Chapter Four

Childhood and Adolescence Growing Up in the Shadow of Divorce

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Introduction

Each year approximately 1 million children in the United States experience the divorce of their parents, and 20 million children currently live with just one parent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Half of all divorces in the United States involve children and adolescents, and about 40% of children will experience their parents' divorce (Amato, 2000). "The increase in marital dissolution has had major implications for the settings in which children are nurtured and socialized" (Amato, 2000, p. 1269). Although many children and adolescents survive the impact of their parents' divorce with resilience, good coping skills, and develop into well-adjusted individuals (Kelly, 2007), there are many who do not. This chapter focuses on the children and adolescents who struggle with the change, transition, and loss caused by the time preceding, during, and following parental divorce. These children and adolescents grow up essentially in the shadow of their parents' divorce.

Reactions to separation and divorce may vary among children and adolescents depending on their ages and the specific circumstances. The severity and duration of negative responses is also dependent on the presence of a variety of protective and risk factors (Amato, 2000). Children and adolescents enduring parental divorce may experience phases of grieving similar to those associated with death and dying (Shulman, 2005). Similar to the death of a parent, divorce impacts children and adolescents by putting them at higher risk for a number of affective disorders and mental health

problems, both during childhood and into adulthood (Luecken & Appelhans, 2005).

Divorce represents the termination of the family unit, and is often characterized as a painful loss. The period during a divorce may involve tremendous emotional distress, confusion, relationship strain, and life upheaval for both children, adolescents, and their parents (Emery & Forehand, 1994). Divorce involves loss of attachment to parents and the revision of a life plan that a child or an adolescent has come to expect and depend on (Bernstein, 2006). Children and adolescents may perceive their parents' divorce as "unexpected, unwelcome, and unpredictable" (Booth & Amato, 2001). That which was familiar transforms into an unknown and uncertain future Divorce can have lingering, subtle effects that shadow childhood and adolescence.

Children's Responses to Divorce

Children's reactions to divorce depend on many variables to include the child's age, the family's level of psychosocial functioning prior to divorce, the parents' ability to focus on the needs of their children despite their own emotions of anger, frustration, and loss, as well as the basic nature of each parent-child relationship (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Cohen, 2002). Parental separation often precedes divorce by months and sometimes years. Marital conflict may also precede divorce for some period of time, exposing children and adolescents to negative emotions, arguments, and perhaps violence. Children are very vulnerable during this time period in response to high parental distress (Cohen, 2002). Behavior problems in children can be viewed as early effects of marital dissolution when there is overt conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Infants and children younger than 3 years tend to absorb the emotional responses of their caregivers and may reflect their distress, grief, and preoccupation. They often exhibit irritability, separation anxiety, increased crying, fearfulness, sleep problems, gastrointestinal upset, aggression, and regressive behavior (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). Children 4 to 5 years of age tend to blame themselves for their parents' distress, unhappiness, and divorce. They may become clingy, act out, fear abandonment, experience nightmares, and have behavior problems, difficulty with task orientation, and adjustment in preschool (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). Children this age can also become overwhelmed by their custodial parent's emotional reactions of sadness, anger, and frustration (Christ, 2000). Developmentally, their early preoperational cognitive abilities make it difficult for them to understand the meaning of divorce and the permanence of their parents no longer living together (Christ, 2000).

School-aged children may show aggression, have temper outbursts, act out, and report feeling rejected by the absent or noncustodial parent. They can exhibit moodiness, preoccupation, decreased school performance, and feel somehow to blame for their parents' divorce (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Cohen, 2002). There is profound sadness and the possibility of depression. Children at this age also struggle with divided loyalties to each parent. There may be evidence of psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, sleep problems, and joint pain as a response to anger, guilt, feeling unloved, loneliness, loss, and grief. Acting out behavior may occur at home as they test rules and limits as a way of needing to feel in control (Cohen, 2002).

Children at any age may develop a fear of abandonment and sensitivity to loss, which can lead to anxiety and adjustment problems. Divorce can cause increased

sensitivity to loss, a general sense of vulnerability to abandonment, and fear of losing the noncustodial parent (Luecken & Appelhans, 2005).Even children who appear to successfully cope with the challenges brought on by their parents' divorce report having unhappy thoughts, feelings, and memories about the divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1996).

Adolescents' Responses to Divorce

Adolescents are often thrust into premature autonomy as they attempt to deal with negative feelings about the divorce and their deidealization of each parent (Cohen, 2002). Their anger, confusion, and sense of betrayal combined with the challenge of adolescent development makes dealing with parental divorce quite daunting. Young adolescents, ages 12 to 14, may immerse themselves in activities to distract themselves from their emotions. They are often characterized by an avoidance of all emotional expression, particularly any public display of their feelings (Christ, 2000). Middle adolescents, ages 15 to 17, describe intense emotions that interfere with enjoying their normal routines, including school and extracurricular activities (Christ, 2000). In response to their parents' divorce, adolescents often feel different from their peers, experience self-blame, and have a heightened sensitivity to interpersonal relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994). They may exhibit externalizing behavior such as substance abuse, poor school performance, somatic complaints, inappropriate sexual behavior, depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior, and delinquent behavior as a response to complex emotions caused by their parents' divorce (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000).

Many adolescents refuse to risk the trust and vulnerability involved in being close to someone again. They tend to remain vigilant to other possible losses, particularly in

regard to relationships, and are vulnerable to affective disorders, especially during times of high life stress (Luecken & Appelhans, 2005).

Adolescents may embrace the concept of having a damaged identity due to being the child of divorce, dismiss parental efforts to help alleviate their stress, isolate themselves from the family, and develop symptoms that act as reminders that parents have hurt them (Bernstein, 2006). They may not be ready to relinquish feelings of anger, distrust, and hurt.

Gender Differences

Boys and girls may be affected differently when they experience their parents' divorce, and may manifest their stress in dissimilar ways (Videon, 2002). . The impact of parental divorce in very early childhood "affects girls more strongly than boys emotionally, and boys more strongly than girls intellectually" (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000, p. 323). Girls adapt more quickly post-divorce than boys who continue to exhibit emotional distress, academic difficulties, lower self-esteem, and behavior problems (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000).

In general, boys tend to have more problems than girls following parental divorce, and are more negatively impacted than girls (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, & Teitler, 1991; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). Problems for boys related to divorce are demonstrated by aggression, acting out, depression, cognitive errors, and conduct problems (Mazur, Wolchik, Virdin, Sandler, & West, 1999; Sun, 2001). Some boys evidence increased aggression following parental divorce, which typically begins prior to the divorce (Amato, 2000; Emery & Forehand, 1996). Substance abuse and psychological problems tend to increase after divorce in boys (Doherty &

Needle, 1991; Sun, 2001). However, it is suggested that some of these problems may have existed for years prior to the divorce (Amato, 2000). Notably, there is a strong association between mothers with antisocial personality disorder and their sons having adjustment problems during marital divorce (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991). Until adolescence, boys may have more adverse reactions to the stressors brought on by divorce (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994).

Loyalty conflicts are evidenced more in girls who report feeling that parents put pressure on them to take sides during parental conflicts (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Girls feel caught in the middle (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Yet, there is more substance abuse among daughters of divorced parents (Doherty & Needle, 1991).

Protective Factors

Protective factors are elements that strengthen and bolster children and adolescents, enabling them to cope with parental divorce. Protective factors buffer children's and adolescents' responses to divorce-related stressors. They "act like shock absorbers and weaken links between divorce-related events" and the experience of stress (Amato, 2000). There are multiple protective factors which lessen the negative impact of divorce, that are characterized by three categories as outlined in Table 1, to include *individual protective factors*, *familial protective factors*, and *environmental protective factors*.

Individual Protective Factors

Several individual protective factors have been identified that increase positive functioning in children and adolescents following their parents' divorce. These include attitudes or coping style, cognitive abilities, social skills, interpersonal awareness,

feelings of empathy, internal locus of control, sense of humor, and an optimistic view of the future (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

Children's and adolescent's beliefs and feelings about their parents' divorce may moderate or mediate its effects or impact on them (Amato, 2000; Emery & Forehand, 1996). If they do not blame themselves, are able to understand that their parents' problems are not caused by them, then they manage the divorce better. Coping styles that involve directly talking about the divorce and their feelings toward their parents, rather than avoidant styles, allow children and adolescents to explore the ways in which divorce impacts them. Granted, children and adolescents cope differently due to varying cognitive abilities and developmental tasks dependent on their age and life experiences (Emery & Forehand, 1996).

Good social skills are extremely beneficial to children and adolescents as they navigate their parents' divorce (Aseltine, 1996; Hetherington, 1999). Social skills include communication, problem-solving, decision-making, self-management, and peer relations abilities that allow children and adolescents to initiate and maintain positive social relationships with others. Social competence is related to peer acceptance, teacher acceptance, and success in school and extracurricular activities. These skills basically include the ability to share, allow others to talk without interrupting, and taking turns. Additionally, the ability to appropriately manage anger and tolerate frustration enables children and adolescents to connect with other children, adolescents, and adults in a healthy and positive manner.

Children and adolescents who possess interpersonal awareness know and understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Amato, 2000). This translates to their

awareness of how their actions impact others and to self-regulate their behavior. They are more easily able to understand that their parents' divorce was not caused by them, and that there are times when adults can no longer live together. This awareness leads to feelings of empathy which allows them to understand why people, especially their divorced parents, behave the way the do. Additionally, empathy helps children and adolescents read and interpret nonverbal cues.

Children or adolescents who are perceived as relatively high in internal locus of control view themselves as more in control of their lives (Aseline, 1996; Hetherington, 1999; Kim, Sandler, & Jenn-Yum, 1997). They do not feel as though they are at the mercy of whatever occurs in life but believe that they have some amount of control over the outcome. Reinforcement comes from inside of the child or adolescent. This can be related to academic achievement as well as success in extracurricular school activities.

A sense of humor is an emotional and social tool that children and adolescents can rely on to help them through adverse life events such as parental divorce (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007). This includes seeing things from a variety of perspectives, being spontaneous, and exhibiting unconventional thinking. They recognize the absurd, enjoy the playfulness of life, and do not take themselves too seriously. There are physical and emotional benefits of humor that support the immune system, help children and adolescents connect with others, serve as a coping mechanism, and increase hope (Schuurman & DeCristofaro, 2009).

Maintaining an optimistic view of the future is another protective factor that leads to a better outcome of parental divorce for children and adolescents (Cohen, 2002). Children and adolescents who hold "positive illusions" about the divorce tend to think

more positively, develop active problem-solving abilities, and exhibit fewer psychological symptoms (Mazur et al., 1999). This suggests that focus on positive outcomes of divorce leads to better adjustment in children and adolescents.

Familial Protective Factors

There are several important familial protective factors which focus on the relationship between children and adolescents and their divorced parents, as well as the relationship between the divorced parents themselves. These factors include the existence of supportive and caring parents, a positive parent-child/adolescent relationship, parental cooperation and harmony, a supportive relationship with at least one parent, consistent parental rules and discipline, the maintenance of a normal household routine, and continued contact with the noncustodial parent (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

Children and adolescents tend to cope better with divorce if their parents exhibit supportive and caring behavior toward them. Although the family constellation changes during divorce, the parent-child/adolescent relationship must remain positive, strong and consistent. This allows children and adolescents to continue to feel loved, cared for, supported, and that no matter what happens, the relationship is a reliable reality. A positive relationship with at least one parent mitigates against the difficulties that can occur in response to parental divorce, even if the relationship with the other parent is not good (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Additionally, frequent and consistent contact with the noncustodial parent predicts better adjustment to divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Maintaining positive parent-child/adolescent relationships enables children and adolescents to develop a healthy attachment, trust, and security in future relationships.

Parental cooperation and harmony act as a protective factor buffering children and adolescents from other sources of distress in divorce. Children and adolescents tend to have better relationships with their divorced parents, grandparents, stepparents, and siblings when parents remain cooperative and cordial following the divorce (Ahrons, 2006). The emotional climate around the transition between parental households needs to be smooth and consistent. This decreases the possible stress and discomfort they may feel as they maneuver back and forth between two different parents in two different household environments.

If children receive consistent parental rules and discipline, maintain a normal routine, and experience continued parental acceptance and caring, then they are in a better position to survive the divorce with healthier levels of functioning both at home and at school (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996). Maintaining these norms increases feelings of safety, security, and lets children and adolescents know what to expect on a daily basis.

Continued contact and interaction with the noncustodial parent has positive effects on children and adolescents. Contact with noncustodial fathers for instance, predicts higher academic achievement, and less behavior problems (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Amato, 2000).

Environmental Protective Factors

Environmental protective factors include a supportive network of extended family, friends, and peers. Additionally, positive and successful school experiences, a feeling that teachers understand, a connection to the school community and to teachers, a connection to the neighborhood community, and a connection to a religious community

make a difference for children and adolescents experiencing parental divorce (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

A supportive network of extended family members, friends, and peers enables children and adolescents to cope with the loss that divorce entails (Amato, 2000). This network can help them understand and adapt to the changes brought on by divorce. This support is crucial especially if they are enduring an uncooperative and disharmonious parental divorce. This network can provide a healthy retreat away from the conflict.

Children and adolescents who have positive and successful school experiences cope better with their parents' divorce. Success may be evidenced by good grades and/or involvement in extracurricular activities which provides children and adolescents an arena where they can master and have some control over the outcome. Connection to the school community and to teachers is an important protective factor in that it provides them a place to be engaged in away from the home environment. Positive attention and understanding shown by teachers is associated with positive child and adolescent adjustment following divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1996).

Connection to the neighborhood community also provides an outlet for children and adolescents. A neighborhood swimming pool, basketball court, or park can offer another setting in which they can connect with friends and peers. If a family is involved in a religious community, this is another available support network which allows children and adolescents a place to retreat to and gain additional support.

Table 1: Protective Factors (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

Individual Protective Factors	Familial Protective Factors	Environmental Protective Factors
Attitudes or coping style	Supportive and caring parents	Supportive network of extended family
Cognitive abilities	Positive parent-child/adolescent relationship	Supportive network of friends and peers
Social skills	Supportive relationship with at least one parent	Positive and successful school experiences
Interpersonal awareness	Parental cooperation and harmony	Feeling that teachers understand
Feelings of empathy	Consistent parental rules and discipline	Connection to school community and teachers
Internal locus of control	Maintenance of a normal routine	Connection to neighborhood community
Sense of humor	Contact with noncustodial parent	Connection to religious community
Optimistic view of the future		

Risk Factors

Risk factors are elements that deter children and adolescent from developing healthy coping skills in regard to parental divorce. The multiple risk factors which increase and amplify maladaptive reactions to the changes and challenges that divorce may bring are characterized by three categories in Table 2 to include *individual risk factors*, *familial risk factors*, and *environmental risk factors*.

Individual Risk Factors

The individual risk factors which contribute to a child or adolescent having problems related to their parents' divorce include having a difficult temperament, poor coping skills, poor social skills, a lack of interpersonal awareness, an external locus of control, lacking a sense of humor, and presenting a very serious outlook (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

A difficult temperament has been associated with more emotional and adjustment problems in children following parental divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Adaptation to change in these children appears to be problematic especially with the increase in stress. Therefore, personality types may have an impact on how children and adolescents cope with parental divorce. Consideration must also be made regarding the parents' personality types. For example, antisocial parents are more apt to divorce and are most likely to have temperamentally difficult children (Lahye, Hartdagen, Frick, McBurnett, Connor, & Hynd, 1988).

Children and adolescents who exhibit poor or maladaptive coping skills tend not to do well adjusting to their parents' divorce. Avoidant behavior, distraction, and self-blame are the most prevalent manifestations of poor coping skills (Amato, 2000; Emery & Forehand, 1996). Some children and adolescents distract themselves with school work, video games, or music to the point of isolation. Initial or elevated levels of substance use or abuse can occur as a further method of distraction and escape (Doherty & Needle, 1991; Sun, 2001). Children and adolescents who distract themselves and avoid discussing their thoughts and feelings about their parents' divorce are apt to hold in negative emotions, isolate from family and friends, and become anxious or depressed. They blame themselves for the dissolution of the family unit, believing they are the cause of their parents' divorce (Amato, 2000). Many children and adolescents who self-blame ruminate about how they could have been better at school, more helpful at home, and wish they had not been born.

Children and adolescents who are deficient in social skills have difficulty interacting with others (Aseltine, 1996; Hetherington, 1999). They may misread social or

communication cues, and often do not show appropriate behavior in social settings. Displaying poor social skills may cause rejection by other children, adolescents, or adults, particularly teachers. This may contribute to or exacerbate already existing learning problems or conflicts in the classroom. Poor social skills detract from children's/adolescents' ability to obtain needed support from friends and peers as they experience parental divorce.

Children and adolescents who lack interpersonal awareness do not have a good understanding of their thoughts and feelings, or motives affecting their behavior. They may have limited capability of connecting their actions with how others react to them, and have difficulty self-regulating their behavior. Their ability to read nonverbal cues is limited and they may easily misread others' behavior. This makes it more difficult for them to understand that their parents' divorce is not caused by them.

Children and adolescents who maintain an external locus of control tend to believe that things happen due to chance or fate (Aseltine, 1996; Hetherington, 1999; Kim et al., 1997). They do not see themselves as having control over events in their lives. They perceive that reinforcement comes from the external world rather than from within themselves. Academic or extracurricular achievements are viewed as due to luck, or being at the right place at the right time.

The lack of a sense of humor puts children and adolescents at a disadvantage for coping and managing the adverse events of life (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007). It limits their ability to look at life events from a variety of perspectives, and they tend not to be very spontaneous. Their outlook on life is very serious, which makes it difficult for them to relax. Serious children and adolescents tend to be vigilant, as if waiting for negative

events to occur. They are apt to personalize their responsibility, particularly around their parents' divorce, and catastrophize about the possibility of adverse outcomes (Mazur et al., 1999).

Familial Risk Factors

Familial risk factors that impact children and adolescents of parental divorce include interparental conflict and hostility, poor parenting skills, reduced or no contact with the noncustodial parent, and lowered family income (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

The existence of interparental conflict and hostility is more strongly related to children's adjustment than the actual divorce (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Emery & Forehand, 1996). Conflict disrupts the ability to parent well and can lead to children's problematic behavior. High levels of interparental conflict and hostility expose children to negative models of interpersonal relationships which can lead to more aggression and acting out behavior. When divorced parents remain hostile and speak badly of one another, children and adolescents become conflicted about loyalty to their parents, often siding with one or the other (Ahrons, 2006; Amato & Afifi, 2006). This can lead to a sense of fragmentation because children and adolescents may feel the need to keep their relationship with each parent completely separate. Additionally, the custodial parent's anger with the noncustodial parent, questions about his or her right to parent, and display of dissatisfaction with child support can diminish the custodial parent's involvement with the child/adolescent (Ahrons, 2006).

Children do not function as well when poor parenting skills exist. These may include less or limited affection, less consistency, erratic routine, rejection, poor

communication, poor monitoring and supervision of behavior and activities, dispensing of harsher discipline, poor problem solving, lessened involvement in their lives, and increased conflict (Amato, 2000; Emery & Forehand, 1996). Poor parenting skills may have existed prior to the divorce, or as a result of the divorce.

Reduced or no contact with the noncustodial parent is also a risk factor (Amato, 2000). This of course, is dependent on the noncustodial parent's pre-divorce relationship with the children. If the relationship was problematic and conflictual, then disengagement may act as a protective factor. However, if the pre-divorce parent-child/adolescent relationship was positive, caring, and supportive, then risk is created when that relationship is diminished to the point of reduced or no contact (Videon, 2002).

Another risk factor pertains to socioeconomic status of children post-divorce. In the majority of families, divorce tends to deprive children of much of the resources provided by paternal resources (Fischer, 2007). Lowered family income especially if it is severe and leads to economic hardship, contributes to stress and depression in the custodial parent, and psychological and academic problems in children and adolescents (Amato, 2000; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Sun, 2001). A decline in socioeconomic status increases other negative life events such as moving from a bigger to a smaller house or apartment, living with relatives, and a change in neighborhood and schools. This impacts children's and adolescent's friendships, support systems, and extracurricular activities. These divorce-incurred negative life events represent significant loss to children and adolescents.

Environmental Risk Factors

There are several environmental risk factors that deter children and adolescents from healthy adaptation to parental divorce. These include no or limited contact with extended family members, a nonexistent network of supportive friends or peers, school performance problems, learning difficulties, negative relationships with teachers and the school community, and no connection to a community or neighborhood, (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

Sometimes divorce causes reduced or limited contact with extended family members (Emery & Forehand, 1996). This is particularly true if interparental conflict involves extended family members taking sides in the divorce which can exacerbate responses to divorce. Children and adolescents may lose this important support system of people who can help them navigate their parents' divorce. This is a group of people who perhaps know, understand, and love them, which includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives. Children and adolescents are also at risk if they do not have a supportive network of friends or peers to help them normalize and validate their thoughts and feelings. Friends and peers offer distraction and normalcy.

Divorce can exacerbate any school performance problems that children and adolescents may have been facing pre-divorce, especially in areas of reading and math achievement (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Any existing learning difficulties may worsen in response to the stress of parental divorce, and new academic problems may arise. This can make school a stressful and adversarial environment.

Children and adolescents who have negative relationships with teachers, principals, or the school community in general may find the school environment stressful,

and dread attending school (Amato, 2000). This risk factor can lead to more school problems, absences, and even school drop out. The dual challenge of parental divorce and poor school relationships can be detrimental.

Another environmental risk factor involves children and adolescents having no connection to their community, neighborhood, or religious organization. This can add to a sense of loneliness and isolation, particularly as they experience the unraveling of their family.

Table 2: Risk Factors (Cohen, 2002; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

Individual Risk Factors	Familial Risk Factors	Environmental Risk Factors
Difficult temperament	Interparental conflict and hostility	No or limited contact with extended family members
Poor coping skills	Poor parenting skills	Nonexistent network of supportive friends or peers
Poor social skills	Reduced or no contact with noncustodial parent	School performance problems
Lack of interpersonal awareness	Lowered family income	Learning difficulties
External locus of control		Negative relationships with teachers
Lack of sense of humor		No community connection
Very serious outlook		

Assessment Methods with Children and Adolescents

Children's and adolescent's mental health is measured with more validity and reliability than their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Emery & Forehand, 1996). However, there are several measurement instruments available to practitioners that are easy to administer, score, and evaluate that provide information about the inner world of children and adolescents experiencing their parents' divorce. These measurement instruments can be used together or separately depending on the areas practitioners need to assess. Listed

below are 7 such instruments (Fischer & Corcoran, 2007). Appendix A lists where these instruments can be obtained.

1. The Children's Beliefs about Parental Divorce Scale (CBAPS) is a 36-item yes/no objective scale designed to measure children's problematic beliefs about their parents' divorce. It includes statements about the thoughts and feelings children have about themselves and their separated parents. Practitioners can gain useful information about children's experiences of peer ridicule and avoidance, fear of abandonment, maternal blame, hope of parents' reunification, and self-blame. It is recommended for children in grades 3 to 6, and adolescents in grades 7 to 9.

2. The Child's Attitude Toward Father (CAF) and Mother (CAM) Scales are 25-item instruments designed to measure the extent, degree, and/or severity of problems a child may have with either parent. These scales measure the degree of contentment that children have in their relationship with their parents. Scores can alert practitioners that children are experiencing severe stress with the possibility of some type of violence being used to deal with stressors and problems. It is recommended for use with children ages 12 and up.

3. The How I Feel (HIF) is a 30-item self-report measure designed to assess emotional arousal and regulation of children ages 8 to 12. It is based on the premise that a child's ability to regulate or control emotions that occur with social interactions increases his or her capacity for adaptive coping. This measurement instrument can benefit practitioners in understanding the interplay between arousal and control in social-emotional adjustment in children, particularly as they navigate their parents' divorce.

4. The Norwicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (N-SLCS) is a 40-item yes/no questionnaire designed to measure whether a child/adolescent has an internal or external locus of control. This can inform practitioners about whether or not this is an individual risk factor or an individual protective factor. It is recommended for children in grades 3 and above.

5. The Children and Adolescent Social and Adaptive Functioning Scale (CASAFS) is a 24-item questionnaire designed to measure social functioning of children and adolescents. It includes subscales of School Performance, Peer Relationships, Family Relationships, and Home Duties/Self-Care. This measurement instrument can benefit practitioners to identify areas of strengths to be maximized and deficits to be targeted for treatment. It is recommended for children and adolescents in grades 8 and above.

6. The Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE) is a 54-item questionnaire designed to measure and record behaviors adolescents determine helpful in managing problems or difficult situations which happen to them or their family members. Practitioners can utilize the results to assess an adolescent's coping strategy during or following parental divorce. It is recommended for adolescents in both middle school and high school.

7. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) consists of three 25-item questionnaires that measure attachment to parents and peers. The three separate scales measure attachment to mother, father, and close friends. Attachment to these significant others are a source of security which is important considering the

attachment issues potentially created by parental divorce. It is recommend for ages 10 to 20.

Interventions with Children and Adolescents

Practitioners are cautioned not to assume that all children and adolescents who experiencedthe divorce of their parents are symptomatic in response. Resilience plays a key role as children and adolescents grow and develop. Divorce is not always a sufficient explanation of symptoms. It is beneficial to perform a thorough assessment to determine if presenting symptoms are related to divorce and its impact, as well as to rule out any other mental health issues. Each member within a divorcing family can experience varying degrees of both distress and adjustment, and at different points of time throughout the divorce process (Amato, 2000). One child may experience stress prior to the divorce, another during the disintegration of the marriage, and still another post-divorce. Meeting with the divorced parents, together or separately, depending on their ability to cooperate and co-parent without hostility, is advantageous in gathering useful information about the child's or adolescent's current and history of behaviors, academic performance, mood, and developmental milestones.

Interventions with children and adolescents should focus primarily on adjustment and constructively modifying their response to the outcomes of divorce. Pre-divorce parental conflict and hostility cannot be undone however, practitioners can help children and adolescents identify and understand their perceptions of these interactions (Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). Providing a supportive environment for direct discussion helps to reduce the risk impact of divorce on children and adolescents and to guide them through altering the meaning of divorce (Zambelli & DeRosa, 1992). Children and adolescents

learn to discuss the losses that divorce has created in their lives, and to recognize and develop coping strategies.

Bibliotherapy

The use of literature may be a means of reducing risk for both children and adolescents. Books for children that deal with themes of divorce and its subsequent changes and losses, enable them to explore and discuss their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Bibliotherapy can be perceived as a fairly easy way for the practitioner to enter into the confused world of the child (Christenbury, Beale, & Patch, 1996). Their sense of isolation and being different from other children, stemming from their parents' divorce may be reduced if they realize other children, even if they are only characters in a book, have been through a similar experience (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001). This allows children to identify with the characters and to vicariously share their experiences (Zambelli & DeRosa, 1992). It is a practical method for practitioners to engage children in discussing their lives before, during, and after their parents' divorce.

The use of literature with adolescents allows them to identify, acknowledge, and normalize their own responses to their parents' divorce. Many books aimed at adolescents explain the consequences of divorce, how to develop the necessary coping skills and ways of altering their social environment in order to adapt to the changes and losses created by divorce.

There are limitations to the utilization of bibliotherapy with children and adolescents. It is to be used as an adjunct to work with the practitioner rather than the main treatment approach. A list of children's books is provided in Appendix B that

practitioners may find useful in their work with children and adolescents experiencing the divorce of their parents.

Artwork

Making art can be therapeutic and cathartic for children and adolescents as they maneuver through parental divorce. Children and adolescents can be encouraged to make drawings or paintings, or construct collages. Children can have difficulty verbalizing the inner turmoil caused by divorce. Feelings of confusion, frustration, and anger may be evoked by and expressed through artistic activities (Ayyah-Abdo, 2001). Children can be asked to draw specific pictures about their family and about themselves. They can be encouraged to draw each parent's household and their place in it. Also, providing children and adolescents the opportunity to draw during a therapy session often allows them to speak more freely about their thoughts and feelings. It takes the focus off of them and onto the activity of making art.

Adolescents can be encouraged to draw or write, both during sessions and outside of sessions. They will often keep a journal of prose, poetry, ideas, and drawings that express their thoughts and feelings. Adolescent are often willing to share these with the practitioner as an invitation to their world, which opens up an avenue for expression and exploration about their reactions to parental divorce.

Interventions with Families

Families experience grief and loss in response to divorce. Practitioners can work with families in the aftermath of divorce by helping them mourn the loss of attachments and of life plans that must be revised (Bernstein, 2006).

Practitioners can aid divorcing parents to consider the impact of their post-divorce interactions on children and adolescents by helping them realize that parent-child relationships continue throughout the course of their lives (Ahrons, 2006). An ex-spouse can still be a valued member of a child's or adolescent's family, and practitioners can help post-divorce parents achieve a mutually respectful relationship (Bernstein, 2006). Family therapy holds the possibility of bridging painful gaps in post-divorce families, when practitioners utilize the methods of effective family therapy such as thinking systematically, listening with sensitivity and respect to the voice of each family member, and creating a safe and secure environment in which to ask engaging questions and convey important information about divorce (Bernstein, 2007).

When mothers are the custodial parent after divorce, fathers can often feel unimportant in children's lives. It is imperative that practitioners emphasize to fathers the importance of continued contact with their children. Early intervention with divorcing fathers has shown to significantly increase their involvement and improve relationships with their children even years later (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Cookston, Braver, & Griffin, 2007; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007). It is also important to work with mothers to help them recognize the benefits and needs of children's continued relationships with their fathers. Of course this is all contingent on the noncustodial parent not having an abusive or conflictual relationship with the child or adolescent.

Practitioners can be of great benefit to parents who maintain hostile relationships by pointing out the damage to children and adolescents incurred by painful loyalty conflicts (Ahrons, 2006; Amato & Afifi, 2006). Power struggles between divorced parents cause inordinate amounts of stress on children and adolescents. These need to be

recognized, defused, and diminished. Practitioners can help divorced parents develop effective coparenting skills to minimize conflicts, and build and increase resilience within the family. Good divorces allow children and adolescents to maintain relationships with each parent and their extended families (Ahrons, 2006). The bond between each parent and their children can be strengthened and supported. Support can be tangible or emotional (Shulman, 2005).

The custodial parent may be overwhelmed by the changes divorce brings. There may be lingering feelings of anger, fear, sadness, and grief, as well as problems with depression and anxiety. Maintaining anger toward the ex-spouse may serve as a method of diverting a devastating depression or an all-encompassing grief (Bernstein, 2007). Practitioners can work with the custodial parent to manage thoughts and feelings related to divorce and issues of coparenting. Additionally, the relationship between children and adolescents and their custodial parent can undergo changes, and even become problematic. They may experience more closeness or more distance, changes in strictness, increased responsibility in the family, and more autonomy (Emery & Forehand, 1996). The oldest child is often thrust into the role of a secondary parent, or parentified child. Custodial parents can have difficulty maintaining parental authority, completing the myriad tasks of running a household, and giving affection toward their children and adolescents (Emery & Forehand, 1996).

Working with Schools

Group Therapy

Practitioners can work with schools to provide school-based groups for children and adolescents of divorce. Divorce groups focus on many of the common occurring

stressors associated with parental divorce and offer strategies on effectively coping with these stressors (Holmes & Sprenkle, 1996). Groups are designed to alleviate misconceptions, and negative cognitions and feelings about divorce. Essential group components include providing support, giving information about divorce and ensuing reactions, and ensuring a safe environment for discussion and expression of feelings. Group practitioners can teach communication skills, social skills, relaxation skills, anger management skills, and problem-solving skills (Holmes & Sprenkle, 1996). Benefits of group involvement include reduction in feelings of shame and isolation, decreased anxiety, increased assertiveness, and development of positive feelings about their families, themselves, and their parents (Emery & Forehand, 1996; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). Feelings of anger, confusion, betrayal, self-blame, and frustration are typical as children and adolescents confront the losses caused by divorce. An important aspect of group work is the normalization of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as peers discuss similar experiences regarding the multiple changes, transitions, and losses that divorce brings into their lives. Groups help to replace the support systems that children and adolescents may have lost due to their parents' divorce. Group involvement promotes a move from parent-child focus to one of peer-group relatedness (Zambelli & De Rosa, 1992). Group members "learn to use others as a valid source of social comparison of their emotions and ideas…there is a move from one-way assistance (i.e. parent-child focus) to interpersonal relations that are based on reciprocity, intimacy, mutuality of trust, and interdependence, (i.e., peer-group relatedness)" (Grunebaum & Solomon, 1985).

The following is from a booklet titled *Tips for Kids Living in Changing Families* which was created by a group of adolescents experiencing separation and loss in their families (Malekoff, 2004, p. 182):

- Don't hide it all inside. Otherwise you will get very sad.

- Think about it or it will hit you all at once and when you least expect it.

- Don't feel like what happened is your fault.

- Just because your parents can't stand each other, doesn't mean they can't stand you.

- If you're angry, control your temper and don't hurt anyone.

- If you're upset, don't take it out on yourself or anyone else.

- If you're sad, show your feelings to someone you feel close to.

- Go to a therapy place if you don't have anyone to talk to.

- Don't be afraid to cry.

- Try not to be pessimistic. Be optimistic.

- The only thing to fear is fear itself.

- As long as there is love in your family, that's all that counts.

This is useful information constructed by adolescents for other children and adolescents about what they need. Practitioners can emphasize these tips in group work.

Common Ethical Dilemmas

Practitioners who work with children, adolescents, and families at any stage of parental divorce may at times find themselves saturated with hearing about the impact divorce has on each person. Separating out the various versions of acts and behaviors that transpired in the past or the immediate past can be challenging. A common ethical

dilemma in working with children, adolescents, and families with divorce-related issues is when neglect and/or physical or sexual abuse is present. Practitioners need to be cognizant of their state's laws and statutes that their profession must comply with. Practitioners have a professional and legal responsibility to report any suspicion of neglect and/or physical/sexual abuse to a child protection agency. This must be done without hesitation, even though an investigation may cause even more disturbance, confusion, and pain to an already challenged family system.

Cultural Considerations

Practitioners' work with children and adolescents and their families must always entail sensitivity to cultural issues and differences. This includes diversity within ethnicity and race, culture, religion, country of origin, gender and sexual identity, and each family's system of values and norms.

The term family can mean many different configurations of people. Families are "variable, fluid forms that are structured by and around the individuals within them" (Gabb, 2005, p. 587). This may include people who are biologically related and those who combine as a family based on affection, respect, similar life goals, and numerous other reasons. Many more families are blending biological and nonbiological ties, with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people creating innovative ways to plan and define families (Allen, 2007).

Of particular consideration is the impact that separation, or "same-gender relational breakup" has on the children and adolescents of lesbian-headed families, or "lesbian parent families" (Allen, 2007; Gabb, 2005). Without "legal rights and a parent identity", lesbian comothers, particularly if they are not the birth mother, often lose

connection and access o the child they coparented (Abrams, 1999; Gabb, 2005).When lesbian mothers separate, the 'other mother' must often negotiate visitation rights with the biological mother. Likewise, the child or adolescent can painfully miss the former relationship and is further isolated from support and understanding due to the loss of the other mother (Allen, 2007). The child's or adolescent's loss can be further compounded by estrangement and conflict between the former couple. Allen (2007) describes this as "fractured parent-child ties" which causes ambiguous loss, confusion, sadness, uncertainty, and a great deal of mourning. Intimate adult partnerships may end, but relationships with child and adolescents need consistency and continuity (Amato, 2000). Practitioners and families can work together to manage the relationship losses in order to create a smooth and less painful transition.

Case Example: *"Forever Caught in the Middle"*

The following case example illustrates how a conflictual parental divorce impacts a boy's life from childhood through adolescence. Concepts in this chapter are incorporated in the case example.

Travis is currently a 16 year-old boy whose parents divorced when he was 7 years old. His parents agreed on joint custody and he splits his time equally between the two households, spending a week at a time with each parent. His father remarried when he was 8 years old and his mother remarried when he was 9 years old. Neither of his stepparents have children. He is an only child within two different families. Travis' parents fought verbally and physically throughout his early years. He describes going to his bedroom and curling up in a ball "to be as small and insignificant as possible." Whenever he perceives conflict in either household, he retreats to his bedroom and "holes

up" until things calm down. Travis has avoided all conflict within his two families, at school, and with friends until the past 2 years.

Travis did well academically in elementary and middle schools. He caused no problems in school and "followed all the rules, like everyone expected." Teachers liked him since he was quiet, compliant, and did his homework. High school presented a different challenge. He failed a couple of courses during his freshman and sophomore years but did pass them in summer school. Both sets of parents were very unhappy with him, particularly his father.

Travis has played baseball "like forever since I can remember." This was something he and his father had as a common interest. Travis has been on select teams, playing year round. His father invested a great deal of money in baseball instruction clinics, camps, and select teams. However, Travis did not make the team in high school, and could not try out his sophomore year due to failing grades.

He describes his father as extremely authoritarian, who rages whenever Travis does not meet his expectations. Travis is often grounded from activities with friends, driving, and from his cell phone. Weeks with his father and stepmother involve chores, homework, isolation, and avoidance of his father. Travis basically shuts down. Weeks with his mother and stepfather are completely different. Travis is rarely grounded and has been given many freedoms "to be a teenager." He is encouraged to socialize with friends, can drive his car, and always has his cell phone.

Although his parents no longer engage in physical altercations, they continue to "fight over everything about my life." Both biological parents pay equally for costs involving Travis unless it is something extra that either parent wants to invest in. His

father paid for costs associated with baseball and his mother paid for guitar lessons over the years. Both parents split the cost for private school tuition in elementary and middle school. His parents argued extensively over which high school he would attend. His father wanted him to attend public school in their neighborhood, and his mother preferred he continue in private school. Travis also preferred attending the private high school since the majority of his friends and peers would be there. These are friends and peers he has known since kindergarten. His father "won that one because of the money. He never lets me forget how much I cost. Why did they even have me if I cost so much?" Travis is tired of being caught in the middle, in between his parents. He feels they fight over him and that he is the cause of their continued strife., his father's rage, and his mother's sadness.

Over the past 2 years Travis has shifted from being quiet, compliant, and obedient to being loud, argumentative, stubborn, and does not hold back his anger. However, this happens only at school and when he spends his week at his mother's home, and never during the week with his father and stepmother. He has punched his fist through walls at his mother's house, yelled at her to the point of bringing her to tears, and got in his car and driven away.

Travis harbors a lot of anger and resentment, especially toward his father. He has begun to dislike anyone in an authority position including teachers, whom he has been giving a hard time. He states that teachers do not understand him and that "they are stupid."

Travis's mother and stepfather brought him to the initial session midway through his freshman year in high school. His father gave his consent for treatment but refused

invitations to join his son in a session. Individual treatment, along with some family work was the focus. One of the main areas for work with Travis, his mother, and his stepfather was the setting of appropriate and consistent limits. He had been given too much freedom "to be a teenager" and his mother admitted to trying to make up for "his horrible childhood" by giving him whatever he wanted when he wanted it. There were some initial power struggles as Travis adjusted to the new household rules.

During his sophomore year, Travis was referred to a coed adolescent group co-led by a female and male practitioner. The group consisted of 4 boys and 5 girls. All of them had experienced their parents' divorce. Some had stepparents, some had a single parent, and others were negotiating relationships with a second stepparent. Travis met 2 boys and a girl who also expressed their anger by hitting things and throwing objects. The group discussed less destructive methods of releasing anger while validating the reality and commonality of the feeling. Group members were encouraged to keep a journal and bring in any writings or drawings that conveyed their thoughts, feelings, and behavior between group sessions. Travis produced a number of drawings revealing a talent that he had kept hidden from his parents. His drawings were dark and foreboding yet extremely detailed and precise. He explained the emotions attached to his drawings and group members responded with understanding, empathy, and acknowledgement of entertaining some of the same thoughts.

The practitioners taught the group members relaxation skills to be practiced in times of stress. Travis grasped the concepts involved and successfully used the skills to calm himself whenever he felt angry and misunderstood. He envisioned a safe and secure place while breathing deeply. This worked for him while he endured his father's rages

and during stressful times at his mother's house. However, retreating to his bedroom and drawing was the most beneficial stress reducer for him, and particularly sharing them with the group.

Travis will begin his junior year of high school with some new skills. He plans to continue group participation, individual therapy, and use drawing as a means of emotional expression. He has come to the realization that his father may never change but that employment of his new-found skills can help him remain calm. He is still angry and frustrated about being caught in the middle of his parents' continued plans for him but expresses his feelings in more constructive ways.

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Appendix A

Listed below are the addresses from which to obtain the measurement instruments described in the Assessment Methods with Children and Adolescents section (Fischer & Corcoran, 2007).

1. The Children's Beliefs about Parental Divorce Scale (CBAPS): Professor Larry Kurdek, Wright State University, Department of Psychology, Dayton, OH 45435-001.

2. The Child's Attitude Toward Father (CAF) and Mother (CAM) Scales: WALMYR Publishing Company, PO Box 12217, Tallahassee, FLA 32317-2217 or call (850) 383-0045.

3. The How I Feel (HIF) scale: Email Dr. Tedra Walden at tedra.Walden@vanderbilt.edu.

4. The Norwicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (N-SLCS): Dr. Stephen Nowicki, Jr., Department of Psychology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322.

5. The Children and Adolescent Social and Adaptive Functioning Scale (CASAFS): Email Dr. Jeannie Sheffield at jeannie@psy.uq.edu.au.

6. The Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE): Call the University of Wisconsin, Family Stress Coping, Coping and Health Project at (608) 262-5070.

7. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA): Contact Mark T. Greenberg, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, NI-25, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195. Instruments and a short manual are available for $5.00.

Appendix B

The following is a list of books available for children and adolescents experiencing their parents' divorce:

Beyer, R., & Winchester, K. (2001). *What in the world do you do when your parents divorce?* Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

Blume, J. (1978). *It's not the end of the world*. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury Press.

Boyd, C. (1983). *Chevrolet saturdays*. Simon and Schuster.

Brotherton, M. *Split: A graphic reality check for teens dealing with divorce.* Flipswitch.

Brown, L.K., & Brown, M. (1990). *Dinosaurs divorce: A guide for changing families.* Little, Brown & Company.

Cassella-Kapusinski, L. (2006). *Now what do I do: A guide to help teenagers with their parents' separation or divorce.* Skokie, ILL: ACTA Publications.

Coleman, W.L. (1998). *What children need to know when parents get divorced.* Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.

Danziger, P. (1997) *The divorce express*. Putnam Publishing Group.

Gardner, R. (1985). *The boys and girls book about divorce*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

Girard, L. (1987). *At daddy's on saturdays*. Morton, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

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Grunsell, A. (1990). *Divorce. Let's talk about it.* Watts Franklin.

Holub, J. (2001). *Cinderdog and the wicked stepcat*. Albert Whitman.

Holyoke, N., & Nash, S. (1999). *Help! A girl's guide to divorce and stepfamilies.* Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publications.

Johnson, J. (1999). *Everything you need to know about your parents' divorce*. Rosen

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Lansky, V. (1998). *It's not your fault, Koko Bear: A read-together book for parents &*

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MacGregor, C. (2004). *The divorce helpbook for teens.* Atascadero, CA: Impact

    Publishers.

Mayle, P. (1980). *Divorce can happen to the nicest people*. Indianapolis, IN: MacMillian

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Osman, T. (1990). *Where has daddy gone?* Hambleton-Hill Publishers.

Prokip, M. (1996). *Divorce happens to the nicest kids*. Alegra House Publishers.

Ransom, J.F. (2000). *I don't want to talk about it: A story about divorce for young*

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Rubin, J. (2002). *My mom and dad don't live together anymore*. American Psychological

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Schab, L.M. (2008). *The divorce workbook for teens: Activities to help you move beyond the breakup.* Oakland, CA: Instant Help Books.

Spelman, C., & Parkinson, K. (2001). *Mama and daddy bears divorce.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

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Stinson, K. (1988). *Mom and dad don't live together anymore*. Westport, CT: Firefly Books.

Thomas, S. (1997). *Divorced, but still my parents.* Springboard Publications.

Trueit, T.S. (2007). *Surviving divorce: Teens talk about what hurts and what helps.* Scholastic Books.

Winchester, K. & Beyer, R. (2001) *What in the world do you do when your parents divorce: A survival guide for kids.* New York, NY: Magination Press.