Promoting Resilience in Children

While Navigating Separation and Divorce

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The Concept of Divorce

A “single event”? 
No
Conceptualizing Divorce

A process
Involving multiple changes
Creating potential challenges for children

Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980
Influential Research on the Effects of Divorce on Children

Judith Wallerstein
Mavis Hetherington & John Kelly
Joan Kelly
Philip Amato
Anne Bernstein

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Psychological problems
“Sleeper effects”
Long-term negative consequences

Massive media attention to the alarming effects of divorce on children

“Dr. Judith Wallerstein has been studying the effects of divorce on children for 25 years, while children learn to cope….its greatest effects don’t emerge until adulthood”

New York Times Magazine (10/19/2000)

Wallerstein (1989)
Marin County study

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“Children of Divorce”

Problem-Centered Paradigm

- Self–fulfilling prophecy
- Restricts opportunity
- Creates limited narrative
- Broken identity
- Instills fear
- Amplifies shame and guilt

Influential Longitudinal Studies 2002

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce
Wallerstein
- 25 years
- 60 clinical subjects
- Selection Bias
- No Comparisons
- Long Term Consequences

For Better or Worse
Hetherington/Kelly
- 25 years
- Children of both married and divorced
- No clinical subjects
- 2 Year Adjustment Period

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Post-Divorce Adjustment

(2 year period post-divorce adjustment)

20-25% cont’d psychological problems post-divorce

10% of children from “intact” families

Hetherington & Kelly 1988
A process, not a single event
Uncharted territory for everyone
A crisis in the family unit
Often experienced as a loss
About the marital relationship
Protective Factors in Adjustment

• competent and warm parenting
• absence of depression/other psychological disorders
• lower conflict
• post separation living arrangements

(Kelly & Emery, 2003)
Discussing Separation and Divorce with Children

Best Practices

• Meet with all family members together
• Both parents should have a unified, age-appropriate explanation of divorce
• Be unified in their reassurance that the children will be OK
• Children should know that it is not their fault
• Convey clearly that both parents will remain there for them as parents
• Should not instill false hopes of reconciliation
• Parents present a conjoint “parenting plan”
Addressing Basic Needs of Children

Who will take care of them?
Where will they live?
How will they spend time with each parent?
Who will tuck them in?
Who will help with homework?
Who will take them to school?
Where will their pets live?
The Affective Experience of Separation/Divorce

- Shock
- Confusion
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Grief
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Jealousy
- Hope
- Optimism
- Relief
Psychological Tasks of Children Experiencing Family Transitions

Understanding the Family Transition
Disengaging from Parental Conflict
Dealing with Loss
Dealing with Anger
Accepting the Permanence of Family Transition
Taking a Chance on Love

(University of Minnesota) Extension
Children Adjusting to Parental Separation/Divorce

Infants: notice change in parent energy and emotional states (become more irritable, fussing, crying)

Toddlers: recognize that one parent no longer lives at home, may express empathy towards parent who appears sad (separation anxiety, tearfulness, clingy, regression with toilet training and nightmares)

Grade Schoolers: begin to understand that divorce means that parents no longer love each other (may blame themselves, worry about changes, experience nightmares, sadness and grieving, confusion, physical distress, stomach aches, separation anxiety)

Adolescents: understand what divorce mean, thinking more complex (may blame self, may feel abandoned by parent no longer in the home, may become angry, act out behaviorally, may withdraw from friends or favorite activities, may exhibit a decline in academic performance, experiment with alcohol/other drugs, become over-responsible, anxious, depressed, somatic complaints)

Adapted from GH6600 Helping Children Understand Divorce University of Missouri Extension (2004)

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Pre-Divorce Risk Factors

• Nature of initial separation
• Parental adjustment to initial separation
• High-conflict parental dyad
• Domestic violence
• Substance abuse
• High conflict family systems
• Chronic mental illness
Post-Divorce Risk Factors

- Unresolved parental conflict
- Parental depression, anxiety, or substance abuse
- Parental absence or abandonment
- Limited financial or emotional resources
- Gatekeeping by custodial parent
- Rapid onset of serial dating
What Children Say They Need from Divorcing Parents

“We need both of our parents in our lives”
“Don’t say mean things about one another”
“Don’t turn us into messengers”
“Please stop fighting”
“Don’t ask us to choose sides”
“Don’t make us feel disloyal or guilty”
“Don’t fish for information about our other parent”
“Help us pack to spend time with our other parent”
“If you are angry with our other parents don’t say it around or in front of us”
What Children Need from Divorcing Parents

- Love
- Listening
- Limits
- Consistency
- Caring Behavior
- Communication
- Reassurance
- Role Modeling
- Presence
- Patience
- Participation
- Permission to feel
Children’s Residential Arrangements Post-Divorce

Prior to 1980s
- Traditional cultural norms
- Traditional gender roles
- Institutional values
- Psychoanalytic theory
- Unsubstantial research

Last 3 decades
Researchers in both social science and child development have identified risk factors associated with

- Outdated
- Rigid
- Restrictive
- Failed to address psychological/developmental needs of children
- Not gender neutral
- Maternal sole custody resulted oftentimes in limited paternal involvement (risk)
- Did not address best interests of children both short and long term

Joan B. Kelly Family Process, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2006
Promoting Well-being
Post-Divorce Residential Plans

Sole Custody

Military
Domestic Violence
Relocation
Incarceration
Mental Disability
Physical Disability
Addiction
Economic
At Risk Environment

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Promoting Well-being
Post-Divorce Residential Plans

- Cooperation
- Flexibility
- Mutual Participation
- Mutual Respect
- United Parenting Styles
- Conjoint Involvement
- Low Conflict
- **Clear Parenting Plan**
What Children Need from Custodial Parent

• Support of visitation with non-custodial parent
• Support communication with non-custodial parent
• Refrain from speaking disrespectfully about non-custodial parent
• Refrain from sharing too much information regarding the cause of the separation (especially if infidelity was involved)
• Emphasize that non-custodial parent is leaving the marriage, not the child
• Obtain professional help to manage unresolved anger
• Do not take your children hostage – get a therapist instead
What Children Need from Non-Custodial Parents

**Regular contact** (telephone, e-mail, text, snail mail, visits, time together, new rituals, special events)

**Parental Involvement:** (activities, school, sports)

**Parental Reassurance:**

- Love
- Consistency
- Structure
- Limits (age appropriate)
- Role models
- Listening
- Attending
Parental Self-Care: An Essential Ingredient in Change Management

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Support Networks
- Professional Support/Consultation
- Clinical Resources (Individual/Child/Family)
Co-Parenting Tips
Separation/Divorce

Emphasize that the children are not responsible
Discuss change together
Follow your “Parenting Plan”
Be respectful of one another in front of the children
Provide clarity, consistency, and structure
Communicate directly with your spouse, not through children
Keep children out of the middle
Reinforce and reassure
Is Divorce Harmful to Children?

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As compared to what?
Parental Conflict
Post-Divorce Adjustment in Children

- adjust better post divorce process
- “a welcome relief”

Hetherington (1985)
Fostering Hope

Re-Visioning
Life’s Possibilities
Restructuring
Repairing Bridges
Reconciliation
Letting Go

Anne C. Bernstein, Ph.D. 2006
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Thank you for your attention!
Resources

Single Parent Resource Center
National Organization of Single Mothers, Inc.,
National Congress for Fathers and Children

31 28th Street, Suite 200, New York, NY 10016-9998
P.O. Box 68, Midland NC 28107  (212-951-7030)
P.O. Box 17167 Kansas City, MO 66117 (1-800-733-237)

Websites:
Partners Employee Assistance Program
www.thefatherhoodproject.org

1-866-724-4EAP

Programs for divorcing dads rlevy2@partners.org

Dads at a Distance
Moms Over Miles

Other Resources:
Co-parenting After Divorce
Divorce Matters: Coping with stress and change
Creating a Parenting Plan
Children Moving Between Two Households
Children's Books on Divorce and Separation
The Effects of Divorce on Children (Parenting 24/7)
Children and divorce: Helping kids cope with a breakup
Using books to talk with children about divorce

Montana State University (Extension Service)
Iowa State University (Extension Outreach)
University of Minnesota (Extension)
University of Illinois (Extension)
Mayo Clinic
University of Missouri (Extension)

Life-span Adjustment of Children to their Parent’s divorce
Children’s Living Arrangements Following Separation and Divorce: Insights from Empirical and Clinical Research
Re-visioning, Restructuring, and Reconciliation: Clinical Practice with Complex Post-divorce Families

Paul Amato, P. 1994
Kelly, Joan B  Family Process, Vol. 46, No. 1 2006

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Resources

Children’s Books

**It’s not your fault, Ko Ko Bear:** Vicky Lansky (1998) Book Peddlers (ages 3-5 yrs) to be read together

**Dinosaurs Divorce: A guide for changing families:** Laurance Krasney Brosn and Marc Brown (1986) Little Brown & Company (parents and young school-aged children)

**I Don’t Want to Talk About It:** Jeanie Franz Ransom Magination Press, 2002 (ages 4-8 yrs.)

**My Mom and Dad Don’t Live Together Anymore: A Drawing Book for Children of Separated or Divorced Parents:** Judith Aron Rubin (Magination Press, 2002) (4-12 yrs.) allows children to express feelings through art

**How do I feel about” My Parents’ Divorce:** Julia Cole (1997) Copper Beach Books (older school aged)

**Pre-Teen Pressures: Divorce:** Debra Goldentyer (1998) Steck-Vaughn Company (pre-teen readers)

**Two Homes:** Claire Masurel and Kady MacDonald Denton

Parent’s Books

**Reconciling Divergent Persepectives:** Judith Wallerstein Quantitative Family Research, and Children of Divorce Paul Amato in Family Relations, Vol 52 No1 4 pgs. 332-339 October 2003)

**For Better of Worse: Divorce Reconsidered** E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly WW Norton (2002)

**Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust** Nicholas Long and Rex Forehand (2002)

**Dad’s House: Making Two Homes for Your Child:** Isolina Ricci

**Children and Divorce: Helping kids after a break-up** Mayo Clinic (2014)