
Risk and resilience after divorce
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Divorce and life in a single-parent household have become common experiences for parents and children in contemporary society. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the kinds of stresses and adaptive challenges that adults and children face when confronting transitions that surround divorce. We start by discussing the prevailing model of divorce as part of a continuous process of family reorganization, before examining the prevalence of divorce and subsequent transitions. Following a review of the consequences of divorce on physical and mental health outcomes, we explore concomitant changes in family processes, relationships, and life experiences. We conclude with a brief focus on two emerging areas in the literature: (1) how courtship and nonmarital cohabitation affect family processes and the well-being of individual family members, and (2) how families navigate the legal system in addressing initial and ongoing parenting concerns.

A PROCESS MODEL OF DIVORCE

The most commonly accepted theoretical model of divorce involves a process perspective that addresses stress, risk, and resilience. In this model, divorce is viewed as a cascade of potentially stressful changes and disruptions in the social and physical environments of adults and children, rather than as reactions to a single negative event (e.g., Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2006; Strohschein, 2005). Thus, marital instability and divorce introduce a complex chain of marital transitions and family reorganizations that alter roles and relationships, and affect individual adjustment. Each transition presents new adaptive challenges, and the response to these challenges is influenced by previous family functioning and experiences.

The success with which individuals cope with these stressors will depend on the presence of protective and vulnerability factors. Protective factors buffer the person or promote resilience in coping with the challenges of divorce; vulnerability factors complicate adjustment, increasing the likelihood of adverse consequences. Examples include personal characteristics of the individual, family processes and relationships, and ecological systems external to the family, such as friends, extended family, school, the workplace, and the larger neighborhood. Additionally, developmental factors play a central role in the adjustment of children and adults to marital transitions. Individuals may be more sensitive to stresses and opportunities presented by marital transitions at specific developmental periods; some challenges may trigger delayed adjustment effects to divorce (i.e., so-called “sleeper” effects). In addition to the normative challenges associated with changes in age, family members must confront non-normative challenges associated with the event of divorce (e.g., adjusting to life in a single-parent household, parental dating, remarriage). Thus, this model underscores the importance of studying the postdivorce adjustment of parents and children over time, as marital transitions and family reorganizations unfold. In some cases, divorce may offer parents and children potential benefits: an escape from an unhappy, conflictual family situation; the opportunity to build more fulfilling relationships; and the potential for personal development. In other words, what is perhaps most striking about this model is not the inevitability but the diversity of responses for parents and children who face the challenges of divorce. We turn next to a consideration of the prevalence of divorce and related transitions.

PREVALENCE OF DIVORCE AND RELATED TRANSITIONS
The divorce rate for the United States peaked in 1981, the culmination of a dramatic increase that began in the 1960s (Krieder, 2005). The rate has declined since, with most recent reports showing a lower rate in 2009 compared to earlier in the decade (Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2010). Lifetime probability of a first marriage ending in divorce still approaches 50% (Amato, 2010; Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), but may be lower for more recent marriages (Cherlin, 2010). By the 5-year anniversary, 20% of marriages have been disrupted due to separation or divorce. This proportion increases to 33% and 43% by 10 and 15 years, respectively (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

About half of all dissolving marital unions consist of families with children (Amato, 2000; Krieder, 2005; Raley & Bumpass, 2003), with the majority of children (84%) residing primarily with their mothers (Grall, 2009). Even prior to the actual divorce decree, many families already may be in transition: a mixed sample of mothers and fathers showed that half had some experience with dating new partners within 60 days of the filing, rising to 79% by one year postfiling (Anderson, Greene, Walker, Malerba, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2004). Moreover, 27% of parents in this study had experienced a “serious” dating relationship at the time of filing, increasing to 53% by one year. By two years, a sample of residential mothers showed that 89% reported experience with dating (Anderson, Hurley, Greene, Sullivan, & Webb, 2009).

As repartnering progresses, family life continues to be transformed. By two years after filing for divorce, two-thirds of residential mothers report having a new romantic partner spending the night while the children were present (Anderson et al., 2009). Many families go on to experience full-time cohabitation; the proportion of mothers and fathers who cohabit full-time with a new partner increases from 8% by 60 days after divorce filing, to 24% by one year after filing (Anderson et al., 2004). Families also may experience break-ups, with 32% of mothers and fathers reporting having dated three or more partners by one year after filing for divorce (Anderson et al., 2004).

Collectively, these events have important potential implications for adjustment, because multiple transitions increase the adaptive challenges that confront parents and children (Anderson & Greene, 2005; Anderson et al., 2004; Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Thus, the process perspective on divorce is being extended to include more micro aspects of changes in family formation.

RISK FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO DIVORCE

Relative risk for experiencing divorce depends on a variety of factors, including age at marriage, education, household income, race/ethnicity, religiosity, parents’ marital history, and community characteristics, such as the crime rate, the community unemployment rate, and the percent of families in poverty (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Some of these relations are relatively straightforward. For example, 48% of women first married before age 18 have divorced within 10 years, compared to 24% of women who married after 25. Other factors may interact with one another in complex ways. Among non-Hispanic white women, for instance, education is inversely related to risk of divorce: 48% of non-Hispanic white women without a high school degree have divorced after 10 years of marriage, compared with 27% of those with more than a high school education. Among Hispanic women, however, there is a positive relation between
education and divorce risk: only 29% of Hispanic women without a high school degree have
divorced after 10 years, compared with 39% of those with more than a high school education.
Thus, an examination of risk for divorce must be tempered by the possibility of complex
interactions with other variables (see Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009 for an example with
regard to the impact of religiosity on risk of divorce).

With regard to race/ethnicity, by 10 years after marriage, the likelihood of divorce is 20%
for Asian American women, 32% for non-Hispanic white women, 34% for Hispanic women, and
47% for African American women. (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Hispanic and African American
women are more likely than non-Hispanic white women to remain separated without divorcing.
Ninety-seven percent of non-Hispanic white women have completed legal divorce within 5 years
after separation, whereas the comparable rate is 77% and 67% for Hispanic and African
American women, respectively. Rates of cohabitation and remarriage also differ across
race/ethnicity. By five years after separation, 58% of non-Hispanic white women, 50% of
Hispanic women, and 31% of African American women have cohabited with a new partner.
Rates of remarriage 5 years after divorce are 58%, 44%, and 32% for non-Hispanic white,
Hispanic, and African American women, respectively. Risk for divorce also is associated with a
wide array of factors reflecting socioeconomic disadvantage (e.g., community male
unemployment rate, % receiving public assistance, median family income, % below poverty line)
Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). It is unclear to what extent racial and ethnic differences in risk for
divorce are proxy indicators for longstanding economic and educational disparities (Amato,
2010; Bratter & King, 2008).

The likelihood of divorce also is associated with patterns of interaction and personal
characteristics of married adults. Couples are at higher risk for divorce if their interaction
involves escalation or reciprocation of negative affect, disengagement, stonewalling, contempt,
denial, and blaming (Gottman & Notarius, 2001; Hetherington, 1999b; Hetherington & Kelly,
2002). Relatedly, risk increases if couples differ on their views of family life, if they share few
interests or friends (Hetherington, 1999b; Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983), and if there is little
spousal interdependence (Rogers, 2004). There is some evidence that participation in premarital
education can be beneficial in reducing conflict and divorce (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, &
Markman, 2006). Sexual dissatisfaction contributes more to risk of instability for men than for
women (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), although the finding is stronger for white than for African
American men (Orbuch, Veroff, & Hunter, 1999). Additionally, risk is associated with
preexisting levels of personal maladjustment, such as antisocial behavior, depression,
alcohol/substance abuse, and impulsivity. Individuals with a history of these kinds of problems
are more likely to encounter stressful life events, to experience relationship distress that ends in
divorce, and to be deficient in parenting skills (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Hetherington, 1999b;
Kitson, 1992; Kurdek, 1990). Antisocial individuals also are more likely to select an antisocial
partner (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), thereby compounding any relationship
problems.

EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON ADJUSTMENT

Adult Adjustment

Divorce is one of the most stressful experiences adults may face; not surprisingly, many
individuals exhibit a variety of problematic outcomes. Although not all postdivorce changes are negative (see Hetherington & Kelly, 2002 for a review), a substantial body of work documents the increased risk of psychopathology, higher incidents of motor vehicle accidents, elevated drinking and drug use, alcoholism, suicide, and even death for those who separate or divorce as compared to the continuously married (see Amato, 2000 for a review of this earlier work).

More recent research supports and extends these earlier findings, toward providing a more nuanced understanding of potential factors that moderate the effects of divorce on physical health outcomes. For example, increases in depression, dysthymia, and alcohol abuse, and lowered global happiness depend upon particular factors such as gender, economic resources, the quality of the marriage, and the presence of young children (Overbeek, Vollebergh, de Graaf, Scholte, de Kemp, & Engels, 2006; Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). Alcohol abuse and dysthymia increased after divorce, but not for those who left lower quality marriages (Overbeek et al., 2006). The presence of preschool age children increases risk of depression for men and women after divorce (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). Divorce also is associated with increased alcohol abuse for men regardless of the presence of children; for women, increased alcohol abuse is only seen when preschool age children are present, in part because of concomitant increases in parenting strain and frequency of contact with the former spouse.

Strain also comes from inadequate levels of income. Divorce typically leads to a dramatic reduction in the residential parent’s household income, with per capita declines averaging 13–35% in national populations (Cherlin, 1998; Peterson, 1996). Women with children under the age of 6 may be at special risk for strain, with over half of this group below the poverty line (Teachman & Paasch, 1994). Reduced income contributes to other potentially stressful circumstances, such as changes in employment, education, and residence (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1999; Forgatch, Patterson, & Ray, 1996; Lorenz et al., 1997; McLanahan, 1999; Patterson & Forgatch, 1990). Stress usually dissipates with time (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1997; Forgatch et al., 1996; Hetherington, 1993; Lorenz et al., 1997), although those with lower incomes generally experience greater numbers of disruptive events. If income remains low, stress often persists. Correlations between income and happiness/life satisfaction are generally small; however, it is notable that social relationships and emotional support largely moderate adverse effects of economic distress on family relations and adjustment following divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Simons & Associates, 1996). Life satisfaction also may reflect selection effects, with results of an 18 year national German sample showing lower scores for those who eventually divorce versus stay married are evident even before the marriage occurs.

An emerging literature also addresses the underlying processes and diseases by which long-term health may be affected after divorce, such as changes in blood pressure (Sbarra, Law, Lee & Mason, 2009), immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002), cardiovascular disease markers (Zhang & Hayward, 2006) and chronic illnesses and mobility limitations (Hughes & Waite, 2009). Moreover, there is evidence that family disruption is related to the community homicide rate (Schwartz, 2006).

**Child Adjustment**

The relation between divorce and child adjustment is well established, although controversy arises over how best to integrate the findings. Readers may encounter, for example, the following
seemingly incongruent statements:
1. Children of divorce are at serious risk for maladaptation.
2. Most children display no serious difficulties after their parent’s divorce.
3. Substantial numbers of children of divorce are better adjusted than those from nondivorced households.
4. Some children’s lives are enhanced by their parent’s divorce.
5. Negative effects of divorce on children generally resolve soon afterward.
6. Children may be adversely affected even into adulthood by parental divorce.
7. Many of the negative effects associated with divorce exist well before the marriage ends.

Interestingly, each statement correctly summarizes a part of the literature relating to children of divorce. These statements further comprise two broad domains: (1) descriptions of the overall risk associated with divorce (statements 1–4); and (2) changes in adjustment over time (statements 5–7).

**Overall Risk**

Studies of divorce generally find that approximately one quarter of children in divorced families experience high levels of problem behaviors versus 10% of children from nondivorced households (e.g., Forgatch et al., 1996; Hetherington et al., 1992; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Simons & Associates, 1996; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Although select studies have found larger differences, meta-analyses approach these figures (Amato, 2000). We could correctly conclude that the experience of parental divorce doubles the risk of serious problems for children (support for statement 1). However, we also can correctly conclude that the overwhelming majority of children (i.e., the 80% without behavioral problems) show no serious difficulties in relation to their parent’s divorce (support for statement 2). Both statements are supported by the data, although the former emphasizes the risk for some individuals, whereas the latter emphasizes the resilience demonstrated by most. Furthermore, with substantial overlap in the distribution of adjustment between the children from divorced versus nondivorced families, we also could correctly conclude that a substantial number of children of divorce (i.e., about 40%), are better adjusted than their nondivorced counterparts (support for statement 3).

Some researchers have argued that the divorce itself is but a marker for other factors that create problematic adjustment in children, such as parental conflict. Children appear to be better off in cases in which the divorce substantially reduces levels of parental conflict or when there was ongoing violence in the marriage (support for statement 4) (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Booth & Amato, 2001; Emery, 2009; Jekielek, 1998; Strohschein, 2005). Children from the most conflicted homes also are more likely to report feeling relieved that their parents divorced, although those from less conflicted homes are more likely to report distress after their parents’ divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997). Many children, in fact, initially respond to divorce with confusion, anxiety, and anger, but over time are able to adjust, with the support and involvement of a caring, competent adult.

**Adjustment over Time**

Evidence suggests that for children of divorce, some adjustment problems may be transitory, others may persist, and still others may be present long before the actual dissolution occurs. Longitudinal studies (e.g., Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982)
find, for example, that many problems dissipate within the 1–2 years following a divorce, as families adjust to their new life situation (support for statement 5). In other cases, effects of divorce persist over time. Across reporter (boys, mothers, teachers, peers, trained observers), Hetherington (1993) found that boys who experience parental divorce while in preschool continue to show significant elevations in externalizing behavior than their nondivorced counterparts, with differences maintained into adolescence. With respect to early adolescence, Hetherington et al. (1992) reported that, regardless of gender, children demonstrated difficulties in school and home settings even 4–6 years after the divorce. In a meta-analysis of 37 studies linking parental divorce in childhood with eventual adjustment in adulthood, Amato and Keith (1991a) found moderately sized negative effects for depression, diminished life satisfaction, and lower marital quality, educational attainment, income, occupational prestige, and physical health (support for statement 6). There is evidence that parental divorce impacts women’s expectations for their own marriages, so that women who experienced their parents’ divorce have lower relationship commitment and relationship confidence, controlling for prior parental conflict and current relationship adjustment (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). Selection of a stable, supportive spouse from a nondivorced family, however, can essentially eliminate the risk of marital instability associated with having divorced parents (Hetherington, 1999b; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

In part, long-term effects may persist because of disruptions in normal developmental trajectories during the period of adolescence (e.g., Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Keiman, 1995). In addition, a confluence of risk factors may occur in adolescent girls from divorced families. Girls from divorced and remarried families achieve physical signs of puberty earlier, which, when combined with association with older male peers, poor parental monitoring and control, and an overtly sexually active divorced mother, leads to early initiation of sexual activities, more sexual partners, and higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Despite evidence for long-term difficulties, some problems stem not from the divorce itself but from earlier deteriorating conditions in the family (support for statement 7). Strohschein (2005) found, for example, that children whose parents later divorce exhibited higher levels of antisocial behavior and anxiety/depression even before the divorce. Sun and Li (2002) find that children whose parents divorced had lower test scores three years prior to divorce, with additional declines after the divorce. These studies echo earlier work by Block, Block, and Gjerde (1986), Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) and others.

In an effort to synthesize the existing literature on divorce, researchers increasingly are adopting a perspective that emphasizes diversity in children’s responses (Amato, 2000; Hetherington et al., 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Strohschein, 2005). Relatedly, there is growing interest in identifying the conditions that influence risk versus resilience, such as the child’s own temperament (e.g., Hetherington, 1991), although resilience does not mean that children are invulnerable to effects of divorce (Emery, 1999). Although divorce generally exerts only a moderately negative—and in many cases temporary—effect on children, the differences are far from trivial for the families involved. Most families avoid the more calamitous outcomes, such as school dropout and unwed pregnancy. But avoiding calamity is not the equivalent of
having achieved success. Emery (1999) describes the concerns of many parents who worry that their children, while not necessarily demonstrating clinically significant levels of problems, still show some level of behavioral problems or emotional distress from having experienced the divorce. The children themselves, as young adults report more distress over recalling their childhood experiences around divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Many families seek help in addressing these concerns. Some of what they may seek is help for psychological pain of a more subtle nature (Amato, 2010; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), or to repair or bolster key family relationships. Thus, the diversity of postdivorce outcomes for children reflects various unique qualities of the family.

Finally, it is important to determine how results of the substantial body of existing literature on divorce will track with emerging demographic shifts in marriage that are now taking place, such as delays in age at marriage, and more educated individuals selecting into marriage (see Shoen & Cheng (2006) for a discussion), combined with increased rates of child support compliance and noncustodial contact that are occurring (see later section for a discussion). These and other shifts ultimately may moderate risk for problems associated with divorce for future cohorts of children produced from these marriages.

**EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

**Relationships between Divorced Spouses**

After a divorce, overall levels of physical contact, conflict, and emotional attachment between spouses typically diminish rapidly. Men are more likely, however, to have lingering emotional attachment to the ex-spouse and to entertain thoughts of reconciliation, although, ironically, men also are quicker to remarry. In cases where their ex-spouse remarries, women commonly report sustained anger, resentment, and competitiveness toward the new wife (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). If violence arises, it is most likely to occur toward wives in the time during the decision to divorce and immediately after the separation, with highest risk when wives have initiated the divorce. By 6 years postdivorce, most adults have moved on to build reasonably satisfying lives, and intense emotions associated with the breakup have faded.

Some studies find evidence that conflicts linger on, especially when former spouse are tied to one another through mutual children or other factors (Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006). About 25% of divorced parents exhibit sustained or even increased conflict that usually concerns finances and relations with the children (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Tschann, Johnson, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990). Some children report feeling “caught” between parental loyalties or think that they are to blame for these arguments; in such situations, boys are more likely to engage in noncompliant, angry, acting-out behaviors, whereas girls are more likely to respond with guilt and anxiety (Hetherington, 1999a).

Ideally, postdivorce family life would involve minimal conflict between parents who are able to engage in a cooperative, supportive role with regard to each other’s involvement with the child. Such a situation characterizes only about one-fourth of divorced households. Instead, most ex-spouses become disengaged or resort to parallel parenting, characterized by little collaboration or communication but, fortunately, with few instances of actively undermining the
other parent (Ahrons, 2011; Buchanan et al., 1996; Hetherington, 1999a; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

**Relationships between Residential Parents and Children**

In the early years after divorce, residential mothers and fathers often struggle with task overload and question their adequacy as parents; they also experience health problems associated with a lowered immune system and report psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1988; Simons & Associates, 1996). Residential parents often are preoccupied with their own adjustment problems, and demonstrate irritability and a lack of emotional support toward the children. Discipline may be erratic and punitive, while monitoring of children’s whereabouts and behaviors typically diminishes (Forgatch et al., 1996; Hetherington, 1993). As a consequence, children generally display increased noncompliance, anger, and dependence during this time. Relationships involving residential mothers and their sons may be especially disturbed, as demonstrated by the presence of escalating, mutually coercive interactions (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1992). By 2 years postdivorce, many of these problems have diminished, although the residential mother–son relationship continues to be more distressed than those in nondivorced families. In contrast, after an initial period of perturbation, relationships involving residential mothers and their daughters often are characterized as warm, close, and companionate.

Additional problems may surface during adolescence. As daughters reach puberty, their relationships with mothers may become strained, particularly in cases where early-maturing daughters demonstrate precocious sexual or acting-out behaviors (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1992). Maternal attempts to correct for these problems by increasing parental monitoring and control of the adolescent daughter generally are unsuccessful. About one-third of children of divorce also disengage from their families earlier than counterparts in nondivorced families. If familial influence is replaced with involvement in an antisocial peer group, risk for delinquent behavior may increase; alternatively, development of a supportive relationship with a competent adult (e.g., a grandparent, teacher, or neighbor) may buffer negative effects of this early familial disengagement (Hetherington, 1993).

Although residential mothers and fathers demonstrate similarities in the pattern of deterioration and recovery of competent parenting, some differences remain. Residential mothers communicate and self-disclose more openly with their children and are more active in monitoring children’s activities and knowing their friends. Residential fathers report less child-rearing stress than do mothers and tend to have fewer problems with discipline or control. Additionally, divorce appears to undermine opposite-gender relationships more than same-gender relationships, such that mothers and daughters are considerably more affectionate and close than daughters and fathers, or mothers and sons. Sons in divorced families have less contact with fathers and feel less affectionate toward them than sons in nondivorced families, although the differences are relatively small (Amato & Booth, 1997).

Consistent with findings for nondivorced households, the parenting style that works well in divorced households is authoritative, characterized by warmth, support, responsiveness, and consistent control and monitoring. In contrast to disengaged, authoritarian, or permissive
parenting styles, children raised with an authoritative parenting style have higher levels of social and academic competence, and lower levels of psychopathology (Anderson, Lindner, & Bennion, 1992; Avenoli, Sessa, & Steinberg, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002). Divorced parents are less likely than those in nondivorced households to use an authoritative parenting style, however (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Simons & Associates, 1996; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992), and mean levels of problem behaviors are still higher in divorced versus nondivorced families, even when authoritative parenting is used (Anderson et al., 1992).

**Relationships between Nonresidential Parents and Children**

Nonresidential divorced fathers report a strong desire to stay involved with their children (Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2003) and children themselves report similar desires to be involved with their nonresidential fathers (Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Schwartz & Finley, 2009). Although negative stereotypes of nonresidential fathers still persist (Troilo & Coleman, 2007), more recent cohorts show that at least in the short term, there is little or no decline in contact between nonresidential fathers and their children (DeGarmo, 2010). With respect to maintaining weekly contact over time, results of nationally representative data pooled from the 1970s to 2000s show a substantial increase, from 8% in 1976 to 31% in 2002; rates of no contact at 37% in 1976 decreased to 29% in 2002 (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009).

Contact is more likely to be maintained in situations in which mediation is used, when there is low parental conflict, when the nonresidential parent believes he or she has some control in decisions affecting the child, and when the child is a boy (Amato, 2000; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Braver et al., 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The presence of a cooperative coparenting relationship also is associated with increases in contact (Sobolewski & King, 2005). Contact is associated with compliance with paying child support in a consistent and timely fashion (Juby, Billette, Laplante, & LesBourdais, 2007). It is of concern, therefore, that child support payments continue to lag, with 2004 data indicating that less than half pay the full amount (Grall, 2006).

Frequent contact with nonresidential fathers during childhood is associated with a number of positive child outcomes, including better feelings toward both parents (Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius & Luecken, 2006) and less blame of fathers as the cause of the divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Additionally, quality involvement has direct benefits for children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Aquilino, 2006; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; King, 2006; King & Sobolewski, 2006) and for father-child relationship quality and responsive fathering (Sobolewski & King, 2005). For boys, close relationships with fathers reduces feelings that they will themselves divorce as adults (Risch, Jodl, & Eccles, 2004).

Most studies have shown that nonresidential mothers have greater contact and closeness with their children (e.g., Hawkins, Amato & King, 2006). For example, in a comparison of nonresidential fathers and nonresidential mothers, Gunnoe and Hetherington (2004) found that adolescents reported more contact and social support from nonresidential mothers than nonresidential fathers. In addition, the relation between perceived social support and adolescent adjustment was greater for those with nonresidential mothers. Although they are less authoritative than residential mothers or mothers in nondivorced families, nonresidential mothers
are more likely to make efforts at monitoring and controlling their children’s behavior, and to be more supportive and sensitive to their children’s needs. Nonresidential mothers, however, are less likely to pay child support than nonresidentia l fathers (Sousa & Sorenson, 2006), although child support orders do improve rates of compliance (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, & Bay, 1993; Grall, 2009). Finally, the greater involvement and closeness of nonresidential mothers may interfere with the formation of close bonds with a stepmother (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Relationships between Siblings
In contrast to the postdivorce research on parent–child relationships, studies of siblings are rare. The few studies in this area show that sibling relationships following parental divorce are generally distressed, marked by patterns of conflict and negativity, as well as disengagement and avoidance (Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Within 4–6 years after divorce, many of these differences have abated, although, consistent with the research on parent–child relationships, sibling relationships in divorced families continue to be more negative compared to those in nondivorced families (Anderson & Rice, 1992). Patterns of disengagement and avoidance may explain why child adjustment is less strongly related to sibling relationship quality in divorced versus nondivorced families (Anderson et al., 1992). In contentious divorces, siblings may be drawn into opposite sides of parental disputes, aligning with one parent against the other (McGoldrick & Carter, 2011).

Research in this area provides evidence for a spillover effect with other family relationships. More negative sibling relationships are related to higher levels of conflict occurring between divorced spouses, and between parents and children (Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; MacKinnon, 1989). Over time, the presence of a sibling may introduce the potential for differential treatment by parents, and differential involvement in parental disputes (Greene & Anderson, 1999). When sibling relationships are positive, they may buffer the effects of a conflictual relationship with a parent (Hetherington, 1993), although boys appear to receive less sibling support than do girls (Anderson & Rice, 1992; Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington, 1993). Even in adulthood, it is mothers and female siblings who promote more family cohesion through phone calls, organizing joint activities or celebrations, and coming together at vacations (Hetherington, 1999a).

Relationships with Grandparents
Following divorce, a strengthening of ties with blood relatives often occurs (Gongla & Thomson, 1987). Many divorced mothers turn to their own parents for economic assistance; about one-fourth of divorced women live with their parents at some point after the divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Many residential mothers and fathers also rely on their family of origin for child care and emotional support. Reflective of economic disadvantage, help in African American families is more likely to take the form of providing services, in contrast to the monetary support provided in white families (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

Divorce also increases the risk of lost contact between grandparents and grandchildren (Drew & Smith, 2002; Drew & Silverstein, 2007; Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). Grandparents who had lost contact with their grandchildren due to separation, divorce, or other events were found to have adverse emotional health, including greater increases in depression up to 15 years later (Drew & Silverstein, 2007).
Related research findings on the role of grandparents in protecting children from the adverse effects of parental divorce have been mixed. Some have found that children, especially African Americans in mother-headed homes, may benefit from the presence of a grandmother in the home (Kellam, Adams, Brown, & Esminger, 1982; Lussier et al., 2002); however, family stress may increase in situations where residential grandmothers and divorced mothers conflict on views of control and discipline of children, the divorced mother’s social life, and level of independence (Hetherington, 1989). Moreover, when support from grandparents comes with unwanted advice, costs, and restrictions, it is unhelpful to parents or children (Amato, 2000; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington, 1989; Kitson, 1992; Miller, Smergla, Gaudet, & Kitson, 1998). When the presence of a grandparent has advantageous effects on children, it is because the grandmother’s support leads to improved maternal parenting (Hetherington, 1989). Although there is little research on the impact of grandfathers on children’s postdivorce adjustment, some evidence indicates that the presence of an involved, competent, residential grandfather in a divorced family can decrease antisocial behavior and increase achievement in grandsons (Hetherington, 1989).

**EXTRAFAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DIVORCE**

In addition to family ties, relationships external to the family have the potential to exert influence on adjustment after divorce. In fact, this influence may occur even before the actual breakup: Of note, about 75% of those who initiate a divorce report that either an adult confidant (e.g., a friend, or family member) or new romantic partner played a major role in their decision to leave the marriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In the aftermath of divorce, parents seem likely to continue seeking contact from these adults for support and assistance.

**Relationships with Romantic Partners**

Along with the divorce comes the legally and socially sanctioned potential to form new romantic attachments with other adults. In fact, the strongest contributor to a divorced adult’s well-being and happiness is the eventual formation of a supportive, mutually caring, intimate relationship (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Moreover, situations in which the romantic partner is residential may provide more immediate support than nonresidential partners, or nonresidential friends and relatives (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1997; Simons & Johnson, 1996). Unlike a live-in partner, who is available to offer encouragement, advice, and actual help with child rearing, nonresidential partners, friends, and relatives, even if supportive, may not be present to assist with everyday duties, and thus exert little influence on the quality of parenting.

Ironically, the potential for a new partner to offer emotional and social support to the family is not always reflected in improved child outcomes. The adjustment of children in cohabiting families may be worse than that in divorced, single-parent households (Buchanan et al., 1996; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Seltzer, 2000). It may be that the stresses and challenges in forming successful cohabiting relationships (e.g., ambiguity of the new partner’s parental role, uncertainty of a long-term commitment) at times outweigh the benefits of possible support, or that the adverse effects of divorce are pervasive and long-lasting (Anderson, Greene, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1999; Buchanan et al., 1996; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Further, families continue to confront emerging challenges related to postdivorce life and repartnering, with potential reverberations felt across the coparent households (see later
sections). Yet many postdivorce families are able over time to establish gratifying relationships and a salutary environment in which competent children can develop (Hetherington et al., 1998; Seltzer, 2000; Thomson et al., 1992). Given that cohabitation is such a common experience for postdivorce families, we turn next to a consideration of the available literature.

REPARTNERING AND NONMARITAL COHABITATING RELATIONSHIPS

Nonmarital cohabitation appears to be a difficult transition for many families. Buchanan et al. (1996) have found, for example, that boys in cohabiting postdivorce households scored higher on almost every problem measured, including substance use, school deviance, antisocial behavior, poor grades, and problem peer relations compared to remarried families. Girls in cohabitating families were more likely than those whose parents were remarried or romantically noninvolved to have strained relations with the residential parent. Additionally, parenting was problematic in dating and cohabitating families as opposed to remarried families. Nonmarital cohabitation has adverse potential effects for adult adjustment as well; the risk of physical abuse to adults in cohabitating relationships is three times greater than that for married couples, 15% versus 5% (Waite, 2000). Perhaps because of uncertainty in the cohabitating state, couples are less likely to pool income, although income sharing increases when a child is born into the union. When cohabitation occurs after engagement, such relationships may be more successful (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2006).

Compared to stepfathers or nondivorced fathers with biological children, the cohabiting romantic partner is likely to be less financially and emotionally invested in any residential children (King, 2009). The cohabiting romantic partner’s relationships and parenting style with residential children are more problematic, with the partner typically devoting less time to youth-oriented activities at school or in community or religious organizations (Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009; Thomson et al., 1992). When cohabitating families experience strain between the romantic partner and child, it can spill over into distressed relations between the residential parent and child, particularly daughters (Buchanan et al., 1996).

Given the challenges inherent in adjusting to divorce, along with the likelihood that many of these families eventually will remarry, which factors contribute to successful repartnering? Although literature on the topic of postdivorce repartnering at present is limited, it seems likely that the period prior to actual legal remarriage comprises a time of potentially dramatic levels of change, as the parent, the new romantic partner, and children meet one another and begin to form the basis for new relationships and efforts toward forging a new family system. Specifically, repartnering success may be dependent on how well parents handle three central challenges in the repartnering process: (1) developing effective decision-making strategies for dating others, (2) serving as gatekeepers or regulators of information to children concerning their own repartnering and their ex-spouse’s repartnering; and (3) acting as managers of emerging relationships in repartnered families.

As part of the first challenge, developing decision-making strategies in dating, parents must evaluate their personal readiness to begin the dating process; some already have begun the process of repartnering even as the marriage dissolved, whereas others may not be ready for months or even years after the divorce. Parents also must decide on their selection criteria for the new romantic partner, including the strategies used to meet others, such as the dating arena or
specific setting that they select as a way to access a potential source of eligible partners (e.g., work, bars and clubs, religious organizations, personal ads, the Internet, contact with friends or relatives). Finally, parents must determine the extent to which considerations about the child affect the process of dating, including the child’s own level of readiness and individual adjustment. The presence of residential children appears to increase the chance of forming a union with a new partner who also has children (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006), and there is some research to suggest that positive child adjustment may accelerate the repartnering process (Forgatch et al., 1996; Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1992).

With respect to the second challenge, parents must serve in the role as gatekeeper, by orchestrating whether, when, and how to disclose information relating to the romantic relationship itself (e.g., the extent of this disclosure, its timing and level of developmental appropriateness). For example, they must decide how to handle the child’s exposure to any implied sexual involvement between the parent and partner, such as the frequency and timing of overnight stays (Anderson et al., 2009). The success with which the parent is able to manage such situations has important potential implications for children. Inappropriate levels of exposure and knowledge may lead to precocious sexual knowledge (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), and increase distress and acting out behaviors in adolescents (Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, Lee, & Escalante, 2004).

With the third challenge, managing emerging relationships, parents must incorporate the new romantic partner into the existing system with the children, such as deciding on the level of the partner’s involvement in discipline. There also must be opportunities for joint activities shared between children and the new romantic partner. Shared activities may influence how well families adapt over the long term to the new romantic partner (Montgomery et al., 1992). Relatedly, the adjustment of families to postdivorce events such as parental repartnering takes place against a backdrop of mutual and recursive influence among family members. The ways in which the parent responds to the interaction between the new romantic partner and the child provides, for example, a signal to the child as to how to interpret and further react to the partner’s behavior. The child’s response to overtures made by the new romantic partner may provide the parent with a means to gauge the successful integration of the partner into the family and, thus, an indirect assessment of the long-term prospects for the repartnered relationship. Moreover, whereas much of this discussion on postdivorce parental repartnering has concerned the residential parent, the little available research demonstrates that even changes in the nonresidential parent’s romantic life exert effects on child development (Anderson et al., 1999).

In summary, the negotiation of family transitions around postdivorce repartnering has important implications for adult and child adjustment and parental functioning. Further research is needed to identify the mechanisms involved in successful repartnering and to inform theory, as well as interventions, with divorced populations.

THE LEGAL SYSTEM AND DIVORCING FAMILIES

Divorce has become a major focus for social policy (Amato, 2004). The Federal Government created a major initiative to support marriage, and three states have instituted covenant marriage laws as a way to discourage divorce. In the past two decades, many U.S. jurisdictions have adopted statutes that promote joint legal custody, shared parental
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responsibility, and continued contact with both parents. Moreover, nearly half of all U. S. counties have some sort of parenting education program in place for divorcing parents (Arbuthnot, 2002).

About 10% of divorcing families are not able to reach even a minimal level of agreement to allow for coparenting their children (Grych & Fincham, 1999; Maccoby, Depner, &Mnookin, 1990). Such high conflict domestic relations cases are recognized as recidivists since these families resort to court processes repeatedly because of on-going disagreements. High conflict family cases consume a disproportionate among of court resources, and contribute to burn out among family court practitioners. High conflict has long been associated with poor child outcomes, and thus, these families pose special risks and challenges for social scientists, policy makers, and the courts.

Consequently, there is an evolving concern that adversarial procedures may entrench families in litigation, giving rise to alternative efforts to foster non-adversarial means of deciding issues of legal and physical custody, visitation schedules, and parenting plans (e.g., Atwood, 2007; Warshak, 2007a, 2007b). Alternative efforts include mediation and collaborative divorce (Emery, 2007). Results from interventions that employ collaborative law approaches show promise (Ebling, Pruett, & Kline Pruett, 2009). Use of collaborative law attorneys, for example, is associated with better psychological functioning for mothers, which yielded indirect positive effects for child outcomes (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003). Moreover, use of divorce mediation has been demonstrated to lower trial rates and enhance coparenting (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001; Emery, Sbarra, & Grover, 2005).

High-conflict families that become entrenched in the legal system are essentially allowing for judicial determination of custody. Judge Judith Kreeger (2003) raises a concern that most family court judges, while experienced in family law, have little formal training in family systems, mental health, and child development issues. In such cases, judges may rely on custody evaluators to assist in decision-making, a practice that has been criticized (Emery, 2007; O’Connell, 2007; Tippins & Wittmann, 2005).

In response to a demand from practitioners for clearer custody guidelines (Emery, 2007), the American Law Institute has recommended inclusion of an approximation rule to guide contested custody cases. This approach involves determining physical custody on the basis of the proportion of time the child has spent with each parent in the past. The goal of approximation is to anchor custody decisions in “lived” experience (Atwood, 2007), extrapolating from past parenting behavior to anticipate what may likely be future parenting behavior (Emery, 2007). In contrast, disputed custody arrangements have historically been determined using the best-interest-of-the-child standard, an approach that has been criticized because of a lack of consensus on what actually constitutes the best interest of the child (e.g., Emery, Otto, & O-Donohue, 2005; O’Connell, 2007). A debate over the relative merits of the two approaches appeared recently in Child Development Perspectives (Atwood, 2007; Emery, 2007; Lamb, 2007; O’Connell, 2007; Warshak, 2007a, 2007b). Even among the authors with differing views on this debate, however, there is strong consensus that parenting with minimal conflict is optimal for children, with an agreed-upon parenting plan determined by the parents themselves (Atwood, 2007; Emery, 2007; Lamb, 2007; O’Connell, 2007; Warshak, 2007a, 2007b). Emery (2007) forwards that “parental
self-determination should be parents’ first priority and our legal system’s overriding goal” (p. 133). Thus, practitioners should be concerned with identifying alternatives to relitigation and promoting children’s meaningful contact with both parents (Emery et al., 2005). Psychological interventions for high-conflict divorcing families exist, but have yet to be empirically tested in the field. Promising approaches include Lebow’s (2003) integrative multi-level family therapy, and Benjamin and Gollan’s (2005) Controlled Communication model.

SUMMARY

The breakdown of a marriage initiates a series of notable changes in the lives of parents and children. As emerging challenges are met, new relationships formed, and family roles and processes altered, most adults and children experience considerable stress. Whereas about one-fourth experience lasting problems in adjustment, it should be underscored that most are resilient, able to move on and lead satisfying new lives. Postdivorce resilience largely depends on the ability of parents and children to build close, constructive, mutually supportive relationships that play a profound role in buffering families from effects of related adversity.

REFERENCES


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1 It should be noted that prior to January 1996, the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) compiled their annual marriage and divorce statistics from actual counts provided by all of the individual states. Since that time, six states no longer collect actual counts of divorce (California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota). Thus, the annual divorce rate is now derived from actual counts from the states that continue to participate, supplemented with estimates of the rates for the missing states from nationally representative surveys such as the National Survey of Family Growth.