactly what parents can do and what guidance professionals can offer them.

1) Risk and protective factors. While individual and extra-familial factors are also important, these are the family factors that have been identified through research.²

Family Risk Factors	Family Protective Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing conflict between parents, especially when it is abusive and/or focused on children • Diminished capacity to parent or poor parenting • Lack of monitoring children’s activities • Multiple family transitions (divorce, remarriage, another divorce) • Parent mental health problems • Chaotic, unstable household • Impaired parent-child relationships • Economic decline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection from conflict between parents • Cooperative parenting (except in situations of domestic violence or abuse) • Healthy relationships between child and parents • Parents’ psychological well being • Quality, authoritative parenting • Household structure and stability • Supportive sibling relationships • Economic stability • Supportive relationships with extended family

Evidence-based preventive interventions, such as Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and similar models,⁷ have been shown to strengthen these protective

factors and provide support and coping skills to enhance children's capacity to cope with family changes help to promote better outcomes for children as well.⁸

2) Effective parenting. Recent clinical trials of an intervention for parents called the New Beginnings Project⁹ found that quality parenting is a powerful protective factor and a modifiable source of childhood resilience. High quality is defined as a combination of warmth and nurturance with effective discipline and limit setting. This kind of parenting is shown consistently to relate to better outcomes for children.

One of the most important ways parents can reassure their children in these times of great uncertainty is to affirm their abiding love for them. Although at various developmental stages children may appear not to need this reassurance or even to reject expressions of strong emotion, they all benefit from frequent, genuine manifestations of their parents' love. In addition to words, parents can show their affection through physical gestures – snuggling with young children and bear hugs for older ones, for example – and through making the time to simply be with them. Creating routines of shared activities and being empathetic and responsive to verbal and nonverbal clues about children's feelings all help to show warmth and nurturance.

The other side of effective parenting is discipline, characterized by clear guidelines, limits and age-appropriate expectations. Effective discipline helps children by increasing the predictability of the environment and their own sense of control at the same time that it reduces coercive interactions between parent and child and prevents involvement with deviant peers. It requires parents not only to establish clear and appropriate rules and limits, but also to monitor their children's behavior and enforce the rules.² Children need to understand that all feelings are ok, but that not all behaviours are ok.

A part of all these effective parenting practices is establishing open communication in which parents listen respectfully, acknowledge their children's feelings and stay connected. Family routines such as meals and work and play practices strengthen the structure that provides stability, fosters communication and reinforces expectations.²

There are numerous other aspects of effective parenting before, during and after divorce. Among them, parents can help children develop their own abilities (like empathy, problem solving and coping skills), learn what is solvable and what is not, and gain an accurate understanding of marital conflict and divorce as their parents' problem, and not one that children cause or can fix. Parents can also influence external factors that impact children during the changes that occur with divorce by developing a support network, seeking legal procedures that focus on children's developmental needs, and seeking professional help and preventive services for themselves and their children.

3) Parent-child relationships. The quality of parent-child relationships is an important protective factor that predicts the long-term impact of divorce on children. Unfortunately, national surveys show a significant deterioration in relationships between children and their parents, especially fathers, over time.¹⁰ The encouraging and empowering news is

that there are many ways that parents can strengthen their relationships with their children.

Among these are quality parenting practices including committing to one-on-one time with each child, affirming their strengths, reinforcing positive behaviours, listening without judgment, accepting ambivalent feelings, reflecting understanding, connecting words to feelings, allowing silence and giving children space to not talk. All of these help children and parents alike to understand each other and deepen their connection.

Developing strong parent-child relationships depends on communicating well and frequently with children, especially listening to their feelings and responding with empathy. Research shows that healthy families regularly incorporate genuine expressions of appreciation and encouragement for one another. Taking the time to notice and express appreciation for acts of kindness or consideration creates goodwill that fuels hope, optimism and loving relationships.

Establishing new family rituals and routines is another way to strengthen the bonds between parents and children. These convey the message that we are still a family – a very reassuring message for children. Parents can also strengthen their bonds with their children at the same time that they are helping them to become resilient by conveying a positive sense of hope about the future and reinforcing a message of enduring, unconditional love for their children.

Another important way that parents can strengthen their relationships with their children is to avoid rushing into new relationships. While it is understandable that divorcing parents long to have a loving new partner, entering such relationships too quickly can come at great cost to their children. The issues are compounded when the new partner also has children. Many children express an enormous sense of loss, and they may fear being replaced when their parent is suddenly focused on a new love. Their parents' new relationships inevitably bring still more profound changes into the lives of children who are already buffeted from those related to their parents' divorce. Taking new relationships slowly and allowing children time to adjust to the divorce before adding more changes benefits children and new relationships.

4) Understanding children's hidden emotions. The 2009 Stress in America survey conducted by the American Psychological Association reveals the disconnect between what children experience and what parents think they experience. One of their key findings was that "Parents and young people differ on several key measures related to how much stress or worry young people experience, what is causing the stress or worry and how their level of stress or worry has changed over the last year. For example, fewer parents than children believe that children's stress has increased in the past year, there is a disconnect between what parents believe causes stress in children and what children consider worrisome, and parents appear to be unaware of the degree to which children report physical symptoms like headaches and difficulties sleeping that are often associated with stress."¹¹

One of the ways parents can understand their children's emotions is by helping them learn to identify and name their feelings. Recent neurophysiological research has shown that naming emotions calms the amygdala, increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, and helps children develop neural pathways for managing strong emotion, problem solving, rational thinking and judgment.¹²

Parents are better able to understand their children's emotions when they make time for one-on-one interaction, listen empathetically, notice children's non-verbal signals and reflect their own understanding of what their children are feeling. Children often need time and space to share their hidden feelings, and they are most likely to do so if they believe their parents will listen to them openly and without judgment.

5) Managing conflict and strong emotions. How parents manage their own strong emotions and go about ending their marriage and creating a new way of life makes a major difference for their children. It is imperative that parents learn how to control conflict that is verbally or physically hostile, frequent, intense or focused on the children – the kinds of conflict that are most damaging to children. Exposure to domestic violence and abusive behaviour is especially toxic to children. Responsible parenting includes respectful behaviour toward the child's other parent.

There are a number of techniques that parents can use to protect children from the toxic effects of intense conflict. Among these are reframing their relationship into a respectful, business-like partnership for parenting. In so doing, parents agree to set clear boundaries and ground rules for interaction that include respecting the child's right to a healthy relationship with both parents, when it is safe to do so, establishing and abiding by an agenda for all meetings to discuss children and other matters pertaining to the divorce, not using the children as messengers or informants, and keeping children's transitions between parents safe and respectful. In high-conflict situations, parallel parenting in which parents have limited contact is often preferable to co-parenting in which parents interact and communicate frequently.²

Mediation has been shown to be an effective way to resolve conflict as an alternative to litigation in divorce proceedings. A follow up study found that 12 years after mediation, parents were better able to co-parent and contain and resolve conflict than a litigation control group. Moreover, nonresidential parents in mediation stayed more actively involved in their children's lives than those who litigated.¹³

For parents who are having great difficulty sharing parenting responsibilities without becoming embroiled in conflict, legal and mental health professionals may help to create detailed parenting plans that limit parents' interactions with each other and structure transitions with their children at a neutral site. Parenting plans are most effective when they are tailored to the children's developmental needs as well as parents' commitments and schedules, and are modified as parents are attuned to the child's changing needs.

6) Evidence-based interventions. Preventive interventions have been shown to have a positive impact on children and parenting. Programs for children are useful to researchers because they yield solid information about children's feelings and experiences at the

same time that they offer multiple benefits for children. Programs such as CODIP provide group support and skills that help children by reducing their sense of isolation, clarifying misconceptions, and teaching them how to communicate better with their parents, problem solve and develop other important life skills that are particularly important in times of uncertainty and change.¹⁴ CODIP has shown multiple benefits to children of various ages and cultural backgrounds in their social and emotional adjustment, school engagement and reduced anxiety and complaints of physical symptoms.¹⁵ The benefits of this child-focused program are being replicated in countries worldwide.

Interventions for parents, including parent education programs, provide critical information for parents. They help parents understand that what they do matters greatly in shaping outcomes for children after divorce and encourage them to reframe their relationship into a respectful, business-like partnership for parenting. These sessions provide positive, empowering messages to parents, emphasizing what they can control, educating them about the benefits of containing conflict and collaborating when it is safe to do so, and teaching the powerful protective practices of quality parenting, with warmth and limits.

Research on in-depth interventions for parents shows better mental health outcomes for children six years after parents participated, compared with those whose parents did not participate in such a program.¹⁶

Beyond these six research areas, much else has been studied and established about how parents can help children weather divorce and the series of changes that it initiates – more than can be included in a brief article. These are among the additional areas that have a positive impact on children:

- Preparing children for changes by giving them accurate, age-appropriate information helps children to feel secure by addressing that all-important question: “What’s going to happen to me?” Having specific information about what will change and what will remain the same also helps to reduce their worry about both parents, their siblings, their pets, their friends and their extended family.
- Reducing the number of changes in children’s lives is another important step parents can take to protect them in the aftermath of separation or divorce. It’s easiest for children if they can maintain important relationships, go to the same school and activities, and keep their pets. Maintaining structures and routines that are least disruptive to children is important, too, and often their needs change over time. Parents need to stay attuned to how the transitions between them are impacting their children and make adjustments as needed to prevent giving children the sense that their lives are out of control.
- Underlying all that parents do to take care of their children is the important – and often difficult – task of taking good care of themselves. Stress often brings on a number of unwelcome changes in sleep, appetite and physical tension. These are generally compounded by additional pressures on the schedule created by sharing the parenting responsibilities from two different homes and the financial impact of splitting the same income to cover additional expenses. Parents need to make it a priority to find healthy ways to manage and reduce stress and take care of themselves so they can parent in the best way possible.

Research Gaps

More research is needed on the subject of parenting plans. In particular, it is important to learn how to address the needs of children of different ages, especially infants and preschool children, most effectively. Whether it is best for infants and toddlers to spend all their nights in one home or to share the overnight time between homes and parents is yet to be decisively determined. Likewise, more research is needed to develop and evaluate effective interventions for parents entrenched in high conflict and appropriate parenting plans for children in high-conflict families. Studies designed to understand what types of interventions are most effective and tailored to specific populations and problems will certainly add important knowledge.

Conclusions

Since divorce is so prevalent worldwide, it is critical to understand its impact on children and to establish ways to protect them from its potentially damaging effects. Fortunately, a sizeable body of research in multiple areas surrounding divorce and parenting has already yielded considerable information. We know how divorce impacts children in the short and long term. We know the major risk and protective factors that predict how they fare. We know specifically what factors within parents' control have the greatest impact on children, and what specific behaviours will have a lasting positive effect on them. Effective parenting encompassing both warmth and discipline, developing positive parent-child relationships and managing conflict are the three most important factors in protecting children. Developing the ability to listen for children's hidden emotions and help them articulate their feelings underlie parents' ability to parent effectively and develop strong relationships. Evidence-based interventions for children and programs that strengthen parenting skills are helping families at the same time that they are yielding valuable research.

Many children have benefitted from their parents' enduring love and determination to put them first – ahead of their own heartache and sleepless nights. But big challenges remain: How can we help all children come through family changes with resilience and healthy adjustment? How can we reach all the parents and help them develop the focus, skills and determination to give their children the best chance at leading fulfilling lives?

Implications for parents, services, and policy

Parents

The implications of all this research is this empowering message: There is much you can do to foster better outcomes for your children. The risks are real, but so is the potential to help them grow through the changes, to become resilient, and to feel completely secure in knowing they are loved – and will be loved for a lifetime.

Services

Parents need this valuable information on ways to reduce the negative impact of divorce on their children early in the process of a breakup. One of the challenges is how to reach parents with parent education programs, legal procedures and other preventive outreach before problems become entrenched. A triage system of support is needed in every community that includes parent education, alternative dispute resolution methods and

preventive interventions for parents and children. Many of these services are cut due to financial constraints, yet research shows that early outreach programs are cost effective and help to prevent more complex problems for parents and children. We need to find effective and cost-effective ways to widely disseminate evidence-based interventions so that they are easily accessed and available to all parents and their children.

Policy

The biggest implication for policy is to reframe the legal divorce process when children are involved so that it incorporates research on what is genuinely best for children. Decisions about custody and parenting time must be made in the context of child development research, not a uniform default toward any one particular schedule. Increasing the availability of alternatives such as collaborative law and mediation and providing evidence-based information for judges, legal and mental health professionals, and finding ways to structure legal proceedings to protect children are all changes that will benefit children and ultimately, the society they inherit and shape as adults.

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Parenting Plans following Separation/Divorce: Developmental Considerations

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

A central dilemma for separating/divorcing parents and the family courts is how to support both parents' roles in their child's life without splitting the child's time and life arbitrarily in half. Solving this dilemma requires that parents maintain a shared focus on their child's well-being while deciding how major decisions will get made (e.g., health care, education), how parental responsibilities and time spent with the children will be divided, and how conflicts will be resolved as they arise.

Problem

Although plans are required in parental disputes and divorces in most states, there are no age-specific standard guidelines for children. As a result, parenting plan development is often fraught with the parents' different desires, perceptions and beliefs about which structure and content of arrangements that would best serve their child's interests.

What can research teach us about how to craft developmentally-sound parenting plans? Research results offer guidance in creating a plan that achieves a balance between stability and dual parent involvement by attending to the child's stage of development.

Research Context

Infants, toddlers and preschoolers

Attachment theory is central to divorce-related research pertaining to children's early stages of development. Children develop secure attachments to caregivers who meet their needs in a consistent and sensitive manner. It was previously believed that babies formed an exclusive attachment to one primary caregiver; we now know that babies develop several meaningful relationships simultaneously, e.g., with a second parent. In fact, children may prefer one parent over another at varying ages as developmental concerns specific to the subsequent stage of development emerge (e.g., autonomy).¹

Similarly, attachment is an overarching theme in parenting plans for infants and toddlers.² Babies respond optimally to predictable schedules and responsive parenting that take their temperaments into account. Parents have more latitude for plans that include

multiple transitions when their children have easy, flexible temperaments. Children need frequent contact with both parents, as their sense of time and memory is limited, as is their capacity to remember an absent parent.³ Frequent access, daily if possible, helps non-residential parents stay current with children's evolving routines. Parental cooperation about feeding and sleeping routines, and support during transitions to the other parent, help the child develop internal regulation and skills related to autonomy and exploration.

A key question addressed in plans for children under age 3 is at what age to begin overnights with the non-residential parent. Relevant research is sparse⁴ and frequently misquoted in legal contexts. Schedule consistency and parents' emotional sensitivity around transitions help facilitate children's adjustment; when parental conflict and poor communication are evident, or mothers are distressed, overnights are associated with emotional upset and dysregulation in infants and toddlers. By age 4, children with overnights show better behavioural adjustment and closer father-child relationships. See McIntosh's paper under this topic for more details.⁵

School-age children

School-age children want to belong to peer groups and have a strong drive toward competition and mastery of intellectual/cognitive, physical and social challenges. Rules and fairness are highly valued. Children are especially prone to taking sides and experiencing loyalty conflicts at this age.⁴ The development of morality occurs as children learn right from wrong.

Parenting plans at this age facilitate optimal development when they include both parents to the greatest extent possible, support children's school and after-school activities without undue complications from switching houses or parenting time, and keep children out of the middle of parental conflicts through which the child might be tempted or encouraged to take sides. It is important that parents maintain civility, so that children feel secure in relationships with both parents, and schedule consistency so children can feel secure in making plans with their peers and seeing their activities through on a consistent basis.

Adolescence

As adolescent identity emerges and becomes consolidated, youth are eager to belong, to be different and to be accepted at the same time. Peers are the reference group for daily decisions/activities, yet parents remain vital influences on behaviours such as academics, development of healthy or unhealthy peer influences, activities, time usage and values.

Parenting plans at this stage work best when the child has access to both parents, especially if one parent's mental health or authoritative disciplining is compromised. Adolescents often choose to move more fluidly between houses than other age groups,⁶ and this can work to their developmental benefit when it isn't a ploy to duck parental authority and controls.

Shared parenting considerations

Beyond shared decision making and time spent with the child, additional components of co-parenting broaden the opportunities to establish developmentally-sensitive parenting plans. Important components include (a) valuing the importance of the other parent's contributions to child rearing; (b) recognizing gender differences that lead partners to think, feel and behave in distinct ways with respect to child rearing; and (c) creating a "team" that backs each other up and presents a united front,⁷ for example to experimenting teens. Co-parenting which functions as an alliance can counteract compromised parenting and enhance the quality of parent-child relationships,⁸ thereby supporting the child's disrupted sense of security from the transition to separate households and family units.⁹

Children whose parents share joint custody, whether defined as a decision-making arrangement (joint legal custody) or a shared living arrangement (joint physical custody), tend to be better adjusted after separation/divorce than their sole custody counterparts. Indeed, their parents report less conflict,¹⁰ though shared parenting splits with substantial time in both households work best when parents cooperate, especially with young and school-age children.^{11,12}

Nonresidential father involvement

Because fathers make unique contributions to healthy child development^{12,13} and involving men early in co-parenting helps them stay involved for the long haul,¹⁴ parenting plans should reinforce fathers' involvement in their children's lives after separation/divorce. A father's involvement with his children is often contingent upon the mother's attitude towards, and expectations of, support from him.¹⁵ Therefore, parenting plans based on an assessment of the extent to which maternal gatekeeping^{16,17,18,19} is occurring and for what reasons are less likely to destabilize over time.

Research Gaps

It is the quality of time and parenting – not the quantity – that is more highly related to closeness between parent and child. While some quantity is needed to establish sufficient opportunity to establish and maintain closeness, the minimum point has not been established. Similarly, no amount of time nearing equality has been established as helpful or harmful to children in general; individual and family dynamics considerations take precedence. Quality of parenting and parent-child relationships emerge across studies as unassailable factors affecting child development, and so far the particulars of parenting plans provide less useful information than the family context in which co-parenting occurs.

Conclusions

The absolute amount of parenting time should be emphasized less than a plan that allows for a schedule that enables both parents to feel and act engaged and responsible. When children are young, stability and consistency are to be emphasized, with these needs becoming more flexible as the child gets older, depending on the child's temperament, relationships with both parents, and other factors. The benefits of dual parent involvement are emphasized across development, though whether involvement means

overnights, frequent transitions, and extended time in two households takes on different significance as children develop. The key is a parenting plan that promotes the child's sense of security without sacrificing the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent (e.g., father). Achieving this balance requires attending to, but may also challenge what we think of as optimal living situations for minor age children.

Implications

Parenting plans are mandated in most states. They are detailed descriptions of where and when children will live with each parent, how parents will make decisions separately or together regarding children's education, medical needs, activities and welfare, and how conflicts or developmental changes that necessitate changes in the plan will be handled in the future. With most young children and with older children whose mother has taken on the primary parenting role, it is easier for mothers and children to maintain their relationship after divorce than it is for fathers and children. Parenting plans help sustain ample access by fathers and all non-residential parents.

Many parents construct parenting plans themselves, often with guidance from mediators or other professionals trained to help them negotiate and reach agreements. When this is not the case, perhaps because the parents' conflict is high, they worry about the other parent's capacity to care for the children adequately is strong, or the presence of domestic violence or abuse renders the negotiations unfair, imbalanced or unsafe, then the court will intervene and determine the final arrangements by judicial decree. In this latter instance, parents should not proceed without professional or judicial support and intervention. When plans are reached through mediation instead of the court, they last longer and facilitate better child adjustment and closer father-child relationships over the life span.²⁰ Over time, changes will be needed to the plan as children mature and their needs change. When problems arise, returning to a mediator or engaging a parent coordinator^{21,22} to help support parents in making their own decisions and changes to the parenting plan is beneficial before seeking court intervention.

Divorce creates a loss of time and access that parents, especially fathers as frequent non-residential parents, mourn. Yet change toward a more balanced access plan may take time. If each parent has opportunity to nurture, educate, play, discipline, and know the child intimately, the exact amount of time will not matter in the long run to the child's development. It is a legal fallacy that good parenting plans can and should remain permanent. Such thinking ignores the cardinal rule of child development: children mature rapidly and unpredictably, and every experience matters.

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Interventions to Help Parents and Children Through Separation and Divorce

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

It is estimated that 50% of youth in the U.S. experience parental divorce.¹ Compared to youth in two-parent families, those from divorced families exhibit higher levels of mental health problems and academic and social difficulties,^{2,3} as well as higher rates of substance use and teen pregnancy. For some, the negative effects of parental divorce continue into adulthood.^{4,5,6} Although divorce confers increased risk for problems in multiple domains, most children from divorced homes do not experience significant adjustment problems.

The prevalence of divorce, its negative sequelae, and the variability in children's response to divorce argue strongly for the development of theory-guided interventions. This paper presents current knowledge on theory-guided programs designed to prevent child adjustment problems following divorce. The review is restricted to preventive interventions that have shown positive effects on adjustment problems in at least one experimental or quasi-experimental trial.

Subject

Intrapersonal and interpersonal factors have important implications for children's post-divorce adjustment problems. Researchers have identified several potentially modifiable factors that predict children's post-divorce adjustment problems, including interparental conflict,³ parent-child relationship quality,⁷ discipline,⁸ children's cognitions,⁹ and children's coping strategies.¹⁰ Theoretically, if programs modify these factors, reductions in children's adjustment problems should occur.

Programs have taken four forms: child-focused, residential parent-focused, nonresidential parent-focused, and combined residential parent- and child-focused programs. Child-focused programs target skills to cope with stressful divorce-related events, emotional expression skills, and interpersonal resources (e.g., parent-child relationship quality).

Parent-focused programs target factors like parent-child relationship quality, discipline, anger management, and the quality and quantity of contact with nonresidential parents.

Problems

The high prevalence of divorce means that its impact on population rates of problem outcomes is substantial.¹¹ From a population attributable factor perspective, in which the maximum proportion of an outcome due to a risk factor that could be prevented by removing it is calculated, 36% of mental health problems in early adulthood, 30% of teen pregnancies, and 23% of school dropouts could be prevented by eliminating the negative effects of divorce.¹² The development, evaluation and dissemination of programs for this at-risk group have important public health implications.

Research Context

Over the past 35 years, two groups of investigators have developed child-focused programs that demonstrated positive effects on child adjustment problems using experimental and/or *quasi-experimental designs*; three groups of investigators demonstrated positive effects on child adjustment problems with parent-focused programs using experimental designs. Of these five programs, only one has been evaluated with more than one experimental trial. The methodological rigor of the quasi-experimental designs has varied widely across investigations, ranging from using a comparison group of children from non-divorced families, to randomly assigning schools (but not individuals) to intervention conditions.

Key Research Questions

Do theory-guided prevention programs reduce children's post-divorce adjustment problems? Do these programs change theoretical mediators (i.e., variables that are hypothesized to account for the effect of divorce on adjustment problems), and do changes in mediators account for the improvements in adjustment problems? Are the program effects maintained over development? How can access to programs be increased?

Recent Research Results

Child-focused programs

The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP)¹³ and the Children's Support Group (CSG)¹⁴ are highly similar programs. In one experimental and multiple quasi-experimental trials, CODIP has been shown to reduce a range of adjustment problems (e.g., anxiety, classroom problems) and improve divorce-related perceptions.¹⁵ Positive effects emerged for children in kindergarten through sixth grade and in suburban and urban populations.^{8,15,16,17} The effects were maintained two years after participation.¹⁸ CSG has shown positive preventive and treatment effects on self-esteem, social skills and adjustment problems in two quasi-experimental trials with children and early adolescents; program effects on adjustment problems were maintained at one-year follow-up.^{14,19}

Residential parent-focused programs

Parenting Through Change (PTC)²⁰ and the New Beginnings Program (NBP)²¹⁻²² have demonstrated positive effects on children's adjustment problems. In a randomized

controlled trial, the PTC decreased adjustment problems three years after participation and decreased delinquency (e.g., fewer arrests) nine years after participation. The effects on child adjustment problems were accounted for by improvements in positive parenting and coercive discipline; the effects on delinquency were accounted for by improvements in effective parenting and decreases in deviant peer association.^{23,24,25}

NBP has been evaluated in two randomized controlled trials. In the first trial, positive effects at post-test occurred for mental health problems.²¹ This program effect was accounted for by improvements in mother-child relationship quality. In the second trial, positive effects were found at post-test for internalizing and externalizing problems. At six-month follow-up, the effect on externalizing problems was maintained. The effects on internalizing at post-test were accounted for by improvements in mother-child relationship quality. The effects on externalizing problems at post-test and six-month follow-up were accounted for by improvements in mother-child relationship quality and effective discipline. In both trials, program effects were stronger for youth in families that were functioning more poorly at program entry.

A six-year follow-up of the second trial showed a 37% reduction in mental disorder diagnoses as well as positive effects on symptoms of mental disorder, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, substance use, grades, competence and number of sexual partners.²⁶ Improvements in effective discipline accounted for the program effect on grades; improvements in mother-child relationship quality accounted for program effects on symptoms of mental disorder, internalizing problems and externalizing problems. Improvements in parental monitoring accounted for program effects on substance use.

Nonresidential parent-focused programs

Dads for Life (DFL) is a prevention program for nonresidential fathers. In a randomized controlled trial, DFL improved children's internalizing problems at post-test and one-year follow-up. Program effects were stronger for youth with greater problems at program entry.²⁷

Combined residential parent- and child-focused programs

Two experimental trials tested whether combining programs for mothers and youth produced greater effects.^{14,22} The findings indicated that stronger effects did not occur when both mothers and children participated in concurrent programs.

Research Gaps

Additional randomized controlled trials of the programs described above are necessary to identify programs that consistently produce positive effects. Further, most samples consisted of primarily non-Hispanic White families with school-aged children. The effects of these programs should be examined in racially- and culturally-diverse samples that include preschoolers as well as older children and adolescents. Examination of the costs and benefits of such programs and the development of strategies for disseminating these programs into community settings are other important topics for future research. Increasing knowledge of programs' mediators, identifying the subgroups that benefit

most from these interventions, building relationships between program developers and community organizations, and developing strategies to link families at greatest risk for developing problems to effective programs are other important steps in the process of reducing the public health burden of divorce.

Conclusions

Multiple theory-guided interventions have demonstrated short- and long-term positive effects on children's post-divorce adjustment problems. Intervening with residential parents, nonresidential parents, or children are all effective strategies for promoting better outcomes. Combining parent-focused and child-focused programs has not been shown to produce additional benefits over single-component programs. Mediation analyses of NBP and PTC indicated that improving mother-child relationship quality and increasing effective discipline are essential components for residential parent-focused programs. Analyses of NBP and DFL indicated that these preventive interventions are most beneficial for families with greater problems at program entry. Six-year follow-up of NBP and nine-year follow-up of PTC demonstrated that positive effects of these programs persisted across developmental periods. In summary, there is convincing evidence that programs for children in divorced families are effective, especially for youth who have more problems at program entry.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

There is evidence that participation in prevention programs leads to reductions in children's post-divorce adjustment problems and increases in competencies. Program effects have occurred on a wide range of outcomes, including mental disorder, delinquency, behavior problems, self-esteem and grades. Community providers working with divorced families may wish to utilize these programs as part of their treatment to teach parents effective, non-coercive discipline strategies and ways to enhance the quality of their relationships with their children, and to teach children adaptive emotional expression and coping skills.

Despite the existence of multiple effective programs, their availability is extremely limited. To reduce the public health burden of divorce, families' access to effective prevention programs must be profoundly increased. Widespread access to these programs will require the development of strategies for high-quality implementation of these programs in community settings and the identification of ongoing funding streams for these services.

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Special Considerations for Infants and Toddlers in Separation/Divorce: Developmental Issues in the Family Law Context

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

By virtue of their unique stage of development and complex needs for care and nurture, infants and young children under five years of age pose specific concerns for divorce researchers and divorce practitioners alike. While the literature is large and increasingly robust for school-age children regarding impacts of parental conflict and separation, our scientific base is less well established for babies and pre-schoolers. Babies and young children are amongst the least capable of voicing their needs, and as such, the onus falls on family law professionals to advocate for the emotional and developmental security of the infant, and to consider these as prime and determining elements in custody matters.¹ New studies have begun to shed light on the importance of a strong developmental framework for decision making in divorce matters.

The special challenges of parental separation during infancy

The first four years of life is a time of developmental vulnerability by virtue of the rapid physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development during this time. The brain, about 30% formed at birth, expands threefold during the first three years.² Importantly, much of the growth of the human brain during this time is termed experience dependent;³ that is, the complexity of the brain's development depends on the nature and quality of care the infant receives. This is the peak period of attachment formation.⁴

Neuroscientists and attachment researchers alike^{5,6} find that the quality of parenting in the first 2-3 years of life are particularly important to healthy development, and the child's subsequent ability to regulate stress and emotional arousal.⁷ Specifically, psycho-emotional development in infancy depends to a great extent upon continuous, predictable, emotionally-available caregiving, through which infants are shielded from overwhelming and unsafe experiences, enabled to form organised attachments, and supported to develop their capacities for self-regulation and growing autonomy.

Three divorce related stressors threaten this equation:

1. The direct effects of parental conflict and violence,

2. The effects of diminished quality in parenting as parents adjust to separation and/or cope with ongoing conflict, and
3. The effects of repeat separation of the infant from primary attachment figures.⁸
For some infants, the three stressors coincide and are mutually reinforcing.

Extreme parental conflict can disrupt the organization of emotional experience in early childhood,⁹ with high intensity conflict linked to the development of insecure and disorganized attachment styles,^{10,11,12} heightened distress, and with less ability to regulate negative emotional arousal.¹³

Chronic interparental conflict – emanating from ongoing parenting and financial disputes, and fuelled by unresolved loss, grief or humiliation – also impacts parenting sensitivity and availability, with a higher likelihood of harsh styles of discipline and diminished emotional responses.^{14,15} Diminished patience and sensitivity in parenting pose a specific problem for very young children, whose cognitive equipment is not sufficiently advanced to understand or tolerate long periods of poorly attuned care. Such parenting behaviours are associated ultimately with emotional insecurity and social withdrawal in the child.^{16,17}

Repeated separation from a primary attachment figure is a third factor that represents a unique stressor for infants. Across the world, shared-time parenting is an arrangement that is gaining impetus, and in some countries is supported by legislation. Despite ample evidence suggesting that repeated and prolonged absence from a primary caregiver is normatively stressful for young children, few legislatures give attention to the developmental issues unique to infants in the context of parental divorce. Opinions about parenting plans for infants and young children are generally – and unhelpfully – divided into polarized camps: “for” or “against” overnight stays, or wanting to draw artificial distinctions, such as “Overnights are OK after two years, but not before.” These dichotomies, often perpetuated by adversarial process, miss the point. Researchers are attempting to ask and answer more complex questions, such as: under what conditions, and at what points in development does shared-time parenting pose a risk to developmental security?

Current research questions

A growing edge of research is now attempting to identify specific developmental considerations that should be brought to bear in decision making about infants in divorce. Infant mental health specialists and researchers share an interest and concern that shared-time parenting occurring during crucial phases of attachment formation and consolidation may create a scenario in which the infant does not have a continuous experience of reliable care with either parent.^{18,19}

A key area of enquiry concerns the effects of overnight separations of infants from primary caregivers.²⁰ While empirical answers to this question are only just appearing, the special problems that sharing time between two separated parents may pose for the infant are becoming clearer.

Recent Research Findings

In a recent study, McIntosh, Smyth and Kelaher²¹ explored overnight parenting patterns and links to the young child's ability to regulate emotional stress. The study compared outcomes for young children in three types of care arrangements post-separation: shared residence (regular overnights with both parents), primary residence (most overnights with one parent, and occasional overnights with the second), and children who had rarely or never had any overnight time away from a primary caregiver.

For 4- to 5-year-olds with separated parents (n=1,292), high inter-parental conflict and low parental warmth independently predicted a number of emotional regulation problems in children. Overnight time arrangements did not predict outcomes in this age group. However, for infants (0-2 years, n=258) and young children (3-4 years, n=509) in separated families, the findings were different. Regardless of socio-economic background, parenting or inter-parental cooperation, babies under 2 years who spent one or more overnights a week with the second parent showed a cluster of stress regulation problems, compared to babies in lower rates of overnight care. Older infants, aged 2-3 years, who spent 2-3 nights per week with the second parent, also showed greater problematic behaviours than children in lower frequency overnight care, including heightened separation distress, aggression, eating problems and poor persistence.

These findings are consistent with the only other study of infants in overnight care, conducted by Solomon and George,²⁰ who found a greater propensity for anxious, unsettled behaviour in infants when reunited with the primary caregiver, and greater propensity for development of insecure and disorganized attachment with the primary caregiver. This study also identified that frequent transitions of care between parents who remain acrimonious and struggle to facilitate a smooth transition for the infant add to the difficulties.²⁰

While disruptions to overnight care appear to heighten insecurities within the primary attachment relationship, overnight care in early infancy does not appear to determine attachment security with the second parent.^{1,20,22,23} Warm, lively, attuned caregiving interactions between baby and the second parent appear to be central to the growth of attachment security in that relationship.

Research Gaps

In considering the empirical findings about infant outcomes in parental separation, one needs to bear in mind that this field of research is also in its infancy, and is subject to problems with interpretation. There is a need for further research that addresses known difficulties with sampling, definition and data sources, and that utilizes sensitive developmental outcome measures within a longitudinal frame.

Conclusions

Current evidence points to the need for special care in legal decision making about very young children in divorce and parental separation. McIntosh and Smyth¹⁸ describe a matrix of factors that create risks for children of any age in shared-time parenting arrangements, including inadequate socio-economic or pragmatic equipment (income and

housing, work flexibility, geographic proximity) and inadequate co-parenting equipment (lack of shared mutual respect, parenting incompetence, inflexibility, inadequate communication, inability to remain child focused). Important as these factors appear to be for children's outcomes in shared time arrangements, for infants, the third and crucial factor in determining appropriate parenting arrangements after separation is the child's developmental resources. Many assert that this factor should be the dominant consideration during the pre-school years (see Family Court Review, Special Issue, July 2011).

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Current research evidence suggests the following special considerations for infants in separation and divorce matters:

- The impacts of parental conflict and violence – and their associated effect on parenting sensitivity – are especially damaging during the first four years of brain maturation.
- Extra care needs to be taken with the nature of separation from a primary attachment figure during the first 2-3 years. Well-managed, brief separations are indicated in the first 2-3 years, growing in duration through the fourth and fifth years.
- In early infancy, overnight stays are contra-indicated, undertaken when necessary or helpful to the primary caregiver, and when the second parent is already an established source of comfort and security for the infant.
- Time spent with the second parent should enable maintenance of comfortable familiarity, and growing attachment security. Frequency of these visits should not create discontinuity or fragmentation for the young infant within their primary attachment relationship.
- The core consideration and determining factor is whether the proposed parenting plan and the method of its enactment will contribute to or detract from the emotional security of the infant.

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Divorce and Separation: Commentary on Kline Pruett and McIntosh

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

The dilemma

Kline Pruett and McIntosh describe the dilemma faced today by family courts in appropriately and sensitively supporting each parent's role in their child's life. At this time, no developmentally-sensitive standards exist to guide parents and professionals in making decisions about shared parenting time. Naturally, we look to the current body of evidence to help guide us in creating standards. Unfortunately, as the authors point out, there is a scarcity of research in this area. In this vacuum, considerable confusion exists about the optimal structure and nature of parenting time arrangements. McIntosh's call for a strong developmental framework for making decisions in matters of separation and divorce is laudable. It will be a number of years before we can lean on specific developmental studies to support specific parenting time decisions. In the absence of this evidence, we can look to developmental science and studies of parenting during separation and divorce to help guide us. However, we must be very cautious in drawing specific conclusions about parenting time from this more general research literature.

Research and Conclusions

Principles of healthy development

Children's development of fundamental competencies in the early years lays the foundation for all of their future adjustment.^{1,2} And, as McIntosh points out, the remarkable growth that occurs during the early years brings with it great vulnerability to harm.² Parents play a key role in setting up this early development.³ Children's mastery of important social, emotional and cognitive developmental tasks is influenced by the quality of parenting that the child receives on a daily basis. Parent-child interactions consistently characterized by warm, responsive, engaged and reciprocal exchanges between parent and child form the basis of the child's ability to control and direct behaviour, relate to and cooperate with other people, regulate emotions, communicate and form concepts about the world.^{4,5,6} These early competencies set the stage for future developmental trajectories. Parents' knowledge, self-efficacy, personal adjustment and social support affect children's development to the extent that they influence specific parenting practices on a daily basis. These same parenting qualities remain significant as

children grow into adulthood. Additional important parenting skills include supporting and encouraging children's growing autonomy and independence, while also monitoring their activities; all easier within the context of a strong parent-child relationship.

The important role of parents during separation and divorce

Evidence gained from studies of separating and divorcing parents suggest that divorce's negative impact on children's adjustment is mediated through problems in parenting. Daily stressors for divorced parents can accumulate and compromise their parenting. Healthy child adjustment depends in part on the parents' ability to use resources in their environment to manage these stressors.⁷ Parenting in the first year following divorce is marked by increased irritability and coercion, diminished communication, affection, consistency, control and supervision,^{8,9,10} and a decrease in positive parent-child interactions.⁹ Compared with mothers in intact families, single mothers use more harsh discipline⁸ are more critical of their children, use more commands when interacting with their children¹¹ and tend to show less affection.⁸ Inconsistent discipline and harsh parenting can precipitate coercion in the parent-child relationship, a significant contributor to the development of children's antisocial behaviour.¹²

While disruptions in family functioning are a significant risk factor in children's development, healthy family functioning is a major protective factor.¹³ Parents who parent authoritatively, are responsive to their children's needs, and maintain consistent and reasonable control, provide a buffer to the stress of divorce.^{8,13,14}

Decisions about parenting time arrangements should take these bodies of evidence into account. Situations that support optimal expression of parenting qualities and maximal parental engagement are of particular importance.

Creating developmentally-sensitive parenting arrangements

Kline Pruett's suggestion that absolute amount of parenting time should be emphasized less than a plan that allows for a schedule that enables both parents to feel engaged and responsible is an excellent one. Professionals working with separating and divorcing parents can look for arrangements that optimize predictability in daily routines and warm, responsive parenting. Kline Pruett and McIntosh point to some areas to target in separation and divorce process, including the importance of building strong relationships. However, as described earlier, the disorganization and stress that comes with separation and divorce can make it difficult for parents to facilitate and maintain these relationships. Parents need tools and information to help them foster warm supportive relationships with their children. They also need support in negotiating contextual variables that impinge on their ability to offer optimal parenting, such as stress; and they need training in co-parenting skills that strengthen the co-parent relationship, encourage cooperation, and reduce inter-parental conflict.

Another important recommendation given by Kline Pruett and McIntosh is the importance of supporting frequent access by non-residential parents. Contact with non-custodial parents is typically limited in the short-term following divorce and becomes increasingly limited as time progresses.¹⁵ Twenty-five percent of children have weekly

visits with their non-custodial parents; 20% of children have no contact with their non-custodial parents or see them only a few times each year.¹⁶ Currently, the majority of non-custodial parents are fathers. Kline Pruett noted that fathers make unique contributions to healthy child development and that parenting plans should be designed to support their involvement during the separation and divorce process. More frequent contact with the child is associated with more supportive perceptions of co-parenting for nonresident fathers.¹⁷ A meta-analysis by Amato & Keith¹⁸ suggested that children's close relationship with their fathers is linked to healthy development. In a study of single parent intact families, children's perceptions of the degree of intimacy they have with their fathers explained more variance in their emotional, social and academic functioning than any other dyadic relationship.¹⁹ In a longitudinal study of 341 children of divorce, a good relationship with the custodial parent predicted fewer child behavior problems, better communication skills, better grades and higher overall ratings of adjustment.²⁰ Active involvement from both parents can have benefits for children and the residential parent.

Little information to draw from

Many parents and practitioners seek information about children's attachment security to help them make informed decisions about shared parenting time. McIntosh asserts that the fundamental question is whether the proposed parenting plan and resultant activities will contribute to or detract from the emotional security of the infant. This is a good standard, and we can pull from the existing developmental literature to help guide us, but evidence to date is not sufficient to answer this question. As noted above, we know from the developmental research literature that consistent, warm and contingent care is important. However, attachment is a complex and flexible lifetime process that is affected by a wide array of variables, including parenting behaviour, family factors, co-parenting relationships, contextual factors, and individual child and parent characteristics. Recent studies of parenting time arrangements in separation and divorce have introduced some possibilities to explore, yet as McIntosh points out, the research base in this area is in its infancy. Much of the current separation/divorce research is based on small, non-representative samples and the majority of studies rely on mothers' self-report. Studies of co-parenting from the father's perspective are scarce. Very little research is available to inform us about the experience of separation/divorce among never-married parents and among racially/ethnically diverse and underserved populations. Moreover, much of the research discussed relies on measures of attachment status. Attachment has become an increasingly important construct to researchers and practitioners.²¹ Yet research in attachment is still fraught with uncertainty with regard to validity of construct itself and methods of measurement.

Need for reliable and valid measures of attachment

If we are to rely on information gained about attachment, more valid and reliable measures are needed.²² Attachment is assessed in a variety of ways, both observational and self-report. However these differing methods sometimes produce differing results. Studies that have applied different methods for classifying attachment on the same sample, found significant differences in attachment classification among the different methods used.²³ Of equal concern, the construct of attachment needs to be strengthened.

Some researchers have suggested that, in observational studies of children's attachment, such as the Strange Situation²⁴ temperamental variability among infants could influence interpretation of attachment status. For example, an infant prone to distress might experience distress at separation and then continue to show distress upon the reunion with mother and thus more likely is assigned to an insecure attachment status than a less distress-prone infant.²⁵ An alternative measure, the Q-sort,²⁶ suffers from the same potential for bias as other standard self-report measures. In addition, questions have been raised about when critical attachments are formed and whether primary attachments can be formed with more than one caregiver. Thus there is a need to sharpen the construct and strengthen methods used to measure it.

Implications

For many parents, the separation and divorce transition is marked by disorganization, stress and conflict. Parents and professionals want to do what is best for children, and decisions regarding parenting time can have important implications for children's long-term development. Current research to guide these decisions is limited. Because there are so many factors at play, there is no one single best course of action. Kline Pruett and McIntosh outline some helpful considerations. Perhaps the most significant factor in this decision will be choosing an arrangement that preserves and strengthens the child's relationship with both parents. As Kline Pruett so astutely observes, individual and family considerations should take precedence over any one-size-fits-all solution.

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Divorce and Separation: Comments on D’Onofrio, Vélez, Wolchik and Sandler, and Pedro-Carroll

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Topic

[Divorce and separation](#)

Introduction

The three review papers in this section highlight important themes that have emerged from several decades of research on children whose parents divorce. By extension, we assume that these findings may also apply to children of unmarried parents who separate, although there is little research on this group of children. D’Onofrio’s careful synthesis of the research indicates that divorce is associated with significantly higher rates of child adjustment problems that often continue into young adulthood, but that only a minority of children affected by divorce show problems that would warrant diagnosis or treatment. D’Onofrio, Vélez et al., and Pedro-Carroll all emphasize that children’s experiences in the family, rather than divorce per se, may be most helpful for understanding the variations in child adjustment after divorce. Key examples are children’s exposure to interparental conflict before and after divorce, and lower economic standing and disruptions in parenting associated with the transition to a single parent household. Finally, Vélez et al. and Pedro-Carroll review promising evidence that research-based prevention programs and parenting programs can promote better adjustment in children affected by divorce, with benefits seen in socioemotional, behavioural and academic outcomes. Unfortunately, as Vélez et al. point out, these programs reach relatively few children.

Research and Conclusions

The authors’ conclusions are sound, as are their recommendations for continued research and for research-based prevention programs for children affected by divorce. With these shared perspectives in mind, we will highlight several themes that emerged in this set of review papers. These themes, some of which are represented in these authors’ general work, provide an opportunity to examine current challenges in the field and to consider avenues for future research and practice.

A central issue concerns the conceptualization of risk, especially as it is translated into applied work. Here it is helpful to distinguish risk and protective factors on the one hand, and risk and protective processes on the other.¹ Risk and protective factors do not lead

directly to certain outcomes, but they tend to increase or decrease the child's chances of showing problems. Risk and protective processes, on the other hand, are causally related to child outcomes; these processes explain why some children fare better than others in the face of adversity. Pedro-Carroll and Vélez et al. describe several interventions designed to reduce modifiable risk factors such as a chaotic home environment, or to increase modifiable protective factors such as general coping skills, as a way to promote better child adjustment during the divorce transition. They also point to intervention programs that have targeted risk processes such as divorce-related disruptions in discipline, disruptions in parent-child relationships during the divorce process and children's attributions about the divorce.

The terms "risk factor" and "risk process" are used inconsistently in the literature, and the problem is compounded because similar constructs can legitimately be conceptualized as a risk factor as well as a risk process. For example, a longstanding pattern of inconsistent parenting might be a risk factor to the extent that it can exacerbate the effect of divorce on children, but inconsistent parenting related to the divorce transition might also be a risk process that explains the association between divorce and certain child outcomes. Similarly, ineffective coping might act as a risk factor, but the child's methods of coping with the divorce in particular may constitute a risk process that would explain divorce-related outcomes. Hypothetically, changing either a risk factor or a risk process might produce better outcomes in children affected by divorce, although interventions focused on risk processes may be preferable given that these processes are thought to have a direct causal link with child adjustment.² Risk factors and risk processes also interact in complex ways. Careful articulation of the intervention model would promote the design of more efficient and effective interventions over time, and would allow further tests of the conceptual models on which they were based.¹

A second issue concerns the benefits of having a conceptual framework or theory to guide the design and interpretation of empirical work. Notably, interventions for children of divorce that have the strongest empirical support are also based on clearly stated conceptual models. Models of stress and coping³ and of effective parenting⁴ have provided the basis for interventions targeting key factors and processes that have received empirical support in the literature. These include children's appraisals of conflict and divorce, children's coping strategies and coping efficacy, and mothers' support, discipline and monitoring. The emotional security model⁵ also has potential as the basis for interventions for children affected by divorce. This model holds that interparental conflict creates emotional distress – reflected in part in the child's emotion dysregulation, attempts to regulate the parents' conflict, and fears about the family's future – that in turn predicts children's adjustment problems. This model informed a successful parent education program designed to improve marital conflict in a community sample.⁶

Implications for Development and Policy

The articles in this section all convey, either implicitly or explicitly, the idea that research findings can and should be translated into interventions that serve children's psychological needs, although they also note the need for economic solutions as well. At this point, the field faces a dilemma: should we continue to conduct small-scale efficacy

studies, or is it time to move on to effectiveness studies based on what we know to date? The fact that the three papers in this section show agreement on many key points suggests that there may be enough evidence to justify moving ahead to more widely disseminated interventions. Whether population-based or focused on the subset of families most in need of help, these interventions need to be brief and implemented in community settings (see Vélez et al.).

The most well evaluated intervention programs in this area (some child-focused, some parent-focused), reviewed by Vélez et al., and the parenting programs reviewed by Pedro-Carroll, are multiple-session programs that address a relatively large number of topics. Some of the topics are generic in the sense that they might be included in any parenting program or program for at-risk youth. Examples of these general topics include authoritative parenting, general stress reduction and positive relationships with extended family. Similarly, the targeted outcomes – such as improved self-esteem, fewer classroom problems and lower internalizing and externalizing – are common goals in a wide range of interventions, not just those for children affected by divorce. As we move toward briefer interventions, there may be a need to focus on divorce-specific topics such as the relationship between the child and non-custodial parent; interparental conflict after the divorce; and co-parenting and children's stress surrounding transitions between two households (see Pedro-Carroll). Outcome measures would also need to be more closely tied to the child's adjustment to divorce, such as children's divorce-related perceptions (see Vélez et al.).

Pedro-Carroll notes the value of working with the legal system, and indeed, working with the courts may be the key to large-scale dissemination of interventions for children affected by divorce. Three examples illustrate the potential of this kind of coordination. First, most jurisdictions require that parents involved in custody disputes take a parenting class that would typically provide education about the effects of conflict on children, parenting and co-parenting, and legal procedures for dispute resolution.⁷ One avenue to reaching many families would be to implement a brief research-based intervention in the context of these required programs. Second, practitioners might develop programs that target the most contentious cases, and seek collaboration with local magistrates who could require or recommend that certain parents attend the program.⁸ Third, researchers and practitioners have a role to play in shaping policy (see Emery⁹), by making research-based information available to state law makers who determine mandates related to mediation, parenting classes, parenting plans and default visitation schedules.

Research-based programs have focused almost entirely on children of married parents who divorce, and this excludes a large number of children who are affected by the dissolution of their parents' relationship. Unmarried partners include couples who live together but choose not to marry; couples who cannot marry legally, such as gay and lesbian couples in many areas of the United States; and brief romantic partners who do not maintain their relationship (see D'Onofrio). We would expect that interventions for children affected by divorce would also be helpful to children affected by these other forms of relationship dissolution. At the same time, programs that provide information to parents about legal issues would need to be up to date regarding legal procedures that

apply to unmarried couples. In many jurisdictions, custody disputes between divorced partners and custody disputes between unmarried partners are handled in different courts, and the legal requirements (e.g., for mediation) may differ for the two groups of parents.

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