

Sustaining Parent–Young Child Relationships During and After Separation and Divorce. Or Not

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Subsumed in our title is the premise that staying connected during separation and divorce is beneficial; good for parents and children of any age. Inherent in the circumstances of this form of parenting from a distance, however, is a unique dynamic not shared by the other forms of separation discussed in this issue—the potential for conflict before, during, and after this reconfiguration of family life. We emphasize “potential,” given that thousands of families manage this transition with relatively little conflict. They separate to the benefit of themselves and their children, remaining sensitive to the children’s developmental needs despite the change in family structure. We can only guess at their numbers as they generally pass beneath the radar of most research and behavioral health professionals.

The more widely held view in research literature is that children and families experience divorce as a stressful experience and process. As far as researchers know, the same holds true for separation, though there is scant literature on the effects of separation itself apart from divorce. It is unknown, for example, how many separations eventually conclude in divorce. In the authors’ combined five decades of clinical experience, it seems highly probable that once a physical separation has occurred, cleaving the parental dyad, a threshold is crossed that is rarely re-crossed. The only cases of reversal we can recall anecdotally have involved a skilled clinician’s intervention at just the right time.

Changing Profile of Divorce

A RADICAL CHANGE to family structure highly relevant to any divorce impact discussion is the substantial increase in nonmarital child birth and child rearing in the United States; census data from 1985 and 2006 show a rise from 18% to 38%.

Given that one third of all children born in the U.S. are now starting life outside of marriage, and that such couples rarely marry, it is safe to assume that the majority will eventually separate. The influential Fragile Families Study documented that only 26% of originally cohabitating couples had subsequently married, while 46% had separated. Those not cohabitating had a

72% rate of separation (McLanahan et al., 2003). There are also important ethnic and racial distinctions among nonmarried parent populations; 40% of Latino and 70% of African-American children are born to unmarried women (Parke, 2004). For these reasons, we shall subsume separation into

Abstract

That separation and divorce frequently burden the young child emotionally and developmentally has moved from scientific to common knowledge over the past two decades. Recent cultural changes also moderate or intensify such stress and strain on the parent–child relationship: a divorce rate hovering at about 40% of all marriages, a third of all births occurring outside of marriage, and a steady increase in the involvement of fathers in the lives of their young children. This discussion focuses on the clinical implications of such changes for the vital relationships that comprise the nurturing domain in this stressful transition in family life.



CHILD OUTCOMES OF INVOLVED FATHERING

Behavioral

- Reduced contact with juvenile justice
- Delay in initial sexual activity, reduced teen pregnancy
- Reduced rate of divorce
- Less reliance on aggressive conflict resolution

Educational

- Higher grade completion and income
- Math competence in girls
- Verbal strength in boys and girls (literacy)

Emotional

- Greater problem-solving competence, and stress tolerance
- Greater empathy, moral sensitivity, and reduced gender stereotyping

Source: K. D. Pruett (2000), *Fatherhood*, New York: Broadway,

The majority of families who are separating and divorcing have children less than 6 years old.

divorce for the remainder of this article, given that there is little to no evidence that their effects and outcomes for the family differ.

Because a number of states do not track marital dissolutions for the federal government, caution about national rates of divorce is in order. Using census data from the states that do report, we have seen the rise in rates of divorce that started in the 1960s level off and drop through the 1980s. A significant increase in the age of first marrying couples is the most likely explanation for that decrease in the overall rate of divorce, given that (a) older couples who marry have lower rates of divorce, and (b) postponing marriage lowers the rate of married couples per population measure.

Not unexpectedly, U.S. divorce rates are affected by race, ethnicity, and immigration. Mexican-American women born in the U.S. have a divorce rate comparable to white American women (42%), whereas those born outside the U.S. have a very low rate of divorce. African-Americans have a 55% rate of divorce for complex, still poorly differentiated reasons (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Internationally, increases in divorce are being reported from a wide diversity of countries with varied economic and religious characteristics. Increases in women's educational levels and economic independence, and decay in religious social power are some of the suggested factors underlying this trend.

As we move from a demographic to the clinical profile of divorce, we see substantial variability in men's and women's adjustment and reactions to divorce. Although concluding a stressful marriage can lead to improved

functioning in some families and improved sense of well-being for ex-husbands or ex-wives or both, there is variability in outcomes for the initiators and non-initiators of divorce, with the former adjusting better over time than the latter (Wang & Amato, 2000).

Fathers face many challenges because they are more likely to become noncustodial parents after a divorce. Some drop out of their children's lives, but overall, the frequency of fathers' contact with children postdivorce has shown a steady increase over the past two decades (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010). Such continuity benefits the family as a whole and the children in particular. When fathers remain positively engaged, their children do better in school, feel better about themselves, and have fewer internalizing and externalizing difficulties (K. D. Pruett, 2000; see the box Child Outcomes of Involved Fathering).

So, what is it in the nurturing domain that is so threatened by divorce and that increases a child's risk for developmental derailment? The human infant's survival depends on the ability of parent and child to forge a powerful reciprocal relationship to ameliorate the infant's profound, extended physical vulnerability. The reciprocity between each parent's sensitivity, motivation, and ability to keep the child as safe as possible (nature keeps complete safety illusory) and the child's ability and drive to seek out the parent(s) for protection from danger are what make up the protective components of the nurturing domain. Some would say this particular interaction defines the attachment system, a distinction which we will pursue later in this

discussion. But for now, we'll focus on what factors in divorce affect parental sensitivity, motivation, and ability to keep their children's well-being at the forefront of their concern.

Risk Factors in Divorce

CLINICAL CONCERNS ABOUT the effects of divorce have led researchers to try to codify both relationship and social risk factors for divorce. The obvious factors in the former consist of frequent arguing; domestic violence; prevalence of negative emotion; extramarital sexual contacts; and the lack of emotional support, love, happiness, and trust between partners (Clements, Stanley & Markman, 2004; Gottman & Levenson 2000). A less obvious pattern of risk has been identified by Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) in couples who argue less, exhibit little or no physical aggression, have few thoughts of divorce, and experience only moderate unhappiness and interactivity. Both groups however, share liberal attitudes toward divorce, have higher rates of divorced parents, are in second order or higher marriages, and see positive alternatives to the present failing marriage. The authors conclude that through an aggregation of risk factors, there are two common, but distinct, pathways to divorce: (a) a high level of ongoing unhappiness and conflict within the marriage, and (b) a low level of commitment to marriage itself.

Socio-demographic risks seem to remain fairly stable over time: economic stress (poverty), low levels of educational

achievement, marrying or parenting as a teenager, combining children from present and previous marriages, cohabitating prior to marriage, living in an urban environment, having no—or a different—religious affiliation from one's partner, being in a second or higher order marriage, and being raised without two continuously married parents in the home (Bratter & King, 2008; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004; Teachman, 2002, 2008). Although practitioners and researchers have been compiling reliable data on such factors, it remains to be seen whether this information has helped them be more usefully vigilant on behalf of couples who are in the early stages of accumulating such risk factors. One of the areas that has benefitted from increased scrutiny recently is the effect of divorce on men as fathers.

There is no shortage of data describing the negative effects of divorce on men. Divorced men have lower overall wealth, lower household income, and less health insurance, and they are more likely to smoke, drink heavily, report emotional problems, and be clinically depressed (Bierman, Fazio, & Milkie, 2006; Zhang & Hayward, 2006). All of these factors can impinge directly on the ability, or motivation to stay connected to one's children through and after divorce, especially in the face of conflict with the ex-spouse. And fathers are not alone in their distress. Mothers often experience chronic stress and strain as single parents raising children with fewer emotional and fiduciary supports, making it less likely that she will be able to emotionally support the father's ongoing presence in the child's life, despite any potential benefits she may imagine could accrue to her or her child from such involvement.

That men and women tend to respond to such stresses differently is not news. But such differences may have important differential effects on staying connected—or not—to one's children during and after a divorce. Externalizing behaviors (e.g., drinking heavily) and acting out are more commonly reported by men than women, who are often more preoccupied with emotionally destabilizing internalizing issues such as depression (Barrett, 2003; Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). Balancing these vulnerabilities—which have differential effects on connectivity to one's children—is one last gendered trend in postdivorce behavior; men are more likely than their partners to form a new relationship and are more likely to do so sooner. If such new partnerships are supportive of the father's staying connected to his children, it is far more likely to happen than not, especially if children are born to the subsequent relationship (Wu & Schimmele, 2005).

Discussions about who is damaged more by divorce—men or women—may



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The mother often functions as gatekeeper in either facilitating (gate opening) or inhibiting (gate-closing) father-child relationships.

be politically enlightening, but are not very relevant clinically, given the enormous variability in the ways that couples conduct and end their marriages. The numbers of studies that show gender effects in divorce outcome (Bernard, 1972; Brockmann & Klein, 2004; Hetherington, 2003) are balanced by those that don't (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Bierman et al., 2006). But this fact prevails: Women are more frequent initiators of divorce, and as such are likely to adjust better and sooner to the unmarried life than men, who are less likely to initiate divorce. Researchers remain uncertain whether this adjustment translates into more stable parenting of one's children, or greater interest in—or ability to form—a positive co-parenting collaboration with the new ex-partner parent, a crucial factor in staying connected to one's children while running the divorce gauntlet.

Unlike the custodial mother, noncustodial or moving-out fathers often experience a cluster of emotionally salient losses compressed into a very short period of time; becoming a nonresident parent, losing custody of his offspring, experiencing a marriage's end with the failure and dream death inherent in such events, being ordered to pay child support instead of proudly working to support his family and child's well-being. It is not surprising that rates of depression are higher for divorcing fathers of children less than 5 years old than for men who are childless (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006), leading to alcohol use and loss of a sense of purpose in life. To lose or substantially reduce contact with one's children at such moments can leave the

father-child relationship in a high-stakes limbo, raising risk-factors for both father and child outcomes. Given that fathers are capable of forming deep reciprocal relationships with their young children (K. D. Pruett, 2000), sudden disruptions can devastate them both, as well as their relationship. Most children raised in two-parent families become attached to both parents, turning to each for support and protection (Lamb & Lewis, 2010; K. D. Pruett & M. K. Pruett, 2009)

How Children React and Adjust to Divorce

OF THE MANY factors governing how children in general react to divorce in their families, the most salient moderator is the pre-divorce quality of family life. It is one of the more reliably replicated findings in child-focused divorce research; if the divorce ended a high-conflict marriage, children showed either little change or some improvement across a number of well-being indicators (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). However, if the marriage that ended was low-conflict, the children showed declines in several levels of well-being (Booth & Amato, 2001; Strohschein, 2005).

Tempting as it is to draw causal conclusions from these data, it would not reflect most of the research about child outcomes correctly. While it is true that compared to children of continuously married parents, children with divorced parents tend to have less favorable educational, health, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, the effect sizes remain modest to small, given the wide range of family structures in which children



When fathers remain positively engaged, their children do better in school, feel better about themselves, and have fewer internalizing and externalizing difficulties.

are currently raised. Taken together, one cannot assume that the “typical” divorce has any “typical” impact on “typical” children. Some adjust reasonably well, reasonably quickly, while others are quite disabled by the experience and its aftermath.

There do seem to be some moderating factors between child outcomes and parental divorce that are helpful to consider: (a) positive parenting from custodial parents—typically mothers (Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008), (b) positive parenting from nonresident parents—typically fathers (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007), (c) extent of cooperation and low conflict between the parents (M. K. Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003), (d) the child’s standard of living after the divorce (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), and (e) psychological distress in the resident parent—typically mothers (Tein, Sandler, & Zautra, 2000). Gender, once thought to be a contributing factor with boys being seen as more vulnerable, no longer seems to be salient (Sun & Li, 2002). Racial and ethnic variables have not been sufficiently investigated to draw conclusions to date, and this remains important undone research given that more children of all races are living apart from their biological fathers than in any other epoch of American history (Harris & Ryan, 2004).

Father Loss and Divorce

FATHER ABSENCE REMAINS the leading perception of nonresident fathers, yet the past several decades have seen a trend in the opposite direction. A meta-analysis by Amato, Meyers, and Emery (2009) of four representative national samples of mothers’ reports (who tend to underreport father contact) over three decades, observed the percentage of 6–12-year-olds who saw their nonresident fathers nearly double from 1976–2002. The percentage of no-contact dads decreased from 37% to 29% over the same period.

What factors play into staying connected for fathers? Never being married, significant geographical distance between homes, or the mother remarrying are factors which seem to disconnect fathers from their children, whereas father’s age, religiosity, level of education and income, mother being single, significant time spent living together with the child before separation, and positive cooperation with the mother support connection over time (Aquilino, 2006, Cheadle et al., 2010; King, 2003; Landale & Oropesa, 2001; Sobolewski & King 2005).

The age of the child can also play a significant role in connectivity. Fathers who stay collaboratively involved during the first 3 months of a newborn’s life also tend to be in relationships in which couple distress is less likely to spill over into co-parenting stress over the first year of a baby’s life (McHale, 2007). Fathers who hang in there despite challenging relationships with their partners strengthen the foundation of the now and future co-parenting relationship to their child’s—and their own—benefit. In so doing, a father ameliorates the potentially negative effect of reduced time he may have with his child postdivorce. Nonresident dads have less impact on their children than residential dads because of different levels of involvement and the drift toward providing recreational parenting rather than engaged and responsible parenting. It is the quality, not the quantity, of time that matters most to children’s outcomes—a fact as true for mother–child relationships as for father–child relationships. Finally, quality is manifest through sensitivity, which can in turn be partially a function of time spent getting to know one’s children and their needs, vulnerabilities, quirks, and delights.

And time, it now seems, is on the side of nonresident fathers. Unlike the decay in child–father time predictions by Clarke-Stewart and Brentano (2006), newer research has described flexible patterns of involvement that change over time. Cheadle and his colleagues (2010) have shown in a 14-year data review from the National Youth Longitudinal Study that many men remain highly involved

after divorce. A majority (61%) visited once a week or more, and nearly half visited once a month or more after 14 years. Less than a third changed their frequency of contact over the same 14 years. Finally, stability of contact is strongly linked to the father’s initial levels of visitation, suggesting that those who develop early patterns of involvement are likely to persist in them over time.

The Case of Overnights

RE-STATING OUR PREMISE: staying connected despite threats to an existing relationship resulting from changes in family structure is what makes this form of parenting from a distance unique. In circumstances of high conflict, forensic issues may come into play as parents use—and are used by—litigious processes to resolve conflicts over assets, obligations, child “ownership,” or the child’s “best interests.” In these relatively rare, but high profile struggles, psychological theories are placed in play by one side or the other to persuade the court of the legitimacy of their particular petition regarding custody. Attachment theory, and its clinical specter the “attachment assessment,” are frequently evoked as a convincing theoretical construct to favor one side over the other and thus turns out to be more the problem than the solution. As a research construct and tool, it has no place advising triers of fact about clinical notions of parent–child relatedness or the lack thereof, especially during the highly volatile process of parental separation.

The issue of young children’s overnights with the nonresidential parent—a potentially very effective way of staying connected while parenting young children from a distance—has thrust this misapplication of theory to the fore and remains hotly debated. Overnight care—contrasted with daytime care—allows for the important and intimate component of nighttime rituals (e.g., bathing, bedtime) that engage the parent and child in mutually securing behaviors. Over the past two decades, judges and lawyers have been somewhat oversold by mental health professionals on the predictive value of attachment assessments and as such have begun to ask more of them than science can ethically bear. Legal professionals know, in general, that “attachment is the extent to which a parent provides a secure base from which the child interacts with the rest of the world” and “turns to for support and nurturance in times of danger and stress” (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999, p. 691). It therefore seems a natural extension of this theory to members of the bench and bar that overnight access should be determined—and more often than not, discouraged—in the context of attachment theory.

Kelly and Lamb took a contrarian position in 2000 that overnights should be encouraged, not discouraged, arguing that custody decisions are often based on misreading of attachment literature, specifically regarding one primary attachment figure per child and the paramount significance ascribed to location stability. They instead posit that (a) given children's capacities to develop multiple simultaneous attachments, the relationships with both parents should be the primary focus of parenting plans, and (b) more transitions between maternal and paternal caretaking would best support the child's regular and frequent contact with both parents and reduce the likelihood of father drop out. (Father drop-out has been shown to be significantly reduced when young children have overnights with their fathers [Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992].) With the caution that parental cooperation remains optimal, and individual child temperament and coping capacity substantial considerations, they concluded that the preponderance of psychological knowledge and evidence does not show harm in parent-child relationships from overnights, but rather demonstrates the benefits that accrue from quality relationships with both parents. So, even very young children should have overnights. This view does not illustrate a consensus in the field about this conclusion, and the debate continues a decade and more later.

The need for good empirical studies of such issues became paramount. M. K. Pruett, Ebling, and Insabella obliged in 2004 with a young child overnights study which suggested that solutions to this dilemma would not emanate solely or even primarily from attachment literature, but rather from research examining a wide variety of contexts for child outcomes. Two new determinants were introduced that affected mothers', fathers', and the child's experience of overnights: the consistency of the schedule from week to week, and the number of caretakers in a child's life (e.g., parents, day care, extended family). Keeping schedules consistent and predictable and limiting the number of caretakers with which a young child must regularly cope may turn out to be part of what makes a secure base secure, in addition to the sensitivity and personality traits of the mother. Contexts such as the child's age may turn out to be less important than the nature of interparental conflict. Contexts rife with conflict may witness an intensification of conflict through frequent regular transitions, eroding the potential benefits to the child of more frequent contact.

Solomon and George's (1999) overnights research showed both that insecure attachment in overnights was related to parental conflict and to low attachment

overall and also that maternal insensitivity was related to disorganized attachment. Their take-away: overnights *per se* may not be the critical issue in children's attachment behaviors, but rather the sensitivity with which parents handle the situation. Bottom line, such decisions need to be made family by family, child by child. Applicable, empirically supported mandates remain elusive and unlikely in this complex realm.

The debate continues and so, one hopes, does the empirical research so important to understanding how families navigate these complex issues. Attachment theory has provided a critical and helpful backdrop or scaffolding for examining such issues as young children's overnights. But it cannot offer complete understanding of the salient issues, concentrating as it does on but one dyadic vector in the essentially triadic nurturing domain. So for now, the question of how stressful it is for children to leave their primary attachment figure—typically the mother—to spend an overnight at the father's home is not answerable. Researchers and clinicians are missing the critical variable of what role the child's attachment to the father plays in the overall all secure base of the child's world. The current tools available to assess attachment are not sufficiently applicable to understanding the unique components of the child-father dyad.

Mediators of Staying Connected

WHAT ARE THE factors that trend a family as a whole toward staying connected through the divorce process? The majority of families who are separating and divorcing have children less than 6 years old (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The dynamics of families with young children are widely known to be complex, given the dependency needs of the young and the rapidity with which they are developing (McHale, 2007). A point of contention within most families is the lack of shared labor and responsibility in parenting tasks and competence (K. D. Pruett & M. K. Pruett, 2009). The reality in married and divorced families is that the mother often functions as gatekeeper in either facilitating (gate-opening) or inhibiting (gate-closing) father-child relationships. The former, when positive and facilitative, has been shown to lead to higher levels of cooperation between parents, lower parental conflict and hostility, and increased father involvement (M. K. Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007). Inhibiting gatekeeping after divorce was seen by the mother as payback for her perception of the father's negative treatment of her (not the children) during their marriage. Pruett designed a brief intervention based on these findings which helped mothers become consciously aware of



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Overnight care—contrasted with daytime care—allows for the important and intimate component of nighttime rituals (e.g., bathing, bedtime).

their gatekeeping tendencies and promoted positive gatekeeping among mothers and fathers. Such direct intervention around this particular mediator was associated with, and would seem to facilitate, nonresidential parents and their child staying connected.

The Armageddon of staying connected during and after divorce would be the parental alienation paradigm. As a clinical entity it has generated more heat than light, focused as it is on the rare but highly toxic circumstance of intense parental hatred focused on shaping or distorting the child's relationship with the other parent. While there is considerable agreement on what behavioral strategies parents typically employ to manipulate their children's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings in ways to interfere with their relationship with the other parent, there is little systematic agreement on how to assess or measure it as a diagnostic category or syndrome. It is merely a "cluster of commonly recognized symptoms, with insufficient empirically validated evidence about etiology, prognosis and treatment" (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012, p. 436). Despite these limitations, most clinicians are keenly aware of the profoundly negative effects of such parental behavior upon children of all ages.

Recommendations

WE FOCUS FIRST on the best-practice implications of this broader view.

In Practice

- Divorce prevention through educational emphasis on successful co-parenting

behaviors (i.e., telling parents to not be surprised by—rather prepare for—that dip in marital satisfaction after they become parents—“it happens to everyone”) and techniques that recognize and respect the unique contributions that mothers and fathers make to the well-being and development of their children and their families.

- Better define and clarify the parenting strain that often begins acutely with separation and lasts long after the decree is granted, so that practitioners may make parents aware of the approaches that have been developed to help them steel themselves for its potential influence over their relationship with their children after divorce.
- Gatekeeping must be more widely discussed and addressed in supporting co-parenting after divorce. It is easier and safer to deal with it on the table than under it.
- The use of nonadversarial methods of dispute resolution (e.g., mediation, parenting coordination, and collaborative law) during the course of separation and divorce often increases—or at least preserves—the level of father involvement during this stressful period of parenting, trending toward better outcomes for himself and his children.
- Disseminate practical psycho-educational programs aimed at helping separating and divorcing couples differentiate the romantic (i.e., failed and over) vs. parental (life-long) components to their relationship with the goal of functioning—if not satisfying—co-parenting relationships. Many states implement such programs when parents with children initiate proceedings in family court.

- Staying connected with infants and toddlers. Given the limitations of children’s sense of time, memory, and object constancy, avoid prolonged separations from either parent. This tends to ease separation anxiety through the substantial and formative repertoire of interactions afforded by regular contact, forming a foundation of trust and comfort between parent and child, enhancing sensitivity and overall parenting quality.
- Staying connected with preschoolers. Improved memory and language capacity permit longer separations (3 or 4 days), and many (though not all) preschoolers can handle mid-week overnights without stress or difficulty. A structured, novel week-long vacation with the usual siblings and pets, is most comfortable for this age.

Policy

- Behavioral health professionals that work with young families need to consciously shift their clinical and institutional focus toward father-inclusive practice. This need not come at the expense of maternal engagement, but merely to ensure that the professional’s interface with the family encourages paternal inclusion at every turn, from the posters on the wall, to intake forms, to the training of home visitors. Abusive fathers or partners are the obvious exception.
- The paternal role with the young child is especially vulnerable during divorce and separation, given that the father and child have had relatively little time to develop a relationship that is unique to them. Facilitative, positive gatekeeping should be part of any intervention assisting

the family at this time (e.g., court clinic, parenting after separation programs). It will pay off in reduced incidence of father drift. §

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