

# *PARENTING THROUGH FAMILY TRANSITIONS*

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## **Abstract**

Children with divorced parents, compared with children with two continuously married parents, tend to score lower on a variety of measures of adjustment and wellbeing. Although several mechanisms are responsible for the link between divorce and children's problems, the most important factor is a deterioration in the quality of parent-child relationships. Following divorce, many single custodial mothers experience stress that interferes with the quality of parenting. The amount of time that non-custodial fathers have to spend with children is often inadequate to develop anything other than superficial relationships. Weak emotional bonds with parents, in turn, predict a variety of negative long-term outcomes among children. This paper reviews several policies in the United States that attempt to strengthen parent-child bonds following divorce, including parent education courses and the shift toward joint custody. This paper also looks at recent policies that adopt a preventive approach, that is, programmes that aim to strengthen marital quality and decrease the rate of divorce.

## INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that divorce increases the risk of a variety of problems for children, including academic failure, conduct disorders, depression, low self-esteem, and difficulties in peer relationships. Although most of this research has been conducted in the United States, comparable studies have been conducted in England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries. The consistency of research findings across settings suggests that the link between divorce and child problems is a general phenomenon, irrespective of variations in culture or policy environments. (For reviews of this literature, see Amato 2000, 2001.)

We should be careful, however, not to over-interpret these findings. Divorce increases the risk of many child problems, but this does not mean that all children of divorce are affected negatively. Many children from divorced families develop into competent, well-functioning adults. Moreover, many children in two-parent families are exposed to stressful circumstances that have negative consequences, including poverty, chronic marital discord, domestic violence, inept parenting, substance abuse, and parents' mental illness. Indeed, several studies show that children living with parents who are

chronically hostile or violent are better off, in the long run, if their parents divorce (Amato and Booth 1997).

In this paper, I explain why divorce increases the risk of problems for children, with a focus on parent–child relationships. I then discuss several policy efforts in the United States that attempt to strengthen parent–child relationships following divorce, with the ultimate goal of improving children’s long-term wellbeing.

### WHY DOES DIVORCE INCREASE THE RISK OF CHILD PROBLEMS?

Given the variability in outcomes for children in divorced families (as well as two-parent families), researchers have focused on the mechanisms through which divorce increases the risk of child problems.

These studies have identified a number of relevant factors. Because divorce splits one household into two, economies of scale are lost, resulting in a decline in children’s standard of living. Moreover, many non-custodial fathers refuse or are unable to provide child support. Economic hardship means that many custodial parents (usually mothers) do not have the resources to purchase books, computers and other commodities that facilitate children’s school success. In addition, many custodial mothers are forced to move to less expensive accommodation following divorce – a change that is distressing to many children. Moving is especially problematic if it involves relocating to a different neighborhood (which disrupts children’s contact with neighborhood friends) or a different school district (which places children out of step with their classmates).

Moreover, most parents remarry following divorce, and many children resent the addition of a step-parent to the household. Remarriage, of course, increases the likelihood that children will experience additional parental divorces. Of all the risk factors associated with divorce, however, disruptions in parent–child relationships appear to have the greatest potential to affect children negatively.

### The Importance of Authoritative Parenting

Before describing how divorce affects parent–child relationships, it is useful to review the concept of authoritative parenting. A large number of studies show that authoritative parenting is the parenting style most closely associated with a range of positive child outcomes (Baumrind 1968, Rollins and Thomas 1979, Maccoby and Martin 1983).

Support and control are central dimensions of authoritative parenting. Support is reflected in affection, responsiveness, encouragement, instruction and everyday

assistance. These behaviours facilitate children's positive development by conveying a basic sense of trust and security, reinforcing children's self-conceptions of worth and competence, and promoting the learning of practical skills. Control is reflected in rule formulation, discipline and supervision. Through these parental behaviours, children learn that they must act within a set of socially constructed boundaries. Authoritative parents avoid harsh forms of punishment, such as hitting or yelling. Instead, by explaining the reasons behind rules, fathers and mothers help children to internalise rules and engage in self-regulation.

As children grow into adolescence, authoritative parents gradually relax the extent of control in line with children's growing ability to engage in self-regulation. Nevertheless, throughout the teen years, some degree of monitoring is necessary to ensure that children do well in school and do not drift into delinquent or antisocial activities.

### The Importance of Cooperative Co-parenting

In addition to authoritative parenting, children thrive when their parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship. Parents who cooperate in child rearing present a united authority structure. When parents agree on the rules for children and support one another's decisions, children learn that parental authority is not arbitrary. Parental agreement also means that children are not subjected to inconsistent discipline following instances of misbehaviour. Consistency between parents helps children to learn and internalise social norms and moral values. Also, a respect for hierarchical authority, first learned in the family, makes it easier for young people to adjust to social institutions that are hierarchically organised, such as schools and the workplace.

Another benefit of a positive co-parental relationship is the modelling of dyadic skills. These skills include providing emotional support, showing respect, communicating clearly, and resolving disputes through negotiation and compromise. Children who learn these skills through the observation of parental models experience positive relationships with peers, and later, with intimate partners.

Finally, the relationship between parents can affect the quality of parent-child relationships. For example, wives with hostile and unsupportive husbands are likely to feel distracted, emotionally drained and irritable. As a result, they may be unresponsive or short-tempered when dealing with their children. In contrast, wives with supportive and helpful husbands are likely to have positive feelings that allow for more effective parenting. Similarly, support and encouragement from mothers improve the quality of fathers' parenting (Amato 1998).

## Parenting Through Divorce

Marital dissolution creates a number of challenges for parents. Custodial parents (usually mothers) must cope with the emotional aftermath of divorce, the difficulties of parenting without a partner in the household, and the stress of trying to make ends meet with limited financial resources. These stressors can result in a diminished capacity to parent effectively. Divorced single mothers, compared with continuously married mothers, tend to show less warmth toward their children, are less consistent in enforcing rules, engage in harsher discipline, and monitor their children's behaviour less effectively (Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992). Longitudinal studies indicate that some single mothers show improvements in parenting over time, although other single mothers do not.

Children's relationships with fathers are especially problematic following divorce. A large proportion of divorced fathers have little or no contact with their children. Although many non-resident fathers attempt to maintain regular contact in the post-separation period, visitation tends to decline over time.

Most divorced fathers want to ensure that their children enjoy themselves during visits. Consequently, many fathers take their children to restaurants or movies but do not engage in authoritative practices, such as helping with homework or talking over personal problems. In addition, non-resident fathers tend to be relatively permissive and indulgent. Because men fear that their relationships with children are tenuous, they are often reluctant to set firm rules or discipline their children for misbehaviour.

The activities shared by non-resident fathers and their children may be enjoyable, but these activities, in the absence of authoritative parenting, contribute little to children's development. Moreover, in the long run these superficial relationships are unsatisfying, not only to fathers, but also to children (Braver and O'Connell 1998, Umberson and Williams 1993). Under these circumstances, paternal disengagement is common.

Despite these obstacles, recent studies suggest that divorced fathers have increased their level of involvement over the last 20 years. For example, in two studies based on United States data from the 1980s, only 16% to 20% of children saw their non-resident fathers on a weekly basis (Furstenberg et al. 1983, Seltzer and Bianchi 1988). In contrast, several studies based on United States data collected in the 1990s indicate that 24% to 38% of children have weekly visits with their fathers (King 1994, Nord and Zill 1996).

Despite an apparent increase in contact, however, a large group of children continue to be virtual strangers to their fathers. Depending on the study, this group ranges from about one-quarter to about one-third of children. These findings suggest three groups

of non-resident father: about one-third are highly involved in their children's lives, another third are disengaged but still maintain some contact, and a final third have little or no involvement. Not surprisingly, these groups of fathers also vary in the extent to which they pay child support. Fathers' financial support for children is highest among those with frequent involvement and lowest among those with little or no involvement.

It is difficult to think of an event with greater potential to undermine cooperative co-parenting than divorce. For many couples, the hostility that caused the marriage to end carries over into the post-divorce period. Indeed, the process of divorce often exacerbates the level of conflict between parents. Parents who are consumed with anger toward their ex-spouses have a difficult time working together to develop consistent rules and activities for children. As a result, many children encounter different rules in the two households, such as rules about bedtime, meals and television viewing.

Moreover, instead of presenting a united front to children, hostile parents often attempt to sabotage each other's authority. When one parent makes disparaging remarks about the other parent in front of the child, for example, children feel that they are "caught in the middle". Children also feel this way when they are forced to pass messages between parents or when one parent quizzes the child about the other parent's activities. Feeling caught in the middle is stressful for children and is associated with poor emotional adjustment (Buchanan et al. 1996).

In most cases, negative feelings between parents decline over time. Nevertheless, about one-tenth of parents remain trapped in intractable animosity toward one another, even many years after the divorce. Many of these parents return to court to fight over child custody, access, child support and other issues (Johnston et al. 1988). In contrast, about one-fourth of parents settle into a cooperative co-parental relationship following divorce (Buchanan et al. 1996). The most common pattern, which characterises about two-thirds of post-divorce families, is one in which parents have minimal communication – a pattern known as parallel parenting.

Weak ties with parents can be viewed as negative outcomes in their own right. Research also indicates that deteriorations in parent-child relationships explain many of the other negative effects of divorce on children. The importance of parent-child relationships was demonstrated in a recent American study based on national longitudinal data. According to this study:

- Young adults with divorced parents tended to have relatively low levels of psychological wellbeing and weak emotional bonds with parents (especially fathers).
- Young adults with weak emotional bonds with parents tended to have low levels of psychological wellbeing.

- The estimated effect of divorce on psychological wellbeing was explained completely by children's weak emotional bonds with parents (Amato and Sobolewski 2001).

### Effects of Remarriage

Most mothers and fathers remarry following divorce. When custodial mothers remarry, children's standard of living usually improves. Moreover, the presence of a stepfather in the household means that many of the tasks of child-rearing (such as monitoring children's behaviour and whereabouts) are shared between two parents. But despite these advantages, children in stepfamilies have the same risk of emotional and behavioural problems as do children in single-mother families (Amato 1994).

Tension in stepfamily relationships appears to be responsible for this curious pattern. Many children, especially adolescents, resent the introduction of a stepfather into the household. Some children are jealous of the time that the stepfather spends with the biological mother. Other children resent the stepfather's attempts to exert authority in the family. "You can't tell me what to do. You're not my father" is a common response of children to their stepfathers' directives. In addition, some children worry that if they become emotionally close to their stepfathers, then they are being disloyal to their biological fathers. Because of the complex and sometimes stressful relationships that characterise stepfamilies, the remarriage of custodial mothers does not appear to result in a net improvement in children's functioning or wellbeing (Hetherington and Jodl 1994).

The literature on stepfamilies suggests several strategies for minimising the amount of stress experienced by children. First, it is usually better for stepfathers to leave the role of disciplinarian to mothers. Although many children initially resent the remarriage of their mothers, some children eventually come to accept stepfathers who adopt a non-intrusive and persistently friendly attitude. Secondly, after remarriage, it is important for children to continue to have one-on-one time with their mothers without the presence of the mother's new spouse, much as they did before the remarriage. Finally, remarriages that occur quickly after the divorce are more difficult for children to accept. It appears to be better for mothers to give their children time to adjust to post-divorce family life before adding the complexity of a new adult in the household (Hetherington and Kelly 2002).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND INTERVENTIONS

Studies that have focused on the mechanisms that link marital disruption to poor child outcomes suggest a number of policies and interventions that may lessen the risks associated with divorce. Most of these programmes focus on maintaining or improving children's relationships with both parents following divorce. I also comment on recent policy efforts in the United States to strengthen marriage and reduce the rate of divorce.

### Parent Education Programmes

Parent education courses for divorcing parents are widely available, although they are mandatory in some states and voluntary in others. Some educational programmes are provided through family courts in the United States, whereas other programmes are offered by mental health practitioners in the community with the cooperation of the courts. Most of these programmes focus on increasing parents' understanding of how divorce affects children, how parents can respond to children's distress, resolving conflict between parents, improving the co-parental relationship, and strengthening relationships between parents and children following divorce (Geasler and Blaisure 1998).

Although these courses are common, relatively few evaluation studies have been conducted. Available research, however, indicates that the great majority of parents find these courses to be useful, even when participation is mandatory. In other words, consumer satisfaction is generally high.

Research that focuses on parenting or co-parenting is less common, although some studies yield optimistic conclusions. One experimental study (in which some parents received parent education and others did not) revealed significant reductions in interparental conflict up to six months following the intervention (Bacon and McKenzie 2004). Other studies show that parents who receive these courses have more knowledge about the effects of divorce on children (Shifflett and Cummings 1999), are more satisfied with their relationships with their children (McKenry et al. 1999), and are less likely to engage in further litigation (Arbuthnot et al. 1997). Unfortunately, almost no studies have assessed whether participation in these courses improves children's wellbeing.

Existing parenting programmes vary in quality, with some representing brief interventions (watching a video followed by a brief discussion) and others representing more elaborate attempts to educate parents about a range of issues. Presumably, future evaluation studies will reveal which educational interventions are most effective in changing parents' behaviour and improving outcomes for children. Although a reliable database of studies has not yet accumulated, these programmes are not expensive to provide, and even if some programmes are not effective, they have little potential for doing harm.

## Increasing Father Involvement through Joint Custody

In most of the states in the United States, custody decisions are based on the “best interests of the child” standard. Prior to the mid-1970s, most courts operated under the assumption that it is in the child’s best interest for courts to award custody to the parent who served as the child’s primary caregiver and to whom the child was more emotionally attached. In the great majority of cases, this parent was the mother. Correspondingly, most courts awarded the other parent (usually the father) “reasonable” visitation.

During the last three decades, courts and policy makers have increasingly embraced the assumption that it is important to maintain children’s relationships with fathers as well as mothers. Joint custody is one mechanism for achieving this goal. Joint custody has two forms: joint legal custody (in which both parents have the right to make important decisions about the child, such as decisions about medical care and education) and joint physical custody (in which children spend a substantial amount of time in the households of both parents). Children in joint physical custody typically spend between one-third to one-half of their time living with fathers – a substantial increase over the traditional visitation arrangement in which children have an overnight visit with fathers every other weekend. Joint physical custody is less common than joint legal custody, however. Currently, the most common post-divorce arrangement involves joint legal custody and maternal physical custody (Kelly 1994).

Studies indicate that in joint custody families, parents (especially fathers) are more satisfied, communication between parents is more frequent, conflict between parents is less severe, and children are happier – primarily because they can see both parents regularly (Pruett and Santangelo 1999). Using a national longitudinal sample, Seltzer (1998) found that fathers with joint legal custody saw their children more frequently, had more overnight visits, and paid more child support than did fathers when mothers had sole custody. This research is consistent with the notion that joint legal custody promotes father engagement following divorce.

In a recent meta-analysis of 33 studies that examined children’s wellbeing in different custody arrangements, Bauserman (2000) found that children in joint physical or joint legal custody were better adjusted than were children in sole-custody settings. Specifically, children in joint-custody families had stronger family relationships, higher self-esteem, and better emotional and behavioural functioning. Children in joint physical custody tended to score highest across most measures of wellbeing. Overall, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that joint custody can be advantageous for children, presumably by facilitating involvement with both parents.



A recent study of college students who grew up in divorced families (Fabricius 2003) reinforces these conclusions. Most young adults endorsed post-divorce living arrangements that allowed substantial amounts of time with fathers. Moreover, students appeared to be better adjusted when they had frequent contact with non-resident fathers and when their parents had a positive co-parental relationship. Of those children raised in joint physical custody, about three-fourths said that going back and forth between households was not a problem, and about 90% were happy that they had grown up this way. One of the most frequent complaints that children had about their post-divorce years was that they did not have enough time with their fathers – a complaint that was especially common among children raised in mother sole custody.

Of course, fathers who are highly involved in their children's lives prior to divorce may be more likely than other fathers to request joint custody. Correspondingly, the former wives of involved fathers may support this arrangement, or at least not oppose it. If this is the case, then some of the apparently beneficial effects of joint custody may reflect the effects of positive father-child relationships that pre-date the divorce. Nevertheless, some research indicates that many highly involved fathers gradually disengage from their children following divorce, mainly because they (and their children) find that access arrangements provide insufficient time to maintain close ties. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) refer to these men as divorce de-activated fathers. Hetherington and Kelly also found that some fathers became more involved in their children's lives following divorce – a group they refer to as "divorce activated fathers". Marital dissolution often results in a complete reconfiguration of family relationships, and it is not possible to predict post-divorce parent-child relationships from pre-divorce factors. It seems likely, therefore, that custody arrangements that provide fathers with ample amounts of time with their children can help to maintain (and perhaps strengthen) ties between fathers and children.

A recent controversy has to do with whether joint physical custody should be awarded when children are infants or toddlers. Some observers believe that infants should be raised exclusively by their mothers, and that fathers should take on a greater share of care giving (including overnight visits) only when children are older. Two recent reviews of research, however, discredited this view (Kelly and Lamb 2000, Lamb and Kelly 2001). Instead, they argued that overnight visits with fathers are critical in ensuring that infants become attached to both parents. They also point out that with training, fathers can care for infants as competently as can mothers. Although available studies are few in number, research generally supports the Kelly and Lamb perspective (Pruett and Sandler 2004). That is, the age of the child does not appear to be a factor that should restrict joint physical custody or overnight visits with fathers.

When the level of post-divorce conflict between parents is low, and when parents are able to engage in a minimal degree of cooperative co-parenting, joint physical custody

appears to be the best arrangement for children. Nevertheless, there are conditions under which this approach is unlikely to be in children's best interests. For example, if fathers have a history of antisocial behaviour, substance abuse or violence, then access should be limited. (Rather than eliminate access, however, a better procedure is to allow visitation to occur in safe places established by the court.) When parents are litigating for sole custody, some courts (mainly in the past) assigned joint physical custody as a compromise – often against the wishes of one or both parents. In these cases, joint physical custody does not appear to benefit children. Instead, the continuing exposure to interparental discord increases the number of problems that children exhibit (Johnston et al. 1988). Overall, joint physical custody can be good or bad for children, depending on the psychological functioning of both parents and the extent to which former spouses are able to cooperate in raising their children.

### Increasing the Proportion of Children Raised by Two Happily Married Parents

During the last five years, strengthening marital quality – and decreasing the rate of divorce – has become a major focus of social policy in the United States. In 2000, Oklahoma became the leader of this movement by establishing the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. One of the central aspects of this initiative was to train individuals from all parts of the state to become premarital education providers. PREP (the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) was selected as the core curriculum. PREP is a research-based, skills-building curriculum designed to help partners improve communication, resolve disputes amicably, and learn ways to better support one another (Stanley et al. 1999). Experimental studies have shown that this programme is effective in improving communication, decreasing conflict, increasing marital happiness, and lowering the risk of divorce during the first four years of marriage (Carroll and Doherty 2003). After individuals are trained as PREP providers, they return to their local communities and provide free premarital education courses to interested couples. At present, hundreds of individuals have been trained as premarital educators, and these individuals have provided classes to thousands of couples across the state. To encourage participation, Oklahoma provides a substantial reduction in marriage licence fees to couples who participate in a premarital education programme. Although it is too early to determine if this intervention has affected marital quality or the rate of divorce, a state-wide evaluation study is planned for 2006.

Other states have adopted different strategies to strengthen marriage and decrease the rate of divorce. During the last several years, three states (Louisiana, Arizona and Arkansas) implemented Covenant Marriage – a form of marriage in which spouses obtain premarital education prior to the wedding, vow to seek counselling if their marriages are in trouble, and agree to refrain from seeking no-fault divorces. (That is, these couples must prove fault to divorce.) Covenant marriage has not proved to be popular, however, and few couples have opted for this alternative to the standard

marriage. Other states have incorporated relationship skills and conflict resolution courses into high school curricula, distributed information on marriage to newlyweds, and funded public education campaigns to promote the value of marriage.

At the federal level, the Bush administration in 2003 pledged \$1.5 billion to fund programmes to support healthy marriages. Although most of this funding is held up in Congress (at the time of this writing), the United States Administration for Children and Families has provided preliminary funding to many local programmes, as well as funding to conduct a nation-wide evaluation of these programmes. Many people are skeptical about the value of these steps, and a national debate has emerged about the appropriate role of government in strengthening marriage. Nevertheless, the goals of these programmes are reasonable: rather than trying to help couples to become better parents following divorce, these programmes help couples to have satisfying and stable marriages that are unlikely to end in divorce. Thus, the emphasis of these programmes is on prevention rather than cure.

## CONCLUSION

The research literature indicates that children of divorce are at increased risk of a variety of problems, with disruptions in the quality of parenting and co-parenting being the central mechanism. Consequently, programmes and interventions to improve the adjustment of children following divorce are likely to be most effective if they focus on (1) improving children's relationships with mothers and fathers, and (2) strengthening the co-parental relationship. The importance of improving the wellbeing of children following marital disruption is self-evident. After all, children are the innocent victims of their parents' inability to maintain a harmonious and stable home. The importance of effective policies will become even clearer in the near future, however, as the baby-boom generation begins to reach retirement age. As this happens, our society will become increasingly dependent on the emotional functioning, economic productivity, and future leadership of declining numbers of young adults. Although it is a cliché to say that children are the future, this has never been as true as it is in the current era.

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