

# Family Ties After Divorce: Long-Term Implications for Children

CONSTANCE R. AHRONS, PH.D.†

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*Drawing on the data from the longitudinal Binuclear Family Study, 173 grown children were interviewed 20 years after their parents' divorce. This article addresses two basic questions: (1) What impact does the relationship between parents have on their children 20 years after the divorce? and (2) When a parent remarries or cohabits, how does it impact a child's sense of family? The findings show that the parental subsystem continues to impact the binuclear family 20 years after marital disruption by exerting a strong influence on the quality of relationships within the family system. Children who reported that their parents were cooperative also reported better relationships with their parents, grandparents, stepparents, and siblings. Over the course of 20 years, most of the children experienced the remarriage of one or both parents, and one third of this sample remembered the remarriage as more stressful than the divorce. Of those who experienced the remarriage of both of their parents, two thirds reported that their father's remarriage was more stressful than their mother's. When children's relationships with their fathers deteriorated after divorce, their relationships with their paternal grandparents, stepmother, and stepsiblings were distant, negative, or non-existent. Whether family relationships remain stable, improve, or get worse is dependent on a complex interweaving of many factors. Considering the long-term implications of divorce, the need to emphasize life course and family system perspectives is underscored.*

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After 12 years of marriage, three children, two years of counseling, and two brief separations and reconciliations, Michael and Dianne came to my office seeking the advice of “an expert.” They arrived, armed with bulging folders, ready to do battle and

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†Professor emerita, University of Southern California, and Senior Research Associate, Council on Contemporary Families.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Constance Ahrons, 5357 Croton Court, San Diego, CA 92109. E-mail: cahrons@usc.edu

prove their case. Their question: Should they divorce or stay married for the sake of the children? Both agreed on two major points: Their marriage was miserable and they loved their children. Dianne had research evidence showing that the children would be better off if they stayed married, and Michael had equally strong data showing that the children would be better off if they divorced.

As two concerned parents, Michael and Dianne are accurately reflecting the confusing and contradictory media reports about the effects of divorce on children. One day we hear good news about children and divorce: Children whose parents divorce grow up to be well-adjusted, emotionally healthy adults. The next day there's bad news: Children of divorce are doomed to have emotional problems that last well into adulthood. These polarized positions—of divorce as disaster and divorce as inconsequential—oversimplify the realities of our complex lives. An accumulated body of findings, however, challenges these extreme positions and reveals a more nuanced picture of divorce, one that defies sound-bite conclusions.

Drawing conclusions about divorce is difficult at best, not only because of the politics that surround it (see Adams & Coltrane, 2007) but also because researchers use different yardsticks when they study the effects of divorce. As clinicians and researchers, most of us struggle not to let our personal values bias our work, but neither the therapeutic process nor the research process can be value free, and indeed some would argue that it should not be. The questions a researcher asks, whom they select to study, what variables they choose to measure both outcomes and intervening factors, how they evaluate the data, and the interpretations and conclusions they draw are all derived from the frame of reference that the researcher employs. It is clear that even when we rely on articles in scholarly journals and research-based books, we are confused by the conflicting findings.

### LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

Although the literature on divorce has grown considerably over the past three decades, studies using samples with mothers, fathers, and children, following them over time, are limited. Three longitudinal studies (lasting 20 years or longer) are exceptions by providing in-depth interview data on parents and their children and making seminal contributions to our understanding of the long-term process of divorce and its effects on families. These longitudinal studies are diverse in their samples, designs, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks. Each has its strengths and limitations.

The Marin County Project is an in-depth clinical study of 60 families that began in 1971. 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 that greatly limit generalizing the findings to a nonclinical sample. 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, pp. 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 project consists of a series of longitudinal studies on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The major strengths are that it was a comprehensive multi-method approach that used a comparison group of married families, which yielded

broad-based findings. Although the cumulative sample size of 900 youth distributed among nondivorced, divorced, and remarried families was large at the 20-year assessment, the original sample from newly divorced families followed over time included only 61 adult children (Hetherington, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The Binuclear Family Study of 98 families was based on the early findings from the Marin County and Virginia studies. Its strengths are the random sampling procedure, the inclusion of varied legal and informal custody arrangements, the in-depth focus on the divorced parents' relationship, the inclusion of all siblings, the high response rates, and the development of psychometric scales that have been replicated (Ahrns, 1994, 2001).<sup>1</sup> 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 was based on a pathological model of divorce, and the findings reflect that model through emphasis on loss, abandonment, distress, and dysfunction. The underpinnings of the Virginia study were a risk and resilience model, but the study was also embedded in 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 strength and 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. Although the findings also identified sources of distress, the focus was on good outcomes, distinguishing factors that appeared to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy outcomes.

What is striking about these studies, given the many differences among them, is that the conclusions are more similar than they are 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 reported 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 embedded in the interpretations of the findings, such that findings are interpreted to reflect the underlying conceptualizations of the researcher.

One common limitation of all the studies is that the samples comprised White middle-class families. Thus, their findings cannot be generalized to other ethnicities or social classes. What makes these three studies unique is that the researchers have studied and followed their families for at least 20 years, but this very strength also contains a major weakness. One of the most disillusioning aspects of longitudinal research is that the findings may be outdated by the time the study is completed. The divorces studied in all three research projects took place between 1970 and 1980, at a time prior to such major legal reforms as no-fault legislation and joint custody. The parents in these studies divorced on the cusp of these changes and in the midst of major shifts in gender roles. Because of the possible impact of these changes, coupled with a decrease in stigma attached to divorce and emerging alternatives to the

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<sup>1</sup>T1–T3 data are archived at the Harvard Social Science Archive, Murray Research Center, Cambridge, MA. Time 4 will be archived in 2007.

adversarial legal process, it is not possible to know whether all the findings can be generalized to children who experience their parents' divorces in the 21st century.

### THE BINUCLEAR FAMILY STUDY

In this article, I will draw on the findings from the Binuclear Family Study to focus on two of the complex factors: the coparental relationship and parental remarriage. Both factors have been identified in the literature as salient variables that mediate the impact of divorce on children. The specific research questions are: (1) What impact does the relationship between parents have on their children twenty years after the divorce? and (2) When a parent remarries or cohabits, how does it impact a child's sense of family?

It is now widely accepted that ongoing, serious conflict between parents has negative consequences for children, regardless of whether their parents are married or divorced. Although most parents remarry or recouple within 5 years of their divorce, little attention has been given in the literature as to the effect of this major family transition on children. For example, studies of relationships between children and their half siblings and stepsiblings and the relationships between mothers and stepmothers are lacking.

#### Sample, Data Collection, and Design<sup>2</sup>

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, Wisconsin. Interviews with both parents were conducted at 1, 3, and 5 years after the legal divorce. In the second and third wave of interviews, the participants identified new partners, either married or cohabiting, and these stepparents were interviewed as well. Of the 122 new partners at Time 2, 91 (75%) were interviewed. At Time 3, 115 new partners were identified, and 85 (74%) were interviewed.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with each person in the family. The interviews were semistructured, allowing for respondents to answer in their own words and elaborate on issues. They were conducted by clinical graduate students and averaged 1 1/2 hours, with a range of 1 to 4 hours. The response rate at 5 years was 90%, an unusually high rate for longitudinal studies.

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). 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 (see appendixes to Ahrons, 1994, for more detailed information on the sample and sampling procedure).

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<sup>2</sup>I have omitted the methodological detail customary in a research paper because it would limit the range of findings that could be presented. In the interest of clinical applicability, I have chosen to present a broader range of findings and referenced publications throughout that present more methodological detail.

The data presented in this article were collected at Time 4. Interviews with the grown children were conducted in 1999/2000, 20 years after we interviewed their parents. 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 contact information. The original 98 families had a total of 204 children; of these, we were able to locate 193 and completed interviews with 173. These 173 adult children represented 89 of the original 98 families.

At the time of their interviews, the grown children (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 have a minor child, all adult children in the family were interviewed, which resulted in 10 participants who 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 at the time of the interview.

A total of 52% ( $n = 90$ ) 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% ( $n = 73$ ) were married. Of those 58% ( $n = 100$ ) who reported being unmarried at the time of the interview, slightly over half said that they were in a serious relationship, and half of this subgroup were cohabiting. Of the 68 participants who were parents, almost all ( $n = 63$ ) had at least one biological child, and 5 reported having adopted children or stepchildren. The mean age marking their transition to parenthood was 27 (range was 18–37).

Although the earlier interviews with parents were conducted in person, because of their geographical spread, it was not feasible to do so with the grown children. Instead, interviews with the adult children were conducted via telephone by clinical doctoral students and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. 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 were available. The ability to talk about members of the participants’ families by name piqued the respondents’ 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, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own words with as much elaboration as they wished; interviewers probed where indicated. These responses were then reviewed by two research assistants, and categories were assigned and then compared. Following that, each of the questions on every interview was coded by two researchers on the project and their coding compared. When disagreements between the coders occurred, the project director reviewed them and made the final decision.

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 focused 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). My interest was in how the adult children perceived and attached meaning to the events surrounding parental divorce, rather than whether such perceptions represented some absolute truth. My intent was not to identify a consistent set of objective facts about the participants' parents' divorces, but rather to identify the consequences of the divorce as experienced by the offspring and to understand the process by which they came to this experience. I wanted to hear the voices of adult children as they reflected on the effects of their parents' divorces 20 years ago. (See appendixes to Ahrons, 2004, for more detailed information on the sample and data collection.)

## OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

### **What impact does the relationship between parents have on their children 20 years after the divorce?**

In the first three waves of the study, parents' relationships were evaluated on a composite scale of 13 items to determine the degree and type of conflict and support in their relationships (scales developed for this study, along with their reliability estimates in the three waves, are available from the author). From these interviews, five typologies of divorced parenting relationships emerged (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). The typologies form a continuum with the very friendly ex-spouse couples at one end (perfect pals), and at the other end are those parents who have discontinued any contact with one another (dissolved duos). Three other groups (cooperative colleagues, angry associates, fiery foes) clustered along the continuum between the two extremes. When we interviewed their adult children, we read them brief descriptions of each of these five typologies and asked which best fit their parents at the present time, following up with asking them to rate their parents again at the time of divorce. They were also asked other questions about how they thought their parents' relationship impacted their lives, both at the present time and over the years.

The good news is that over half of the participants reported that their parents got along fairly well now that they were grown. Whereas 40% reported that their parents were cooperative at the time of the divorce, 60% reported that their parents were cooperative 20 years later (Ahrons, 2004).

Responding to the five typology descriptions, half said their parents were now cooperative colleagues, and another 10% percent described them as perfect pals. Only 22% said their parents were still angry associates or fiery foes, and 18% said that their parents were now dissolved duos.

The most surprising findings, however, showed up in the group that described their parents as very friendly perfect pals. The number of parents who could now be called good friends increased fourfold between the time of divorce and 20 years later. Although still a relatively small percentage of divorced parents, it is interesting that, at least according to their children, a sizeable group of parents were good friends 20 years after they divorced.

No single factor contributed more to children's self-reports of well-being after divorce than the continuing relationship between their parents. Children whose parents were cooperative reported better relationships with their parents, grandparents, stepparents, and siblings. Most of all, the children said that they wanted to have

relationships with both parents. What the children wanted was not for their parents to be friends as much as they wanted them to be cordial and not badmouth each other.

Even 20 years after the divorce, when the children were grown and many had children of their own, they still wanted their parents to get along. There were those special family occasions, such as graduations, weddings, and grandchildren's birthdays, that most of the grown children wanted to share with both of their parents.

Those adult children who continued to relate to both parents in spite of their ongoing hostilities were still plagued with loyalty conflicts. At earlier stages in their lives, some coped with these loyalty conflicts by siding with one parent or the other. Others felt that their lives were fragmented because they had to keep their relationships with their parents completely separate.

All the adult children with parents who continued to be in conflict talked about their distress they felt as they tried to maneuver between parents. Weddings, birthdays, and graduations were the only times their parents were together, and all these occasions posed dilemmas for their children. Some took a hard line and told their parents that they had to be civil or they would not be invited. Others hoped and prayed that their parents would behave and not spoil their celebration, and still others chose not to involve their parents at all. Some solved the dilemma by inviting only one parent. About half of the small group whose parents' relationships were dissolved noted that although their parents had no interaction, they both still attended some of their children's special events. It was uncomfortable to have both parents present but, for most, it was better than leaving one parent out of the picture.

When they reflected on how their parents' relationship affected them throughout the years, they emphasized the importance of that relationship to their comfort with their living arrangements, and the process of transitioning back and forth between their parents' households. As a group, for example, they were far less concerned about the specific number of days per week or month they spent living with one parent or the other than they were about how their parents' relationship infused the emotional climate surrounding their transitions between parental households.

Analysis of the first three waves of parent interviews showed that in those families in which parents did not have serious ongoing conflicts, fathers stayed more involved with their children (Ahrns & Miller, 1993). At the 20-year mark, half of the grown children felt that their relationships with their fathers actually improved after the divorce, and over one third reported that they deteriorated. Twelve percent reported no change in their relationships. 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 (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003).

A significant finding of the study was that changes in adult children's relationships with their father after divorce were related to the relationship between their parents. The primary picture that emerges is that when interparental conflict decreases and support increases between parents in the early years after the divorce, adult children report that their relationships with their father either improve or remain stable. It is important to note that when the coparental relationship was conflictual and did not improve or worsened, future father-child relationships were likely to be jeopardized. Although other important factors (e.g., mother's anger with father, her view of his right to parent, her dissatisfaction with child support) may diminish father

involvement, these other factors are likely to get enacted through the coparenting relationship (Ahrons & Miller, 1993).

What the findings point to is that the ability of divorced parents to establish a supportive, low-conflict parental unit 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. These findings show that the parental subsystem continues to impact the binuclear family 20 years after marital disruption by exerting a strong influence on the quality of relationships within the family system.

### **When a parent remarries or cohabits, how does it impact a child's sense of family?**

Twenty years after their parents' divorce, most of the adult children had experienced the remarriage of at least one parent. 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. In only 4 families had neither parent remarried. More fathers than mothers remarried, and they remarried more quickly after the divorce. In this sample, 24%, 60%, and 70% of the fathers had remarried at 1, 3, and 5 years postdivorce, whereas fewer mothers had remarried in each of the times, 12%, 38%, and 49%, respectively.

Remarriage represents another dramatic 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 to cope with, more than half of the adult children reported that the divorce was most difficult, and approximately one third remembered the remarriage of one or more parents as creating more distress than the divorce. Of those who experienced the remarriage of both parents, two thirds reported that their father's remarriage was more stressful than their mother's.

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 their relationship with their father got better postdivorce compared with those who reported that their father's remarriage had a neutral or negative impact on their lives. A disproportionately high number of those reporting that their relationships worsened with their fathers after divorce had experienced his remarriage within one year postdivorce (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003).

The majority of children in the study reported that at the time of the interview, they had good relationships with one or both of their stepparents. Most noted that this was not always the case in the beginning but that relationships had improved over time as they came to know their stepparents better. Some gender differences emerged, with two thirds reporting a close relationship with their stepfathers, and somewhat less than half felt close to their stepmothers. For those children who feel that their relationships with their stepparents were close, two thirds considered their stepfathers as parents, and somewhat fewer felt the same way about their stepmothers. The others, who felt close but did not consider their stepparents to be parents, describe their stepparents as friends or mentors. It is important to note that although there were some differences in their feelings toward their stepmothers versus their stepfathers, these differences were not related to the child's gender. Boys and girls both viewed their stepparents in similar ways.



The age of the child, the personality match between a stepchild and stepparent, the relationship with each biological parent, and the amount of time spent with a stepfather are major factors that influence the role he takes in their lives. Because most mothers are still the primary residential parent, most stepfathers live with their stepchildren. Although some children who are close with their stepfathers have poor relationships with their biological fathers, others who have poor stepfather relationships are close with their biological fathers. Still others are able to maintain good relationships with both, and a small group of children have poor relationships with both.

The findings also show an association between relationships with their father and relationships with their father's kin. When relationships with their fathers got worse over time, they reported poorer current relationships with their stepmother, her children (their stepsiblings), and their paternal grandparents. This was most salient when the father remarried shortly after divorce. Adult children who reported that their father's remarriage had a positive effect on their lives also said that they had better relationships with their stepmothers, stepsiblings, and paternal grandparents. This is important because 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 (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1989).

When a family expands through remarriages, it becomes more complex with the addition of stepsiblings and half-siblings. 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 with them at some time during their childhood. The other two thirds saw their stepsiblings only when they all spent short times together in the same household or at extended family celebrations. For some, this amounted to only a few times a year.

They also gained half-siblings. One third of their parents, twice as many fathers as mothers, had new children in their second marriage. New children 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, and 69% ( $n = 44$ ) of this group lived together for some time during childhood or adolescence. Although most of the children lived for some period with these half-siblings, a small group of children never lived with them.

In one fifth of the binuclear families, children had both stepsiblings and half-siblings. These are the most complex families, especially for the few who had all the permutations of maternal and paternal half-siblings and stepsiblings.

Fewer than one third of the children in the study think of their stepsiblings as brothers or sisters. Those who do are more likely to have lived with them, either for partial weeks or for an extended period. Age differences, frequency of contact, and personality issues all entered into the equation of defining what these stepsiblings meant in their lives. The picture with half-siblings is much more consistent. In contrast to how they think of stepsiblings, almost all the children think of their half-siblings as brothers or sisters.

Whereas stepsiblings become instant siblings, with no shared history, when children gain a half-sibling they know this child from the time he or she is born. By the time the child is born, they usually have had time to adapt to the remarriage of their parent and can anticipate the new half-sibling's arrival. Although these differences do not necessarily determine the quality of the relationships among siblings, they do offer

some insight into understanding some of the differences in the way children bond with their stepsiblings and half-siblings.

Many step relationships were tenuous, especially if the parent and stepparent divorced. One quarter of both the mothers and fathers in the study had a second divorce and were cohabiting or in a third marriage. For many children, the second divorce and remarriage represented another difficult major transition, although a few expressed relief because they disliked their stepparent. What happens to these relationships after a divorce depended in large part on how long the marriage lasted, how strong the relationship was between the child and his or her stepparent, and the nature of the divorce between the biological parent and the stepparent. Many of the parents' second marriages lasted less than 5 years, and deep bonds had not formed with their stepparents or other step relations. However, when the second marriage lasted long enough for the children to develop strong relationships with the stepparent, some continued these relationships for years afterward. For a few children, however, not only did they lose a stepparent to whom they had formed a close attachment, but they experienced the loss of their step-grandparents as well.

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Taken together, these findings have important implications for therapists in their work with divorced families. Considering the long-term implications of divorce, the need for therapists to emphasize life course and family system perspectives is underscored. Parent-child relationships continue throughout the life course, and parental divorce during any developmental transition potentially alters family relationships. Whether these family relationships remain stable, improve, or get worse depends on a complex interweaving of both pre- and postdivorce factors.

Most divorcing parents have a short-term, narrow view of the implications of their continuing relationship. It is important that therapists help divorcing parents broaden their image of their postdivorce family and examine the implications of their relationship postdivorce. It can be a powerful intervention to ask each parent to imagine some years ahead and envision some future event like a graduation or a wedding of a child, and then to ask them how they will participate in that shared happy occasion. It is also important to provide parents with some hope and some goals by informing them that it is never too late to improve their relationship and have a good divorce.

After divorce, it is not uncommon for fathers to feel that they have become unimportant in their children's lives. Therapists can help by providing information to both fathers and mothers about children's needs for their father's continuing contact and involvement. It has been shown that early intervention with fathers has a significant impact on increasing their involvement (Cookston, Braver, & Griffin, 2007; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007), and by so doing earlier on, they are more likely to have better relationships with their children 20 years later (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003). Impressing upon parents the importance of these findings, providing positive role models, and aiding fathers in improving their parenting skills are important interventions that help divorced fathers continue to have significant relationships with their children.

Although mothers' relationships with their children are not as negatively affected after divorce (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003), it is important to work with mothers to help them recognize how children need and benefit from continuing relationships with

their father, and how the nature of that relationship interacts with the coparental relationship. Both parents need to understand how their hostile relationships with each other have the potential to result in painful loyalty conflicts for their children. Issues related to contact between nonresidential fathers and their children are often difficult to sort out, not only for the parents but for therapists as well. Conflicts between divorced parents escalate quickly into solidified power struggles, with each parent placing blame on the other for father's lack of contact and/or involvement with the children. It is important to help mothers examine their gatekeeping role and the impact that it has on their ex-husband's continuing involvement with the children. It is also important to help fathers gain insight into the role that they may be playing in perpetuating and maintaining the power struggle.

This longitudinal study clearly shows that the years following divorce bring dramatic changes for children. Parents recoupled, some remarried, and others had second and even third divorces. Not only did stepparents join their family system, but the majority of children also saw their sibling network branch out as they gained step-siblings and half-siblings. Binuclear families are not tidy families; they are made up of a combination of blood and nonblood relationships that defy clear role definitions and often lack appropriate kinship terms. The findings revealed that, even among biological siblings in the same family, half- and stepsibling relationships and stepmother and stepfather relationships will be experienced differently.

When parents remarry, they often believe that their happiness in their new union will be shared by the children they each bring with them, followed by the ideal that their separate units will blend together easily as family. When children do not meet these expectations, it can create disappointment and distress for all family members. A central role for the therapist is to help children and their families understand the challenges that these complex arrangements present and assist them in developing realistic expectations for these new relationships. I have found that showing the family a diagram of the relationships in the binuclear family, noting all the relationships in terms of the child, helps parents visualize that although they may not feel related to some of these people (i.e., their ex-spouse's new spouse and his or her extended family), their child does.

Therapists need to make it very clear to parents that the coparental relationship they establish and maintain will have an effect on four generations in the family, most especially in the paternal kin system. When working with young adults with divorced parents, who continue to suffer negative consequences from their parents' continued conflicts, bringing the parents in to the therapy sessions can be a powerful intervention that has the potential to produce significant change in family relationships. Even many years after the divorce, when divorced parents are confronted with the distress and pain that their continuing conflict and hostility inflict on their children and the resulting negative effect that it has on their family relationships, it provides an opportunity for change. For example, explaining that when parents still battle or denigrate one another—even 20 years later—children are likely to withdraw from relationships with one or both parents. 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. It is important that therapists challenge the prevailing myth that once children are grown, their parents' relationship doesn't affect them. Just as we have normalized the process of seeking marital counseling, divorced coparents should be encouraged to consider brief interventions as necessary

over their life course to help improve their ability to parent effectively and thereby increase the family's resilience (Ahrns, 1994).

When adult children with divorced parents seek professional help the divorce and its aftermath are likely to surface as a distressing theme in their history. Labels that pathologize divorce, such as ACOD (Adult Children of Divorce), send a message to children that they are victims (Bernstein, 2007). Therapists can help young adults become more resilient and move beyond these stereotypic messages by identifying their strengths, exploring more effective ways of coping, and seeking positive models of resolving relationship issues in their complex families.

The Binuclear Family Study is unique in studying the reactions of all siblings in the family. A significant finding was that it was not unusual for siblings to have quite different perceptions about their parents' divorce and to feel that the divorce impacted them in different ways. Such factors as gender, age at the time of the divorce, or birth order were not correlated with outcomes and no identifiable patterns emerged to explain sibling differences. In some cases it appeared to relate to the parent/child relationship prior to the divorce; in others it seemed to be dependent on alliances developed within the family system. A meaningful intervention for young adults in therapy is to have a few sessions that include his or her siblings. Confronting the sibling differences can be very helpful in developing a different perspective on a parental divorce.

Working with post divorce families requires a complex multilevel approach (Ahrns, 1996). When a divorce occurs the children are not the only ones affected; parents and siblings of the divorced couple also may become very involved in the process. When divorced spouses remain at war with one another it is likely to affect extended relationships in the child's kinship system. Caught in loyalty conflicts children may find it difficult to maintain relationships with both paternal and maternal extended kin networks. As we have seen, remarriage complicates the picture and can create a further rift in children's relationships with either paternal or maternal kin.

Good divorces are those in which the children can comfortably maintain relationships with both parents and their extended kin networks. As the findings from this study show, when parents are able to minimize their conflicts sufficiently well to co-parent their children effectively, the children continue to have relationships with both parents and maintain their sense of biological family. An added benefit is that relationships formed when a parent remarries also tend to be more rewarding for the children as their kinship system expands rather than contracts.

The findings from this study highlight the importance of listening to the voices of children who have experienced a parental divorce. Although their views may differ quite substantially from their parents', it is their perception, not their parents', that lays the groundwork for their reactions and behavior. Children's voices often become muted in our research when we use only objective measures to determine adjustment and rely solely on numbers to describe their responses. 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 understanding the personal experience of divorce and its impact.

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