

Adult Children and Their Fathers: Relationship Changes 20 Years After Parental Divorce*

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Adult children's reports of relationship changes with their fathers were examined 20 years after their parents' divorce. Data were drawn from interviews with 173 adult children from the Binuclear Family Study about their perceptions of their parents' divorce and its long-term impact. Findings indicated that most adult children felt that their relationships with their fathers had either improved or remained stable over time. Custody did not directly affect reported changes in the quality of their relationship with their fathers; however, increased interparental conflict, early father remarriage, and low father involvement in the early postdivorce years were associated with worsening relationships over time. Those who reported that their relationships with their fathers got worse also reported poorer quality relationships with their stepmothers, stepsiblings, and paternal grandparents.

The relationship between children and their divorced fathers is of great concern to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, as well as to children and their fathers. Although there has been an increase in shared parenting postdivorce and paternal custody, it is still the prevailing situation that most postdivorce fathers consistently spend less time with their children compared with postdivorce mothers.

Studies dealing with the long-term consequences of divorce generally find that parents' divorce during childhood weakens the emotional bonds between offspring and parents in later life (Amato & Booth, 1997; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This is particularly true for adult children's relations with their nonresident fathers (Amato & Booth; Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Also, studies show that divorce is associated with feeling less close to fathers, especially among college-age daughters (Aquilino, 1994; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

Some disagreement exists in the research literature about how children's postdivorce adjustment is affected by relationships with their fathers (see Amato & Gilbreth, 1999, for a meta-analysis of studies on this topic). However, the general view is that children benefit from continued relationships with their fathers, except when fathers are incompetent or abusive.

Although the importance of maintaining father-child relationships postdivorce has received considerable attention (Leite & McKenry, 2002; Braver & Griffin, 2000; Pasley & Minton, 1997; Ahrons & Miller, 1993), little is known about how adult children *feel* about their relationships with their fathers many years after parental divorce. Most of the cross-sectional studies that assess children's relationships with their divorced fathers use college-age or adolescent children, do not control for time since divorce, and do not take into consideration adult children's marital or parental status (Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Fabricius & Hall, 2000). Findings like these cannot be used to draw conclusions about differences between adult children of divorced and non-divorced parents because this period of the family life cycle, the

launching phase, is a stage of shifting parent-adult children relations. Due to maturational effects, adult children, who may be married and parents themselves, are noted to report improved relationships with their parents, irrespective of family structure (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Here, by examining the perceptions of the adult children 20 years after their parents' divorce, we examine several of many factors that impact father-adult child relationship quality 20 years after their parents' divorce.

Fathers and Children Postdivorce

Whether and how fathers maintain relationships with their children is dependent on an interaction of complex factors. Because of this complexity, the literature is confusing and often conflicting regarding factors and mechanisms that affect the relationship between father involvement and child adjustment, especially following parental divorce. Empirical findings suggest a wide array of interrelated, entangled factors that predict father involvement and link father involvement to child adjustment. For example, such factors include father involvement in childrearing during the marriage; the nature of the father's relationship with each child during the marriage; the premarital and postmarital relationship between the parents; the living arrangements for the child during the separation; the amount of time the father spends with his child; the child's age, gender, temperament, and birth order; and the amount of child support paid. Each may alone and cumulatively impact the long-term father-child relationship.

Longitudinal Studies

Although the literature on divorced fathers and their children has grown considerably over the past three decades (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), studies using samples with mothers, fathers, and children over time are limited. Beyond the study reported here, two other exceptions are the Marin County Study by Judith Wallerstein and the Virginia Study by Mavis Hetherington. Both of these longitudinal projects followed both parents and at least one target child per family over three decades. They have made seminal contributions to the study of effects of divorce on families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

The Marin County Project of 60 families began in 1971 and provides an excellent, in-depth clinical study identifying the emotional distress of children and parents (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This study documents the attenuation of the father-child relationship, noting 20 years later that "few divorced fathers were good friends with their adult children . . ." (Wallerstein et al., 2000, p. 139).

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Hetherington began her pioneering studies on father absence in the 1960s. Questions arising from those studies led her to a series of longitudinal studies on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The first of these, the Virginia Longitudinal Study (Hetherington, 1993), sampled 72 divorced and 72 married families, all with a 4-year-old target child. She expanded this sample over the years, and her findings on adult children of divorce were from this study. Hetherington's studies are valued for their use of comparison groups, multiple measures, multiple methods, and multiple samples. Her findings further corroborate the association between divorce and attenuated father-child relations. As adult children, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) reported that one third of the men and one quarter of the women were close with their fathers.

The Binuclear Family Study was based on early findings from the Marin County and Virginia studies; both concluded that the relationship between divorced parents played a major role in determining child adjustment. Ahrons' (1994) goal was to conduct an in-depth study of the complex dynamics of the coparental relationship and family reorganization after divorce. Her sample was drawn from 1979 public divorce court records and resulted in 98 pairs of divorced spouses with varying custody dispositions. These former spouses were interviewed 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce, and new cohabiting partners and stepparents were included in the second and third waves. Early findings revealed an attenuation of the father-child relationship postdivorce and documented that decreased father involvement could be traced directly to the dynamics of the relationship between divorced fathers and their former wives. Specifically, fathers who had somewhat supportive and low-conflict relationships with their former wives were most likely to continue being involved with their child(ren) 5 years postdivorce. This finding was robust and was not affected by remarriage, their age, or the gender of the child (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). Twenty years after the initial interviews, Ahrons returned to her sample, interviewing 173 adult children representing 89 of the original 98 families. Her intent in these interviews was to focus on the adult children and their perceptions of and reactions to their parents' divorce; these data are our focus here.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Longitudinal Studies

These longitudinal studies are diverse in their samples, designs, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks. Each has its strengths and limitations. One common limitation is that the samples were middle-class and White; thus their findings cannot be generalized to other ethnicities or social classes.

A major strength of the Marin County study is also its main weakness. Although it is a valued clinical study, the sampling procedure and the characteristics of the sample are limitations. Families were offered divorce counseling as an incentive for participation. Although children presently in therapy were excluded, two thirds of the parents had histories of moderate to severe psychopathology (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 328). Therefore, this sample is more likely to represent seriously troubled families and cannot be generalized to a broader population of postdivorce families.

The Virginia study also has major strengths and some limitations. Hetherington's findings are broad-based and comprehensive; as such, they also can be misleading. Although her cumulative sample size at the 20-year assessment of 900 youth

distributed among nondivorced, divorced, and remarried families is large, the original sample from newly divorced families that were followed over time included only 61 adult children.

Strengths of Ahrons' study are the random sampling procedure, the inclusion of varied legal and informal custody arrangements, the in-depth focus on the divorced parents' relationship, and the development of scales that have been replicated (Ahrons, 1994, 2001). Limitations include the fact that children were interviewed only once, 20 years postdivorce, and these reports are retrospective.

Worth noting, because of how they are reflected in reports of the findings from these three studies, are the researchers' underlying assumptions that formulated their conceptualizations of divorce. The Marin County Study used a pathological model of divorce, and the findings reflect that model through emphasis on loss, abandonment, distress, and dysfunction. The Virginia Study used a risk and resilience model, although still relying on a deficit perspective by employing a comparison group of "normals" (nondivorced, intact, first-marriage families). Findings also show distress; yet, the focus is more on resilience. In contrast, the Binuclear Family Study assumed a normative model of divorce and used within-group comparisons of divorced families to assess differentiating characteristics that result in diverse outcomes.

What is striking about these studies, given the many differences between them, is that the conclusions are more similar than different. For example, on global outcome measures, each concludes that the immediate distress surrounding parental separation fades with time and that the great majority of adult children (75–80%) are functioning as healthy adults. In addition, all report that divorce presents certain risks, is an emotionally stressful and complex transition for families, and continues to affect children into adulthood. The differences that emerge are imbedded in the interpretations of the findings, such that findings are interpreted to reflect the underlying conceptualizations of the researcher.

Complexity of Coparenting Postdivorce

During divorce, the nuclear family reorganizes to establish two households, maternal and paternal. These two interrelated households, or nuclei of the child's family of orientation, represent a single family system that is binuclear in nature (Ahrons, 1979, 1980a). In the nuclear family, the spousal and parental subsystems govern the functioning of the family. Following divorce, parents face the complex and paradoxical task of dissolving their roles as spouses while maintaining their interdependent roles as parents. Each needs to establish an independent relationship with dependent children, which requires continued interaction with the other parent. Although the tasks of parenting continue, it is necessary for parents to establish new arrangements to successfully complete these tasks as a binuclear family (see Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987, for an extended discussion of this theoretical perspective).

Nonresident fathers often depend on the good will of their former wives when it comes to the time and activities they share with their children (Braver & Griffin, 2000). Even when the divorce decree is flexible and gives the father the rights of reasonable visitation, custodial mothers define and control the terms of "reasonable" visitation. When parents form a cooperative relationship, they are less likely to engage in major power struggles over the children (Ahrons, 1994). However, when the coparental relationship is unsupportive and fraught with conflict

and power struggles, nonresident fathers often withdraw from their children as a way to avoid conflicts with their former wives (Ahrons, 1983, 1994, 1999; Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Lamb, 1999). Importantly, when there is attenuation of the father-child relationship, it may be related more to the father's relationship with the child's mother and her respect for his parenting rights and responsibilities, rather than to his love and care for his child.

Present Study

We begin here with the views of adult children 20 years after parental divorce regarding changes in their relationship with their fathers. Our purpose is to identify patterns among those who felt their relationships worsened after the divorce compared with those who felt their relationships improved or remained unchanged. We used the interview data with divorced parents from the first three waves of the Binuclear Family Study to assess how father involvement and coparental relationship quality changed in the first 5 years after divorce and how it affected the relationships of adult children with their fathers. We also explore major postdivorce family transitions (e.g., remarriage, the addition of stepkin) to determine how they affect and are affected by relationship changes with fathers.

Method

Sample

Data were drawn from the Binuclear Family Study, a longitudinal study that has followed the lives of divorced families for 20 years. The study began in 1979 with interviews of 98 pairs of former spouses, all of whom had at least one minor child, and who were randomly selected from the public divorce records in Dane County, WI. Interviews with both parents were conducted at 1, 3, and 5 years after the legal divorce. The response rate at 5 years was 90%.

The parent sample was predominantly White and middle class. At the first interview, the majority of the parents were in their mid-30s. Their marriages had lasted, on average, 10 years, and the families averaged 2 children (range was 1–5 children). At the time of the divorce, 20% of the children were preschool age, 50% were elementary school age, and 30% were adolescents. Seventy-five percent of the mothers were employed, and a little over half of the fathers and 38% of the mothers had college degrees.

The data used here were collected from the adult children of the former spouses during interviews conducted in 1999/2000, 20 years after the first interviews. Most of the adult children were located through computer search engines, online telephone books, and sibling contacts; for a few we contacted their parents for information. Our efforts yielded an eligible and locatable sample of 193 adult children out of a total possible of 204. Of the remaining 11 individuals, 1 was ineligible because her parents had remarried one another, 3 were disabled, 3 had died, 1 was hospitalized for addiction, and 3 were unlocatable. Out of the 193 locatable adult children, interviews were completed with 173 of them (90% response rate). These 173 adult children represented 89 of the original 98 families.

At the time of their interviews, the respondents (84 women and 89 men) ranged in age from 21 to 52 ($M = 31.31$, $SD = 6.31$). Although the initial criterion for parent participation was that the parents had a minor child, all adult children in the family

were interviewed, so 10 participants were over 18 at the time of the divorce. Most of the adult children were well-educated: 23% had completed postgraduate training or professional school, 33% had completed college, 31% had completed some postsecondary training, 10% had received their high school diplomas, and 3% had completed their education before receiving their high school diplomas.

The majority (85%) of these adult children were employed; 32% were professional, technical, or kindred workers. Fifty-two percent ($n = 90$) of them reported being either currently or previously married: 29% ($n = 26$) had divorced, and of those 26, 17 remained unmarried. At the time of the study, 42% were married. Of those 58% who reported being unmarried, slightly over half said that they were in a serious relationship, and half of these said they were cohabiting. Of the 68 who were parents, almost all of them ($n = 63$) had at least one biological child, and five reported having adopted children or stepchildren. The mean age marking their transition to parenthood was 27 (range was 18–37 years).

Data Collection

Although the earlier interviews with parents were completed in person, doctoral students with clinical training conducted the interviews with the adult children via telephone. Telephone interviews are noted to be a reliable and valid method (Tausig & Freeman, 1988). One of the strengths of this study is that the interviews were not “cold” interviews. From the parent interviews, extensive genograms and a wealth of information about subjects' families was available. The ability to talk about members of the participants' families by name piqued their interest and allowed the interviewers to establish rapport quickly with participants. Interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded.

The interviews were semistructured, prompting for both quantitative and qualitative responses. Consistent with qualitative methodology, during these portions of the interview, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own words with as much elaboration as they wished; interviewers probed where indicated. The interview schedule was organized to gather information about family processes over time—from the years preceding the divorce to the present—with particular attention paid to the time of parental divorce and (if relevant) subsequent remarriages. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours, focusing on the ways in which parental divorce altered, expanded, damaged, and/or strengthened family relationships over time.

Recent research has found that children's retrospective reports are quite stable and that such reports are reasonably accurate (see review by Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993). Our interest was in how the adult children perceived and attached meaning to the events surrounding parental divorce, rather than whether or not such perceptions represented some absolute truth. Our intent was not to identify a consistent set of objective facts about the participant's parents' divorce, but rather to identify the consequences of the divorce as experienced by the offspring and to understand the process by which he or she came to this experience. We wanted to hear the voices of adult children as they reflected upon the effects of their parents' divorces 20 years ago. Toward this goal, we addressed four major questions:

1. How did their relationships with their parents change 20 years postdivorce?

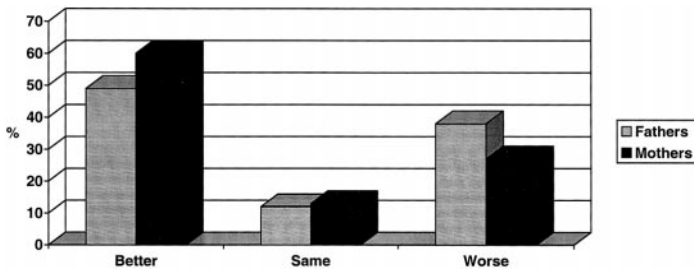


Figure 1. Adult children's reports of change in parent-child relationship quality postdivorce.

2. What factors contributed to changes in their relationships with their fathers?
3. Are changes in adult children's relationships with their fathers related to changes in postdivorce relationships with other family members?
4. Are adult children's reports of changes in their relationships with their fathers related to their perceptions of how they have been affected by the divorce?

Findings

How did children's relationships with their parents change postdivorce? We asked adult children about their relationships with their parents 20 years postdivorce. Each was asked, "On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being much better and 10 being much worse, and 5 or 6 being about the same, how would you rate your relationship with your father since the divorce?" Based on their responses, adult children were classified into one of three groups: those who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got better* ($n = 81$; 49%), *stayed the same* ($n = 20$; 12%), or *got worse* ($n = 63$; 38%). They also responded to the same question regarding their perceptions of change in relationship quality with their mothers postdivorce, resulting again in three groups: those who reported that their relationships with their mothers *got better* ($n = 97$; 60%), *stayed the same* ($n = 22$; 13%), and *got worse* ($n = 43$; 27%).

These categories, describing change in relationship quality with parents, were used in subsequent analyses to capture adult children's perceptions of such change. The limitation of this measure is important to note. The categories measure only a single perspective (the adult child's), and there was no measure of the parent-child relationship at the time of the divorce.

As shown in Figure 1, participants most commonly reported that their relationships with their mothers and their fathers *got better* (60% and 49%, respectively). Research on intergenerational relationships shows that adult children report improvement in relationship quality as they reach adulthood (e.g., Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994). Thus it is possible that this finding can be attributed to the maturation of our participants, rather than to a positive experience with parental divorce. Although their reports of improvement in parent-child relationship quality in young adulthood cannot be attributed specifically to divorce, the fact that divorce did not appear to interfere with the positive maturational impact is an important finding.

Inspection of frequencies indicated that more adult children reported that their relationships with their mothers *got better* (60%) than reported the same regarding their relationships with their fathers (49%). In contrast, frequency data indicated that a

greater proportion of them reported that father-child relations *got worse* (38%) than those who reported the same for their mothers (27%). Two 2 (sex) \times 3 (relationship change group) χ^2 analyses revealed that sex was unrelated to adult children's change in relationship quality with mothers, $\chi^2(2, N = 162) = .82, ns$, and fathers, $\chi^2(2, N = 164) = 3.99, ns$. Likewise, two 4 (age group) \times 3 (relationship change group) χ^2 analyses revealed that age at time of parental divorce was unrelated to how their relationships with their mothers, $\chi^2(8, N = 162) = 10.50, ns$, and fathers, $\chi^2(8, N = 164) = 9.11, ns$, changed or remained the same.

Voices of the Adult Children

To further understand the impact of divorce on adult children's relationships with their fathers, we asked them to talk more specifically about the ways they thought the divorce had affected their relationships with their parents. Analysis of their responses revealed several patterns. Two patterns emerged for those offspring who noted improvement in the relationship: (a) those who felt it was divorce-related, and (b) those who felt that it was due to both their own and their fathers' maturation. Comments indicated that some were able to develop new ways of relating with their fathers. Others recalled that their fathers became more involved in parenting after the divorce, which gave children an opportunity to be involved with their fathers in the same ways they were traditionally involved with their mothers:

It's better. I think before the divorce my dad really didn't have much to do with raising my sister and I—though he didn't consciously do this. I think that before, the marriage turned him off from helping my mom, so he wasn't really into raising my sister and I when they were still married. But afterwards living with my mom and visiting my dad each week helped to establish an understanding and a consistency in his involvement with us. So, I think I was able to get to know him more—and because we saw him maybe one fourth as much as we saw my mom meant that it took four times as long to really get to the same spot with him as we were with my mom, but still it is much better now than it was, say, 10 years ago. (Man, age 28)

He actually spent more time with us after they were divorced, there was a regular time at least once or twice a month where it was a scheduled thing. He concentrated on us more than he had when they were together. (Woman, age 30)

Others noted that the divorce more clearly delineated their relationships with their mothers and their fathers, facilitating their getting to know their fathers as individuals:

In a way I think it got better because I thought of him more separate from my mother. Before the divorce, it was like these are my parents, and after the divorce it's here's my mom, here's my dad . . . I think there was more of a desire to understand what he was going through. (Woman, age 36)

Things are much better. It [the divorce] has made my dad love me and my brother even more. It has made us all closer. We have each other and we would never let anything get in the way of that—even though he is married and has other children too, it's just a very special bond that my dad has shown me and my brother. (Woman, age 32)

Still others recognized that time and maturation fostered a construction of the father-child relationship based on adult prin-

principles of communication, mutuality, and equality, rather than the traditional hierarchical parent-child relationships of childhood.

I think you kind of have to divide it into two stages: Through high school I would have said I would give it like a 7, but since then I would give it a 3. So, over time it has gotten much better. Our relationship was pretty distant at first—after the divorce—but now he has become, or we have been able to communicate more. It is certainly not a personality thing with him because I see how he plays with his grandson, so I don't think it was that he didn't like kids, I just think that there was some tension. (Man, age 29)

Overall, their responses revealed that changes in their father's parenting, the passage of time, and their own maturation enhanced father-child relationship quality. Also, similar to results from the quantitative findings, this shift toward less tense and more mutual relationships is somewhat attributable to development and maturation.

Relationships That Got Worse

Despite the finding that most of the young adults perceived that their relationships with their fathers improved postdivorce, many ($n = 63$) of them reported that this relationship got worse. Inspection of the extreme cases ($n = 23$) revealed that 75% of those who reported that their relationships deteriorated substantially (either 9 or 10 on the scale) were daughters. Amato and Sobolewski (2001) noted a similar finding that the father-daughter relationship was more impacted by divorce than the father-son relationship. Father-daughter relations may be especially susceptible to the type of relationship deterioration that results in dissolution.

Of those who felt that the relationship had deteriorated, it often was perceived that the distancing was due to the remarriage of their fathers.

Before he got remarried there were times when I would love to go over to his house. My relationship with him changed after he got remarried, and he sold his house and moved with my stepmother into her house. And he had to get rid of all of our toys or whatever, it changed then because of the fact that I know we thought that he cared more about her and her kids than he did about us. That's not necessarily how it was, but that's how we perceived it . . . her kids got more than what we ever did. (Woman, age 27)

When my father remarried, he broke ties. . . . We were treated as just second best. (Man, age 27)

Others could not disentangle divorce-related changes and fathers' personalities as the roots of deterioration.

I disliked him even more. I mean I love him, but I also dislike him. He made us feel like a burden. Maybe he didn't make us, but I felt like a burden. . . . He didn't have time for me. He didn't want me around, and as a child that's a terrible thing to feel. (Woman, age 29)

We started out real close and then he got involved with other people and as the relationships went on. . . . I got less and less important. . . . That is hard to deal with because he is still my dad, like he was writing us off. He doesn't really make an effort to stay in contact with us. (Woman, age 29)

In general, adult children's reflections about changes in their relationships with their fathers illustrated that they had complex

understandings of what had changed between them postdivorce. According to them, both the parental divorce and subsequent changes and transitions (i.e., parents' dating and remarriage) affected the father-child relationship. Although relationships tended to mend, a subset reported that their relationships with their fathers got worse.

Links Between Past and Current Relationships

When adult children were asked to recall whether they felt closer to their mothers or their fathers before the divorce, the majority reported that they felt closest to their mothers ($n = 102$). Many fewer reported feeling closest to their fathers predivorce ($n = 24$). When asked, "Which parent—and this may be a stepparent—are you closest with today?" the majority named their mothers ($n = 105$), and only 24 named their fathers. When we cross-tabulated these before and after the divorce, results showed that 40% reported being closest to their mothers at both times ($n = 67$ of 169 respondents), whereas only 4% reported being closest with their fathers ($n = 6$). These findings are consistent with research on intergenerational relationships. In general, children maintain closer relationships with their mothers than with their fathers, both in childhood and adulthood (Cooney, 1994; Lawton et al., 1994; Booth & Amato, 1994), and this pattern continues postdivorce.

Speaking With, Living Close to, and Spending Holidays With Fathers

To examine how adult children's perceptions of changes in the quality of their relationships with their fathers were related to their current ties to him, a series of analyses investigated associations between the frequency of telephone contact, geographical proximity, and whether they spent holidays together. The three groups of adult children (*got better*, *got worse*, and *stayed the same*) were compared on these indicators.

Telephone contact. Respondents were asked to indicate on an 8-point scale how often they had spoken with their fathers via telephone in the past year, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 8 (*daily*). Results from a 3 (group) \times 2 (sex) analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that those who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got worse* talked with their fathers less often ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.96$) than did those who reported that their relationship *stayed the same* ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.41$) or *got better* ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.50$), $F(2, 155) = 29.27$, $p < .0001$. Although those who reported that these relationships *got better* or *stayed the same* also reported that they talked to their fathers about once every 2 weeks, those who reported that their relationships *got worse* also reported that they spoke to their fathers, on average, a few times a year. Sex of the adult child was unrelated to the frequency of phone contact.

The great majority (98%) of the adult children reported that they had at least some contact with their fathers by telephone. Only eight reported that they never spoke to their fathers, and seven reported that they spoke with him only once a year. Of this group of 15 who *rarely* or *never* spoke with him, all but one reported that their relationships deteriorated postdivorce. In contrast, there was only one respondent who reported that he *never* spoke to his mother, and only three reported that they only spoke to their mothers *once a year*; three of these four said that their relationships with their mothers had declined postdivorce.

Geographical proximity. Regarding proximity, a bimodal distribution resulted; most commonly, adult children lived either

within 5–25 miles ($n = 43$) or more than 500 miles away ($n = 38$). Only 3 adult children lived with their fathers; 18 lived within 5 miles, 15 lived within 26–50 miles, 17 lived within 51–150 miles, and 22 lived within 151–500 miles. (Note that the n was 158 for this analysis because 15 of the fathers had died.) Results from a 3 (group) \times 2 (sex) ANOVA indicated no group differences in geographical proximity between the three groups, nor between the sexes.

Holiday visits. Adult children were asked “Did the celebration of holidays change at all after your parents divorced?” A majority of them ($n = 113$, 73%) reported that holidays had changed as a result of the divorce: 53% reported that the holidays *got worse*, 24% said they *got better*, and 23% said the changes were *neither better nor worse*. Adult children were asked specifically, “How did holidays with your father change?” Of those who reported change, 62% said that holidays *got worse*, whereas 19% said that they were *both better and worse*, and only 14% said that they became better. Results from a 3 (group) \times 2 (sex) ANOVA showed no group differences in their perceptions of relationship changes with their fathers postdivorce, $F(2, 106) = 1.31$, $p < .27$. Again, sex of the adult child was unrelated to whether they recalled holidays with their fathers getting better or worse.

In sum, the majority of adult children reported that their relationships with their fathers and mothers improved as they became adults and transitioned to later stages of the family life cycle. However, relationships with fathers fared worse over time in that a greater percentage of adult children reported that their relationships *got worse* compared with relationships with their mothers. The findings suggest that relationship deterioration with fathers may be more reactive, reaching greater extremes and greater incidence of fracture, which, in turn, often resulted in less communication during the adult years.

What Factors Contribute to Changes in the Relationship Between Children and Their Fathers Over Time?

Several analyses were conducted to investigate relationships between factors identified in the literature as related to father-child relationship quality and changes in father-child relationships postdivorce. Our findings describe how postdivorce factors are related to changes in the father-child relationship during the 20 years after parental divorce.

Custody. We tested whether custody was related to adult children’s reports of relationship change with their fathers. Of the 89 families represented here, custody in 1979 was distributed as follows: 26 joint custody (48 adult children), 49 mother custody (91 adult children), 8 father custody (16 adult children), and 6 split custody (18 adult children).

We hypothesized that adult children who experienced father custody would likely report that their relationships with their fathers *stayed the same* or *got better* as a function of coresidence. A 3 (group) \times 4 (custody) χ^2 analysis indicated that there were no differences in adult children’s reports of change in relationship quality with their fathers as a function of the initial custody arrangement, $\chi^2(6, N = 164) = 6.32$, *ns*. Inspection of the extreme cases (23 reported that their relationships with their fathers deteriorated substantially, rated a 9 or 10) further supported the conclusion that custody itself was unrelated to their reports of change in relationship quality with fathers. Those reporting that

their relationships got significantly worse were equally distributed across all custody groups.

This lack of association between custody and changes in relationships with fathers surprised us. Hypothesizing that it may be the informal changes in living arrangements and legal changes over time that account for this, we examined children’s reports of these changes. It is important to note that adult children reported both changes in living arrangement and custody as custody changes, but these did not always mean that legal custody status changed.

Over half ($n = 98$, 57%) of the adult children reported that their custody or living arrangement changed at least once during the 20 years. We created four categories of change based on two criteria: original custody and change in custody. If mother custody was awarded at the time of the divorce and the adult child reported no changes in custody, then the respondent’s custody status was coded *mother custody*. If joint custody was assigned at divorce, and the respondent reported that it changed to mother custody at some point, they also were coded *mother custody*. Thus we took into account the fact that a number of children established informal custody arrangements that differed from the original legal arrangements. All were assigned to one of four categories:

1. Father custody always or change to father custody ($n = 32$).
2. Mother custody always or change to mother custody ($n = 58$).
3. Joint custody always or change to joint custody ($n = 38$).
4. Other: all respondents who reported that they became independent of both parents postdivorce (i.e., got married, left home for college; $n = 40$).

As was true in regard to custody arrangement at time of divorce, there was no significant association between the categories of change in custody and changes in relationship with fathers. Moreover, extreme cases (those who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got worse* postdivorce) remained evenly distributed across custody arrangements, even when custody change was considered.

These findings suggest no direct association between custody and adult children’s reports of change in relationship quality with fathers. Similar proportions of adult children who experienced mother, father, and joint custody reported that their relationships with their fathers improved postdivorce. It is important to note that this finding does not assess how close the children were with their fathers in an absolute sense, but whether children noted a change in relationship quality over the years. This finding does suggest, however, that coresidence with fathers, as in joint- and father-custody cases, does not ensure quality in the father-child relationship over time.

Father involvement. We hypothesized that if fathers were more involved in parenting during the first 5 years after the divorce, their offspring would report that their relationships were better or had remained the same. We used the Father Involvement Scale, a 5-point Likert-type scale that measures frequency of involvement across eight parental activities (e.g., disciplining, celebrating holidays, discussing children’s problems, attending church and school activities; Ahrons, 1983). The scale had high internal reliability (α) in the first three waves of data collection (mothers: .92, .95, .95; fathers: .92, .93, .95, respectively; Ahrons & Miller, 1993). Higher scores indicate greater father involvement.

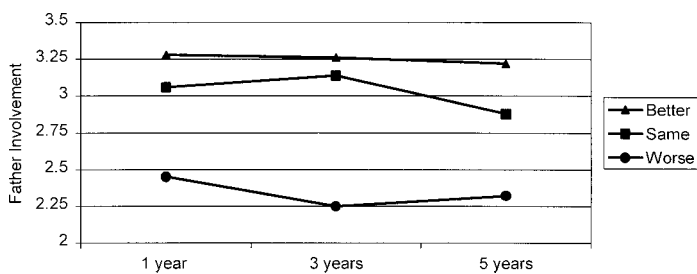


Figure 2. Associations between father involvement at 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce and change in relationship quality with father.

Note: There were 104 adult children whose mothers reported on noncustodial father involvement across all three waves of coparent interviews 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce. Father involvement was assessed using mothers' reports on the Father Involvement Scale previously developed for this study. The same significant findings emerged when father reports of father involvement were used, but sample size was reduced due to fewer father respondents.

We found a positive association between adult children's reports of relationship changes with their father and early postdivorce father involvement (see Figure 2). Those reporting the relationships *got worse* were more likely to have less involved fathers at 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce, $F(2, 102) = 8.29, p < .0001$. There were no differences in this pattern for daughters and sons. Those children whose relationships *got better* or *stayed the same* benefited from significantly more father involvement during the first 5 years postdivorce, whereas low father involvement was associated with reports that their relationships with their fathers *got worse*.

Interparental conflict. Using the Quality of Coparental Communication Scale (Ahrons, 1981), the coparental relationship was measured using 10 items that tap the extent to which divorced couples report conflict (e.g., "arguing when discussing the children," "having an underlying atmosphere of hostility and tension") and support (e.g., "your former spouse is a resource to you in raising children," "your former spouse is supportive of your parenting needs"). Both mothers and fathers reported such interactions at 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce on a 5-point Likert-type scale; higher scores indicate better coparental relationship quality (i.e., less conflict and greater support). Alpha reliabilities were high across all waves for mothers (.87, .87, .87) and fathers (.86, .85, .86).

We investigated whether coparental relationship quality at each data collection was associated with adult children's reports of changes in their relationships with their fathers after the divorce. We were surprised to find no significant differences in coparental relationship quality between those adult children who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got better*, *stayed the same*, and *got worse*. However, when we examined changes in the levels of coparental relationship quality over the first 5 years, we found that adult children who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got better* or *stayed the same* had parents who reported increases in coparental relationship quality. In contrast, we found that those who reported their relationships *got worse* had parents who reported stagnant or decreasing levels of coparental relationship quality between 1 and 5 years postdivorce, $F(2, 126) = 3.40, p < .05$ (see Figure 3). The association held true for both sons and daughters in the same direction.

When considered together, the findings linking fathers' early involvement and interparental conflict to adult children's reports of relationships with their fathers helps build a more complex

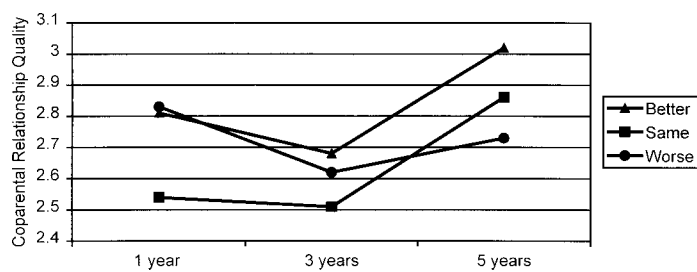


Figure 3. Associations between coparental relationship quality at 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce and change in relationship quality with father.

Note: Coparental relationship quality was computed for 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce by combining mother and father reports of coparental relationship quality. When analyses use mothers' and fathers' reports separately, the same significant patterns emerge.

picture of how postdivorce factors influence these relationships. Based on findings from earlier analyses of the parent data, fathers were more likely to reduce their involvement with their children in the early years after the divorce when interparental support was minimal or nonexistent and interparental conflict was high (Ahrons & Miller, 1993).

Our current analyses indicate an association between better coparental relations over time and respondents' reports of the father-child relationship getting better or staying the same. Those who reported that the relationship *stayed the same* or *got better* were in families in which former spouses were able to reduce conflict and increase support over time. Thus, these findings show evidence for the long-term implications of the coparental relationship quality on father-child relationships.

Remarriage. Twenty years after their parents' divorces, most of the adult children had experienced the remarriage of at least one of their parents. Of the 89 families in this analysis, at least one remarriage occurred in 95% of them; 72% ($n = 64$) of the mothers and 87% ($n = 77$) of the fathers had remarried at least one time. In 64% ($n = 56$) of the families, both parents had remarried.

Remarriage represents another change in the divorced family's reorganization, and children vary in their responses to this change. When asked whether the divorce or a parent's remarriage was more difficult, more than half of the adult children reported that the divorce was most difficult, and approximately one third of them remembered the remarriage of one or more parents as more difficult than the divorce. Of those who experienced the remarriage of both of their parents, two thirds reported that their father's remarriage was more difficult than their mother's.

In addition to asking about how adult children felt about the remarriages in general, we asked them about the specific feelings they had about each of their parents' remarriages. Although they remembered feeling similar levels of negative and neutral feelings about their mothers' and fathers' remarriages, they also remembered having more positive feelings about their mothers' remarriages (see Table 1).

The adult children's reports of the impact of their father's remarriage were associated with their reports of changes in father-child relationship quality. Specifically, those who reported that their father's remarriage had a positive impact on their lives were more likely to report that these relationships got better postdivorce compared with those who reported that their father's remarriage had a neutral or negative impact on their lives, $F(2, 127) = 3.26, p < .05$. There was no association between re-

Table 1
Adult Children's Feelings About Mothers' and Fathers' Remarriages

Feelings	Mothers' Remarriages (<i>n</i> = 109)		Fathers' Remarriages (<i>n</i> = 152)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Negative	22	20	39	26
Angry or aggressive				
Depressed or sad				
Felt shame or stigma				
Jealousy				
Uncertainty or confused				
Devastated				
Upset, not happy, resentful, didn't like it				
Positive	57	51	49	32
Happy				
Relieved				
Somewhat happy, probably for the better				
Neutral	23	21	44	29
Indifference, that is just the way it was				
Shock or surprise				
Didn't affect me much				
Not surprised				

Note: Respondents' endorsements are not exclusive, each adult child may have responded yes in each category. Also, columns do not equal total *n* for the column, because a significant number of adult children reported that they were *too young to remember* or *other*.

spondent's reports of the effect of their mothers' remarriages and their reports of changes in the mother-child relationship postdivorce, $F(2, 88) = .82, ns$.

In addition to remarriage in general, we were interested in seeing whether the timing of parents' remarriages affected changes in the father-child relationship. In this sample, 24%, 60%, and 70% of the fathers had remarried at 1, 3, and 5 years. Rates of fathers' remarriages were higher than mothers' (12%, 38%, and 49%, respectively).

In this analysis, we wanted to know whether early remarriage, specifically, was related to changes in respondents' relationships with their fathers. Indeed, a disproportionately high number of those reporting that this relationship got worse postdivorce had experienced their father's remarriage within 1 year postdivorce, $\chi^2(2, N = 164) = 17.02, p < .0001$. This same finding did not hold for mothers; there was no association between mothers' early remarriage and mother-child relationships getting worse.

Are Adult Children's Reports of Changes in Their Relationship With Their Father Related to Their Reports of Relationship Changes With Other Family Members?

When a family expands through remarriages, it also becomes more complex with the addition of step- and half-siblings. Moreover, remarriages with stepchildren, stepparents-in-law, and step-relatives generally represent a greater demand on both the parents' and the children's time for visits and holidays. Almost three quarters of the adult children ($n = 139$) gained at least one stepsibling when one or both parents remarried, and about one third of them ($n = 42$) lived together some time during their childhood.

New children also were born in 38% ($n = 32$) of the remarriages; in terms of the number of adult children who gained

half-siblings, 37% ($n = 63$) gained at least one through remarriage, and 69% ($n = 44$) of them lived together sometime during childhood or adolescence. Twenty-four (14%) of the respondents had only half-siblings, and 39 (23%) had both half and stepsiblings. We were interested in knowing whether adult children's reports of changes in their relationships with their fathers were related to their reports of their current relationship quality with their stepmothers, stepsiblings, and paternal grandparents.

Stepmothers. Respondents who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got worse* postdivorce reported poorer relationship quality with their stepmothers ($M = 1.85, SD = .91$) than those whose relationships *got better* ($M = 2.39, SD = .82$) or *stayed the same* ($M = 2.47, SD = .80$), $F(2, 132) = 6.14, p < .005$. In contrast, there were no group differences between these groups in their reports of relationship quality with their stepfathers.

Stepsiblings. Most ($n = 139$) respondents reported on the quality of their relationships with their stepsiblings. Consistent with the findings on their stepmother relationships, those who said that their relationships with their fathers *got worse* reported lower levels of relationship quality with their stepsiblings ($M = 2.21, SD = .78$) than those who said these relationships *got better*, ($M = 2.59, SD = .66$), $F(2, 133) = 4.95, p < .01$. Thus, poorer relationships with stepmothers and stepsiblings were associated with adult children's reports of negative changes in their relationships with their fathers.

Paternal grandparents. Last, we tested the association between adult children's changes in relationship quality with fathers postdivorce and their relationship quality with their paternal grandparents. Respondents who reported that their relationships with their fathers *got worse* also reported poor relationship quality with paternal grandparents ($M = 1.65, SD = .92$) than those reporting that their relationships with their fathers *got better* ($M = 2.35, SD = .95$) or *stayed the same* ($M = 2.75, SD = .70$), $F(2, 91) = 7.14, p < .001$.

In sum, when relationships with fathers worsen over time, adult children also report poorer current relationships with their father's kin—his second wife, his stepchildren, and his parents. This appears to be most significant when the father remarried shortly after divorce.

Are Adult Children's Reports of Changes in Postdivorce Relationship Quality With Their Fathers Related to Their Overall Perceptions of How the Divorce Impacted Them?

Adult children were asked whether they believed that they were better or worse off as a result of the divorce. The majority (59%) said that they were better off, whereas only 12% said that they were worse off. Other adult children (12%) said they were neither better nor worse or did not know (10%).

A comparison between those who reported being better off and those who were worse off showed that those who were worse off also perceived that their relationships with their fathers had gotten worse, $\chi^2(4, N = 119) = 5.47, p = .07$. Although not a large group (11 of 20), this number is almost double that of adult children who said that they were worse off and their relationships with their fathers improved ($n = 6$). (Three reported that their relationship with their father had stayed the same.)

Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, our findings show that the majority of adult children felt their relationships with their fathers improved over the 20 years since their parents' divorce. In contrast to most of the literature that calls attention to the weakening bond between fathers and their children, 62% of these adult children reported that relationships either improved or stayed the same. Although relationships with parents generally improve as children mature and transition to adulthood, that the divorce did not interfere with this positive trend is an important finding.

However, it is also important to note that this is a study of White, middle-class American families, a population comparable to those of other widely cited longitudinal studies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Given this limitation—the lack of racial, ethnic, and social class diversity—we make no attempt to generalize our findings to the broader population. Instead, our purpose is to make within-group comparisons of postdivorce families.

That so many of these adult children remained involved with their fathers may well be related to the social class of our respondents. The frequently cited high incidence of father-absent families due to divorce often is linked to social class, particularly to families in poverty (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Although it appears that we found a higher incidence of children who reported improved relationships than noted in other studies (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; King, 2002; Wallerstein et al., 2000), the differences may be more related to measurement and interpretation. That is, the specific questions asked; the parameters of the relationships measured; and whether mothers', fathers', and children's responses were used vary across studies.

Associated with changes in adult children's postdivorce relationships with their fathers is the quality of the relationship between parents after divorce. The ability of coparents to establish a supportive, low-conflict parental unit outside of marriage reverberates throughout the family even some 20 years later. Considering families from a life course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993), we know that although roles may change, the lives of adult children and their parents continue to be interdependent. Our finding that the quality of the coparental relationship affects fathers' but not mothers' relationships with children is consistent with life course research that shows that the bonds between mothers and children appear to be stronger over time (Bengtson et al., 2002). Further, consistent with family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), the continued effect of the coparental relationship on children reinforces the notion that the parental subsystem in married families exerts a powerful influence. Thus, this study shows that the parental subsystem continues to exert a strong influence on relationships in the binuclear family after marital disruption.

That changes in adult children's relationships with their fathers were related to changes in the relationship between their parents is a significant finding of this study. The primary picture that emerges is that when interparental conflict decreases and support increases between parents postdivorce, adult children report that their relationships with their fathers either improve or remain stable. When the coparental relationship does not improve or gets worse, it jeopardizes future father-child relationships. Although other important factors (i.e., mother's anger with father, her view of his right to parent, her dissatisfaction with

child support) may diminish father involvement, we believe that these other factors get enacted through the nature of coparenting.

Interestingly, the quality of the coparental relationship at 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce does not directly affect adult children's relationship with their fathers. This suggests that divorced families may not stabilize by 2 years postdivorce, as previously noted (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Instead, stabilization may take longer. Many changes (e.g., remarriages, the introduction of step- and halfsiblings, changes in economic resources, geographical moves) occur in most divorced families within 5 years (Furstenberg, 1988). Although parents may stabilize their personal, divorce-related stress, the introduction of new relationships can result in imbalances that create new stresses with which children must cope. This is especially evident when fathers remarry and mothers remain single and when stepchildren first enter the system (Ahrns & Wallisch, 1987).

Fathers remarried more quickly and in greater numbers than mothers. For many children, remarriage can be as stressful as the divorce itself. Recall that one third of our respondents reported this to be true, and two thirds who experienced the remarriage of both parents saw their father's remarriage as more difficult than their mother's. On average, the mothers remarried later, and although the arrival of a stepfather was troublesome for some children, their mother's remarriage did not affect continuing relationships with either their mothers or their fathers postdivorce (Ahrns, 2004).

Adult children who reported that their father's remarriage had a positive effect on their lives also said that this relationship improved over time; they also reported better relationships with their stepmothers, stepsiblings, and paternal grandparents. However, when adult children reported that their father's remarriage had a negative effect, their relationship with him got worse and their relationships with his new kin also were likely to be negative. This is important as it relates to the long-term implications of the adult children's sense of family after divorce. Because children have two sets of kin, whether and how they relate to them carries implications for the continuity of family relationships (Ahrns, 2004).

As we saw in a sampling of the qualitative responses, some children felt they "lost" their fathers to his new family. For most children, divorce brings a dramatic change in their lives, and the most painful of these changes is the lack of their father in their daily lives. When he remarries, his remarriage represents a further loss, exacerbated by the presence of his stepchildren in his life—and his home. The worst scenario occurred for those who had fathers that remarried quickly. When this occurs, children lack adequate time to adjust to one loss before being faced with another. Multiple losses have the potential to negatively affect the father-child relationship over the life course (Furstenberg, 1988).

Importantly, the majority of our adult children reported feeling better off 20 years after their parents' divorce, a finding consistent with those reported in both the Marin County and Virginia studies. However, we found some children who felt that they were worse off, especially daughters, who also reported that their father-child relationships declined. Thus, not all of the offspring who reported a worsening relationship with their fathers also reported they were worse off due to the divorce. (Ahrns, 2004, found that a small subgroup of children reported that when their father was abusive, alcoholic, or mentally ill, the loss of a relationship with him was a positive result of the divorce.)

Overall, most of the offspring continued to relate to their

fathers, and this relationship appeared to contribute to their feelings of well-being as young adults. In a national longitudinal survey of parents and children, King (2002) noted that, when compared with two-parent married families, those offspring that maintained close relationships with their fathers after divorce also reported no difference in their trust of him. Her results are consistent with ours in noting that the long-term effects of divorce can be mediated, and perhaps compensated for, by good relationships with parents.

Implications for Practice

Taken together, our findings have important implications for those professionals who work with divorced families. Considering the long-term implications of divorce, the need to emphasize life course and family system perspectives is underscored (Ahrns, 1999). Parent-child relationships continue throughout the life course, and parental divorce during any developmental transition potentially alters family relationships. Whether family relationships remain stable, improve, or get worse is dependent on a complex interweaving of both pre- and postdivorce factors (Ahrns, 2004).

A critical first step for practitioners is to have a solid, empirically-based understanding of the dynamics of divorce as a long-term process of stressful changes in the family (Ahrns & Rodgers, 1987). Although such changes are stressful, dynamics within the family intervene to determine the long-term consequences. Using a risk and resilience framework opens the door to understanding the factors that lead to family resilience and those that increase the risk for negative consequences (Walsh, 2002). The high incidence of cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage requires that professionals shift their approaches to look at family strengths and weaknesses of such normal occurrences (Pinsoff, 2002). The reframing of divorce as a normative life event requires further theory development describing the dynamic changes involved in the transformation of kinship systems. In turn, such reframing should replace the more commonly utilized framework of divorce as a pathological event (Ahrns, 1979, 1994, 2004).

Because our findings show that adult children place high value on close relationships with their fathers, we emphasize the need for preventative interventions aimed at keeping fathers involved, not only at marital separation but also years later. Interventions can be most effective when they focus on the establishment of the divorced family as a healthy functioning system (Ahrns, 1996) by helping divorced parents improve their communication as a means of maintaining and increasing father involvement. Parents may think that their need to interact will cease as their children mature and no longer need child-care decisions or parental planning to facilitate the transitions between households. The knowledge that their relationship continues to affect others in the family over the life course may be surprising to them.

Although mothers' relationships may not be impacted as much as fathers', mothers can be helped to understand how their children need and benefit from relationships with their fathers and how father-child relationships are diminished in the face of poor coparental relations. Hostile, unsupportive relationships between parents usually result in painful loyalty conflicts for children. When parents still battle or denigrate one another—even 20 years later—it is not unusual for their children to withdraw from relationships with one or both parents (Ahrns, 2004). It

is sobering for parents to hear how their behavior—not the divorce per se, but the quality of their coparenting—continues to echo throughout the family system.

In addition, parents need to learn effective problem-solving skills that reduce their conflicts and foster support. Both court-mandated and voluntary classes in conflict management have proven helpful for parents (e.g., Geasler & Blaisure, 1999; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, & Montes, 2001; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999). Using mediation to resolve divorce-related issues is an increasingly available early intervention that also can reduce conflicts, teach problem-solving skills, and increase father-child involvement (Tondo, Coronel, & Drucker, 2001). Although evaluation research on early intervention programs for families of divorce is too recent for us to know about the long-term effects, such programs clearly have the potential to reduce some of the negative effects of divorce on children (Cookston, Braver, Sandler, & Genalo, 2002). Included in these early intervention programs should be information about the predictable transitions in the parents' relationship as they undergo stresses that accompany changes in their lives, and how these transitions may impact their children's lives (Ahrns, 1980a, 1980b).

Emphasizing that the coparental relationship affects four generations in the paternal kin system may help divorced parents realize the importance of working toward a less conflictual and more supportive relationship, even if they cannot accomplish it early on. Just as we have normalized the process of seeking marital counseling, divorced coparents also should consider brief interventions as necessary over their life course to help improve their ability to parent effectively. The fact that it is “never too late to have a good divorce” should become ingrained in the minds of divorced parents so they do not feel hopeless about the possibility of improving their postdivorce family relationships (Ahrns, 1994).

Therapeutic work with the whole family does not exclude the importance of interventions with individuals. Because the role of the noncustodial father is undefined, ambiguous, and complex, it can result in difficulties with performance of his parenting role and decreased involvement with his children (e.g., Arditti, 1995; Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993; Pasley, Furtis, & Skinner, 2002). Unfortunately, paternal identity often is viewed in terms of financial contributions, and this becomes more pronounced in divorce. As a result, fathers may believe that their emotional and nurturing contributions are unimportant, and this may cause some to disengage (Braver, 1998; Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, & Sheets, 1993). In a society that values mothering over fathering, the practitioner may need to help fathers redefine and reframe parenting roles, emphasizing the importance of continued involvement with their children postdivorce. Classes in parenting for the divorced and remarried father can be beneficial in helping protect and reinforce the father-child relationship.

Not only is father role identity and the reduction and management of conflict critical to family relationships, but fathers also need help in understanding how their remarriages may affect their children. Promoting ways to make special efforts to spend separate time with their children and not expecting them to integrate immediately into the new stepfamily will minimize the loss children can feel. Making a place for children in their new homes is evidence that new relationships are not threats to “old” relationships.

Practitioners can be helpful by hearing and giving voice to the children. In the midst of emotional distress, divorcing parents

may have diminished capacities to parent and be unable to hear the anxiety and pain of their children. A skilled practitioner or mediator, however, can help parents listen to their children and be more aware of their needs. For therapists, it also is important to consider separate sessions for children aimed at reducing the immediate distress and offering them alternate ways of coping more effectively with their parents' conflicts. Additional buffers, such as identifying resources in the community (i.e., special groups for divorced children) and activities that provide support and increase self-esteem, will help children find other avenues to meet their needs.

Children's issues with their parents, whether married or divorced, do not cease when they become adults. When adult children of divorced families seek professional help, their parents' divorce is likely to surface as part of their history. Labels that pathologize divorce, such as ACOD (adult children of divorce), send a message to children that they are victims. Therapists need to demythologize societal messages and instead encourage and teach resilience by helping children identify their strengths, explore more effective ways of coping, and seek positive models of resolving relationship issues in their complex families.

We are convinced that listening to the voices of children who have experienced divorce provides meaningful insight. Their views may differ quite substantially from their parents and, not incidentally, from their siblings, but it is their perception that lays the groundwork for their behavior. Their voices often become muted in our research when we use objective measures to determine adjustment and rely only on numbers to describe their responses. We must not forget that well-being is a social construct, and how children perceive the effect of their parents' divorce and the resulting changes in their lives is central to our understanding the personal experience of divorce and its impact.

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