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# Divorce and Child Development

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# Divorce and Child Development

## **Abstract**

Divorce has become commonplace in the United States. Most Americans are likely to feel its effects directly either from the dissolution of their parents' marriage, their own marriage, or the marriage of one of their offspring. Two recent studies using data from national surveys have estimated that close to half of all children borne in the late 1970s, when the divorce rate reached its peak, will witness the breakup of their family before they reach the age of 16 (Bumpass, 1984; Furstenberg et al., 1983).

These startling figures have stimulated a tremendous amount of concern about the impact of divorce on the socialization process. The question of how divorce affects children has interested researchers for more than half a century, and hundreds of studies addressing this question have appeared in psychological and sociological journals. At first glance, it appears that the existing literature tells us very little, for it is rife with inconclusive and even contradictory results. Yet, if we go beyond the specific findings reported in any particular study and look at the larger pattern of results, the data assume a more consistent form, indicating some promising directions for future research.

## **Disciplines**

Family, Life Course, and Society | Social Psychology | Sociology

# DIVORCE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. and Judith A. Seltzer

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Divorce has become commonplace in the United States. Most Americans are likely to feel its effects directly either from the dissolution of their parents' marriage, their own marriage, or the marriage of one of their offspring. Two recent studies using data from national surveys have estimated that close to half of all children born in the late 1970s, when the divorce rate reached its peak, will witness the breakup of their family before they reach the age of 16 (Bumpass, 1984; Furstenberg et al., 1983).

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the larger pattern of results, the data assume a more consistent form, indicating some promising directions for future research.

The initial section of this chapter reviews certain common strands of agreement which can be extracted from recent research. We make no attempt to survey the vast literature on the consequences of marital dissolution for children, but instead we confine our attention to a set of summary articles published in the past decade or so, that have attempted to take stock of what is presently known. Our purpose is to show that researchers are moving away from a crude and futile effort to determine whether or not divorce generally has a negative effect on children to a more sophisticated exploration of how and under what circumstances divorce alters patterns of socialization and the developmental process.

In the second section of this chapter we describe an ongoing project where we are attempting to examine how and why divorce affects children. The findings furnished in this paper are preliminary. We have described elsewhere the initial steps in the second wave of this analysis which assess the effects of marital disruption on children (Furstenberg and Allison, 1985). The results provided here will be treated as provisional and should not be taken as our final word on the subject.

### RECONCEPTUALIZING THE PROBLEM: FROM EVENT TO PROCESS

Throughout the first half of this century, studies of the effects of divorce on children were heavily laced with moral overtones. Reflecting the widespread ambivalence about the growing pattern of divorce, researchers were inclined to assume that coming from a "broken" family caused "psychological damage." Their studies focused on the extent and nature of that "damage." In their brilliant summary of much of the early research on children (boys, in particular) in fatherless families, Herzog and Sudia (1973) exposed the bias of many of the early investigators toward the finding that divorce had a detrimental effect on children. Childrearing was seen as defective in broken families because it was carried out in families that departed from the prevailing ideal of the nuclear family. While this premise has not entirely disappeared, it has been moderated by demographic change and a growing acceptance in our culture of diverse family forms. Researchers today are less likely to subscribe to the notion that the structure of the family so uniformly and directly determines the outcome of socialization (Levitan, 1979).

Compounding this ideological bias, there are several methodological explanations for the attention given to negative outcomes of divorce. First, much of our knowledge to date about the consequences of divorce comes from studies using clinical samples. Because children in clinical populations differ in a variety of respects from children in the general population (in part, because to fall into the

sample they or another family member sought or was referred for treatment), results from these studies are likely to show more negative effects of divorce than might be found in a more inclusive sample. Furthermore, the technique of indepth interviewing used in clinical studies also predisposed the investigator to conclude that divorce has negative effects on children. Divorce is clearly a traumatic and painful event for family members, and clinical interviews are certain to focus upon the immediate adverse responses, particularly if the researcher's goal is treatment or some other form of ameliorative intervention. Finally, the restriction of previous research to relatively small samples meant that other family characteristics associated with divorce and movement from a two parent household to a single parent household could not be controlled. Early research, therefore, frequently confounded the effects of divorce with the effects of a reduction in family income or with the child's move to a new house or school district, both factors that have a negative effect on some aspects of child welfare.

Herzog and Sudia (1973) were among the first to attack the simplistic notion that divorce was a unitary event that had a uniform effect on children. This mode of thinking, which some have referred to as a "states and rates" approach to studying social behavior, predominated not only among the study of divorce, but also among a host of other controversial topics which were capturing the attention of family researchers. An almost precise parallel can be drawn between the treatment of divorce and maternal employment in early sociological and psychological studies. In each instance, a complicated and multi-dimensional process was converted into a unidimensional variable, thus obliterating the mediating links between social structure and socialization. This tendency toward analytical alchemy more or less insured inconsistent results because potential differences were blurred or obscured when mediating conditions were overlooked. Researchers were looking for general effects when there were none to be found. Consequently, conceptual development was thwarted.

Herzog and Sudia (1973:90) advised shifting the focus from a "single variable, assumed to be the determining factor, to a cluster of interacting factors that, on the one hand, mediate its effects, and, on the other hand, provide clues to methods of diminishing identified adverse elements in its effects." They recommended treating divorce as a complex process that must be broken down into many components if its effects are to be understood.

In the decade or so since they published their review, a number of other researchers (e.g., Goetting, 1981; Hetherington, et al., 1981; Longfellow, 1979; Wallerstein, 1982; Zill, 1978) have picked up this theme and have attempted to identify some of the principal mediating factors that link the divorce transition to the process of socialization. By specifying these links, researchers have been able to determine some of the characteristics that intensify or ameliorate the impact of marital disruption for children. Examples of factors mediating children's adjustment to divorce are presented below.

Divorce may be a problem for children, but it is a solution to a problem for many

couples who find themselves trapped in an unrewarding and perhaps conflict-ridden relationship. Moreover, there is a great deal of consensus that marital conflict creates adverse effects for children, whether or not couples elect to divorce (Jacobson, 1978). Consequently, the divorce, because it frequently reduces the level of dissent, may have beneficial effects on children who were caught in the crossfire of parental battles. In fact, few if any studies have investigated the consequences for children of variation over time in levels of parents' marital conflict. It is reasonable to suppose that the effects of divorce may linger on when parents continue to feud in the aftermath of divorce, but this proposition has not been carefully studied (Jacobson, 1978).

The experience of divorce is quite different for adults and children, and the perspectives of each may influence the other. Parents' response to the process of separation is known to affect children, but it is equally plausible that children's reactions influence an adult's ability to manage as a parent (cf., Weiss, 1979). We do not know very much about the dynamics of adjustment within the family system, but we cannot look just at an individual family member's response to divorce if we hope to understand the process of adaptation; rather, *each* family member's response must be considered. A methodological footnote accompanies this observation. Studies that rely on reports from parents about their children's responses to divorce or vice versa run a high risk of confounding their information in ways that make interpretation hazardous. While it is interesting to know how parents and children perceive each other's responses to divorce, these data are not a substitute for collecting direct information from the various parties involved (Niemi, 1974).

As we expand our analysis to the family system, we must also look beyond the household boundaries. Several recent studies have suggested that the role of the noncustodial parent may affect the child's adaptation to divorce (Ahrons, 1981; Steinman, 1981). Relatively little is known about the management of parenthood after divorce, but it is suspected that continued contact between the parents and their coordination of childcare decisions may increase the child's sense of well-being (Clingempeel and Reppucci, 1982). Results reported previously from our own research tell us that most outside parents have very little contact with their children after divorce. Among the small minority who have regular relations with their children, contact and communication between the coparents is generally rare (Furstenberg, et al., 1983; Hess and Camara, 1979). Apparently, most couples are not able to segregate their conjugal and parental roles, and disengage from both roles when the marriage dissolves. Does divorce have different consequences for children whose parents continue to coordinate their caregiving activities compared to those whose parents do not share childrearing responsibilities? This question has not been adequately addressed (Bowman and Ahrons, 1985).

Most existing studies of divorce, for reasons already mentioned, have failed to consider potentially positive consequences of divorce for children. Recent stud-

ies of nonclinical populations have identified adaptations to divorce in children that may promote growth and adjustment. Paralleling the results of studies of sudden economic deprivation (see, for example, Elder, 1974), Weiss (1979) reports that children of divorce may grow up more quickly, assume greater responsibility in the household, and may develop especially close ties with their parents. The possibility that divorce may confer certain benefits directs our attention to the personal capacities that children bring to bear when misfortune occurs, and the resources available to the child both within and outside of the household that serve to buffer the trauma of divorce. The protective features of both personality and social systems that provide some measure of immunity from stressful events are one important key to understanding why some children experience adverse outcomes from divorce and others thrive under difficult circumstances.

Marital disruption is a temporal process that, for the most part, has only been considered cross-sectionally. Previous studies of life course transitions have identified three separate temporal dimensions, all of which may have some bearing on the impact of divorce on children (Elder, 1984; Hareven, 1978). First, *historical* change has both shifted the meaning of divorce and changed the composition of the population exposed to marital disruption. Until the most recent decade, divorce was still a relatively rare event. Families who went through divorce were, no doubt, more different from the rest of the population than is true today. In the past more than in the present, when we compared the children of maritally disrupted and maritally stable families, we were contrasting populations that were probably dissimilar in a variety of respects, many of which cannot be controlled experimentally or statistically. Therefore, it is difficult to isolate the specific effects of divorce from the other factors which potentially distinguished the two populations. As families who divorced became similar to the rest of the population, we would expect the children of divorced parents to more nearly resemble the children of maritally stable parents.

Not only has the recruitment process become less selective, the social response to divorce is more muted today. The children of parents who divorce are made to feel less different from their peers than was true a generation ago. Although divorce may be no less terrifying or painful for children today, it certainly carries less social stigma. Before they experience it directly, children have gained some familiarity with divorce both through images portrayed in the mass media and personal experience. Whether and how this shapes their response to marital disruption in their own family is not known, but it is reasonable to suppose that like other forms of "anticipatory socialization," it may ease the transition to some extent. The question of whether the effects of divorce were different in the past compared to today is one we shall be addressing in another phase of the project described in this chapter.

Another temporal dimension of divorce that mediates its impact on children is the amount of time that has elapsed since the disruption. The significance of

divorce changes with time as the family reorganizes, first in response to marital dissolution, and again when one or both parents establishes a new relationship. The vast majority of studies of the consequences of divorce for children have examined the short-term response or looked only at a single point in time. Two recent longitudinal studies have taken separate readings of children's responses close to the time of separation and again some years later. As might be anticipated, children who are initially extremely upset often recover in time, and some of those who at first have a relatively benign reaction encounter problems a year or two later (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Divorce is a multistaged transition that in actuality is a series of many discrete occurrences. The child may or may not be prepared for the separation, to be removed from familiar surroundings, change schools, lose contact with the outside parent, be separated from siblings, and/or be exposed to continued conflict; these are but a few of the conditions that may complicate the adjustment process. These swift changes in the child's social situation require a substantial redefinition of social reality. Little wonder that most children experience extreme distress around the time of the separation. What we are only beginning to recognize is how much children's responses to the divorce can and do change over time as the boundaries of their social world are redrawn. This is not to say that the pain of the divorce vanishes, but rather that most children have the capacity to accept the reality of their new situation.

In part, children's responses to separation and divorce will be affected by their new circumstances. For most children, divorce is a transitional rather than a terminal event; that is, most, in time, will end up living in households with new parents or parent surrogates. Confounding the process of adjustment to divorce, then, is the sequential or sometimes simultaneous adjustment to remarriage and stepfamily life. Most research that has attempted to measure the outcome of divorce has simply ignored this complication. In fact, children's responses to marital disruption may have more to do with the transitions that occur after the divorce than with the divorce itself. How children deal with the entrance of new parents may be no less important than the loss of familiar figures, in affecting the child's sense of well-being.

A third temporal dimension must be considered if we are to understand children's reactions to these profound disturbances to their social and psychological worlds. The point at which the disruption occurs in children's lives may have a large effect on their responses to the change. Children of different ages employ cognitive and emotional resources differently, have varying degrees of attachment, and varying needs, all of which may shape their response to the divorce and their accommodation to a new family situation. Several recent studies indicate that children respond differently to divorce depending on their age at the time of the event (Longfellow, 1979; Magrab, 1978; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

The above list of mediating conditions is by no means exhaustive. For exam-



ple, we have not referred to children's gender, which, as several studies have shown, has a direct bearing on their response to marital disruption and remarriage (Guidubaldi, et al., 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Lamb, 1977). Gender may also interact with other mediating factors such as custodial arrangements and visitation patterns. Our intention has not been to catalogue all of the factors that might account for children's responses to divorce, but rather to convey a sense of what is required to trace the links between marital disruption, the socialization process, and the development of children. We are merely identifying an emerging consensus among researchers that our approach to the study of how divorce affects children has been inappropriate.

A new generation of studies are beginning to appear that display greater conceptual sophistication and sensitivity to capturing the changing meaning of the transition for the child and the family. Unfortunately, we are a long way from developing the techniques and the tools for studying social processes that unfold over a long period of time. The best studies we have are still qualitative accounts that are rich in detail, or intensive studies of tiny populations. We do not have many studies that look at change in families over time, and only a couple of these rely on data from representative samples (Seltzer, 1981). Consequently, many of the interesting leads in the qualitative and small-scale studies have not been followed up in systematic longitudinal investigations.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA FROM THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN**

The second wave of the National Survey of Children (NSC) was intended to fill this void by providing longitudinal data on a representative sample of children who were first interviewed in 1976 when they were between the ages of 7 and 11. The initial study, carried out by Nicholas Zill under a grant from the Foundation for Child Development, was designed to assess the well-being of children in the United States. Up to two children in each household were interviewed, yielding a total of 2,279 children from 1,747 households. In order to permit racial comparisons, blacks were oversampled and the final data were weighted to correct for this procedure. A professionally trained field worker interviewed the primary caregiver in each household (the mother in 90% of the cases) as well as the randomly selected child(ren). Data on the children were also collected from the schools through a questionnaire mailed to the teacher who was most familiar with each child's classroom performance.

In 1981, a follow-up to the NSC was designed to study the effects of marital disruption on children and on the operation of single and multiparent families. Because funding was limited, we concentrated on the households of children who had experienced a family disruption by the time of the first survey or whose parents were at greater risk of separating because they had reported high levels of

conflict in the initial interview. For comparison, we also interviewed a randomly selected subsample of children living in stable family situations in which the parent reported low or moderate conflict. These data were weighted so that they represented the true proportion in the original sample.

Over 82% of the original sample targeted to be reinterviewed were located, yielding a total of 1,423 children from 1,071 households. As in the earlier survey, the parent who was most knowledgeable about the child was interviewed, and in all but a few cases that person was the same individual who had participated in the initial study. Data from the schools were collected again through a questionnaire mailed directly to teachers identified by the child.

We conducted the follow-up survey by telephone rather than personal interviews so that we could interview a larger sample of children. To test whether the quality of the data was affected by this procedure, we compared the results of telephone and personal interviews for 250 randomly assigned metropolitan interviews conducted by the same pool of interviewers. Comparisons of these two subsets revealed no large or consistent differences in the response rate, interview time, quality of responses, or answers to designated questions that might have been expected to show a response bias.

The interview lasted an average of about an hour for the parents and 35 minutes for the children. The parent interview contained extensive information on marital history, education and work experience, health, social relations, and support furnished by extended kin. If the parent was currently living with a partner, the quality of that relationship was assessed. For respondents who had previously been married, we also obtained a detailed chronology of the dissolution of the earlier marriage(s) and information about her<sup>1</sup> current relations with the former spouse. A separate section of the parent's interview was devoted exclusively to reports about the child or children in the study. We asked the parent a variety of questions on the behavior of the child in the home, with peers, and in school, as well as information on the child's relations with the other parent (typically the father), whether or not he still resided in the household. Parallel questions on these areas were included in the child's interview as well, so that we have independent reports on the child's adjustment in the family, peer group, and school from parents and children. We also asked the child about misbehavior (e.g., alcohol consumption, shoplifting, etc.) which the parent might not be able to report. Finally, we collected data directly from teachers about children's classroom performance and overall adjustment in school, thus allowing three-way comparisons on certain items for which we have independent reports from children, their parents, and teachers.

Several hundred separate questions from the three interviews assess the children's attitudes and behavior in varied areas as reported by parents, teachers, or the children themselves. Many items are similar or identical to questions included in the initial survey so that development and well-being can be examined over a five year period as the children moved from childhood into adolescence.

Together, the two surveys provide an unusual opportunity to look at both short-term and fairly long-term effects on a representative sample of children, using a large and diverse set of outcome measures.

Most important of all, the surveys contain information on most of the intervening or mediating conditions that were referred to in the introductory section of this paper. We can explore how children's adjustment to separation and divorce is affected by such circumstances as the nature of the separation process, the past and present relations between their parents, the amount of contact and quality of relationship with both their residential and nonresidential parents, the past and present social and psychological characteristics of each of their parents, the degree of support provided by extended kin, peers, and teachers, and the children's current family arrangements.

Previous papers from this project have described the incidence of marital disruption in the sample and the child care arrangements that evolve following separation and divorce (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Furstenberg and Nord, 1985). This is the first in a second series of papers that will inspect the effects of these arrangements on the children themselves. We are still in the process of organizing the data on the children and building indices that tap the important outcomes examined in previous research. However, as a prelude to this later analysis, we have selected from the three interviews a few key items that provide an overview of the variety of child outcomes available in the data and can hint at what we are likely to find in subsequent analyses.

## THE FINDINGS

In Table 1, we have reproduced the questions used in this preliminary analysis, and cross-tabulated the responses of the respective respondents by whether the parents of the children in the study had ever been separated or divorced, and the number of marital disruptions that had occurred in the family. Since we have removed the parents who never married and those cases where the outside biological parent is dead (5.6% of the children living with at least one biological parent), one disruption typically means that the child is living in a single parent household, two disruptions signifies a remarriage, and three or more indicate that the children have parents who have undergone a divorce.

Before discussing the results, a cautionary comment about the items selected is in order. To examine the effect of mediating conditions, we selected outcome measures that revealed a difference between maritally stable and disrupted families. Consequently, the results in Table 1 slightly overstate the true magnitude of the differences based on the full array of measures in our survey. Nevertheless, the distortion is not severe. Among the 50 or so items we have examined to date, almost all produced results in the same general direction. Children who have experienced a disruption are disadvantaged relative to children in stable two

Table 1. Selected Items from Child, Parent, and Teachers Interviews by the Parent's Marital History and Numbers of Marital Transitions\*

	Marital Status		Marital Transitions			
	Continuously Married	Separated or Divorced	0	1	2	3+
<i>Items from Parent Interview</i>						
1. Has (CHILD) repeated any grades for any reason?	yes no	21.1 78.9 (356)	11.7 88.3 (940)	21.0 79.0 (190)	20.3 79.7 (108)	24.9 75.1 (63)
2. All things considered, is (CHILD)'s life going:	very well fairly well not so well/ not well at all	47.6 48.6 3.8 (357)	58.2 40.5 1.4 (940)	46.9 51.4 1.8 (190)	52.1 43.0 4.9 (108)	49.6 42.9 7.6 (64)
<i>Items from Child Interview</i>						
3. In the past year, have you gotten into trouble with a teacher or principal for fighting with other kids at school?	yes no	22.9 77.1 (341)	13.8 86.2 (892)	19.4 80.6 (183)	21.3 78.7 (105)	30.4 69.6 (57)
4. Are you very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, or not too satisfied with your family?	very somewhat not too	66.9 26.9 6.2 (342)	81.8 15.2 2.8 (898)	72.1 22.3 5.5 (183)	63.8 28.8 7.4 (105)	59.9 35.2 4.9 (58)
<i>Item from Teacher Interview</i>						
5. In the past year, did (CHILD) have any behavior or discipline problems at this school, which resulted in the student's parents being sent a note or being asked to come in and talk with the teacher or principal?	yes no	20.7 79.3 (254)	12.1 87.9 (726)	17.3 82.7 (141)	24.3 75.7 (79)	26.6 73.4 (37)

\*Restricted to children who are living with at least one biological parent and whose other biological parent is presumed alive. Children of never married parents are excluded.

parent families. Many differences are trivial, the majority are minor, and some, like those presented in Table 1, are of modest magnitude.

With this caveat in mind, let us turn to the results displayed in Table 1. For the five designated items, consistent and statistically significant differences appear between the children of stably married parents and those who were ever separated or divorced. Marital dissolution is associated with a higher risk for the child of academic and behavior problems in school, dissatisfaction with family life, and general adjustment as reported by parents. The same pattern recurs when we examine the five outcome measures by the number of disruptions. Children who are living in single parent and stepfamilies generally experience greater difficulties than those whose parents are stably married, but their adjustment is intermediate when compared to children who have undergone multiple transitions.

The data in Table 1 are not adjusted for socioeconomic and racial differences, but we did take the precaution of controlling for these factors (in analyses not shown here) to see if the observed effects were attributable to demographic differences. Evidently, part but not all of the differences which appear in Table 1 can be explained by the racial and socioeconomic composition of the marital subgroups. When the children's assessments were adjusted to take into account the fact that blacks and low-income families were more likely to have experienced marital disruption, the magnitude for several of the outcome measures in Table 1 narrowed somewhat. Nonetheless, children who have experienced a disruption continue to be at a disadvantage.

In delineating these relative differences, we should not lose sight of the important fact that the great majority of children who have experienced a disruption are rather well adjusted. Only a small minority, even of those whose parents have married and divorced two or more times, are not performing satisfactorily in school. About half are described by their parents as doing "very well" and only a tiny proportion of the adults report that their child's life is not going well. In addition, about two-thirds of the children state that they are "very satisfied" with their family life. These results are consistent with other data that we have examined from the survey. All of the measures we inspected suggest that a marital disruption affects only a minority of children. Frequently the reports from parents, teachers, and the children, themselves, do not correspond even when comparable items such as school problems were examined. This may indicate weakness in the measures, but it also suggests that problems may not be similarly perceived by all parties. Even when we pool the information from the different informants, we still find that most children in disrupted families are doing rather well, though the risks of school difficulties are clearly greater for children of separated and divorced parents.

The data in Table 1 refer to children's adaptations at a single point in time, generally long after the breakup of the marriage first took place. Only a small number of children in our sample have gone through a disruption during the past two years, and for most the event occurred at least five or more years earlier.

Table 2. Measures of Child Well-Being by Occurrence of Disruption and Measures of Parent Coping Capacities\*

	Percent Children Reported Repeating a Grade		Percent Children Who Have Gotten into Trouble in the Past Year		Percent Children for Whom Note Sent Home from School		Percent Children Who Are Not "Very Satisfied" with Their Family		Percent Children Whose Lives Are Not Going "Very Well"												
	Never**	(N)	Ever	(N)	Never	(N)	Ever	(N)	Never	(N)	Ever	(N)									
Do you have days when you are unhappy, sad, or depressed?																					
very or fairly often	21.9	(74)	17.7	(64)	9.9	(72)	20.0	(60)	23.2	(56)	27.1	(48)	43.1	(72)	35.5	(62)	56.8	(74)	67.2	(64)	
occasionally	12.8	(447)	25.9	(156)	14.8	(440)	22.9	(152)	12.3	(345)	19.4	(109)	17.7	(441)	39.2	(152)	46.2	(447)	53.0	(156)	
hardly ever	9.0	(422)	16.7	(136)	12.5	(384)	24.4	(128)	10.4	(328)	18.9	(97)	13.6	(384)	24.5	(128)	33.5	(422)	47.7	(137)	
All things considered, is your life going . . .																					
not so well or not well at all	36.4	(22)	16.1	(30)	26.1	(22)	24.1	(29)	31.3	(16)	15.0	(19)	63.6	(22)	46.4	(29)	78.3	(22)	60.0	(30)	
fairly well	14.6	(430)	23.5	(205)	14.3	(423)	25.0	(195)	14.3	(336)	21.8	(138)	24.0	(423)	34.5	(196)	52.0	(430)	63.5	(206)	
very well	8.5	(484)	17.8	(119)	12.2	(445)	19.7	(116)	9.7	(371)	20.6	(96)	9.3	(445)	26.9	(116)	29.7	(484)	31.0	(119)	
In handling your children, would you say you are . . .																					
sometimes or very changeable	15.7	(255)	26.1	(138)	17.8	(252)	25.8	(132)	12.7	(205)	21.1	(96)	25.0	(252)	37.4	(132)	51.8	(255)	66.7	(138)	
mostly steady	11.5	(540)	17.5	(167)	12.5	(533)	21.5	(163)	12.4	(432)	21.7	(120)	13.8	(534)	29.2	(164)	42.1	(541)	47.7	(168)	
very steady	8.9	(114)	19.9	(51)	8.6	(111)	21.1	(47)	9.4	(92)	15.8	(38)	21.9	(111)	35.8	(47)	27.3	(114)	29.5	(51)	
Do you have times when you lose control of your feelings and feel you might hurt your children?																					
often or sometimes	17.8	(73)	29.2	(48)	12.2	(73)	31.3	(47)	10.5	(47)	36.7	(30)	30.1	(73)	50.0	(46)	47.3	(73)	59.2	(48)	
hardly ever	15.4	(312)	19.0	(107)	17.4	(309)	24.9	(99)	12.6	(258)	20.1	(72)	17.4	(310)	38.2	(101)	46.3	(312)	63.0	(108)	
never	9.3	(599)	20.4	(201)	11.2	(515)	20.0	(195)	12.2	(425)	18.0	(152)	16.6	(515)	26.4	(195)	38.0	(599)	44.9	(201)	

\*Restricted to children who are living with at least one biological parent and whose other biological parent is presumed alive. Children of never married parents are excluded.  
 \*\*Never and Ever in these headings refer to "Disrupted."

Thus, our results seem to square with the observations of previous researchers that, in time, most children recuperate from the turmoil of family change. The critical question, as we mentioned in the first part of this paper, is why some children are more resilient than others and what circumstances account for their ability to manage the trauma of marital dissolution?

This question is explored in Tables 2 and 3. The first of these tables examines a series of questions that tap the parent's capacity to cope with general life situations and specifically with the demands of childrearing, comparing children in maritally stable and disrupted families on the same outcomes that appeared in the previous table. This comparison permits us to see whether children's well-being is affected by the parent's psychological resources, and whether the parent's capacity to cope mediates the impact of separation for the child. Our interpretation of the results presented in Table 2 takes into account the small number of children who have ever experienced a divorce and the relatively large number of comparisons shown in the table. Rather than concentrate on the specific findings for each item measuring coping ability, we describe the general picture suggested by the data.

The results are fairly consistent and highly congruent with findings from previous research. In general, children in both stable and disrupted families fare much better when parents report that life is going well for them personally. Children of untroubled parents are far less likely to encounter problems in school, report greater satisfaction with their homelife, and are more often described by their parents as doing very well. This is not in the least surprising. Parents who are depressed are apt to portray their children's lives more bleakly than parents who are not depressed. Evidence that the findings in Table 2 are not mere artifacts of the survey method can be seen in the similar patterns observed for outcomes reported by teachers and children, as well as by the parent respondents.

An alternative explanation for the relationships shown in this table suggests that the causal effect works from children to parents rather than from parents to children. Parents whose children are well-adjusted are likely to be more content and feel more in control of their lives than parents whose children have school and other behavioral problems. Future steps in our analysis will use the longitudinal data from the National Survey of Children to assess the effects of parents' psychological states at an earlier time on their child's subsequent welfare. We suspect that, in fact, the causality works in both directions, with children finding adjustment more difficult when their parents are unhappy and vice versa.

A second important finding in Table 2 is that the relationship between marital stability and child well-being does not disappear when we introduce measures of the parent's coping ability. We find that differences between the children in maritally stable and disrupted families usually persist regardless of the parent's state of mental health or self-reported capacity to withstand stress. It is nevertheless evident that the parent's emotional resources do help to explain the

Table 3. Measures of Child Well-Being by Aspects of the Separation Process\*

	Percent Children Reported Repeating a Grade	Percent Children Who Have Gotten into Trouble in the Past Year	Percent Children for Whom Note Sent Home from School	Percent Children Who Are Not "Very Satisfied" with Their Family	Percent Children Whose Lives Are Not Going "Very Well"
In the month or two before your (last) separation, did you and (HE/SHE) argue:					
often	23.6 (193)**	23.8 (181)	25.2 (130)	35.2 (183)	53.4 (193)
occasionally	16.1 (82)	19.5 (81)	8.9 (68)	21.6 (81)	46.9 (82)
not at all	16.3 (43)	16.4 (43)	26.9 (32)	34.2 (42)	42.0 (43)
Did these arguments ever become physical?					
yes	25.2 (133)	28.2 (124)	23.8 (90)	31.1 (126)	58.8 (133)
no	17.8 (141)	17.3 (138)	16.2 (108)	31.0 (138)	44.6 (142)
Since you (separated/divorced), has the amount of conflict between you and (FORMER SPOUSE):					
remained same or increased	10.4 (66)	20.3 (65)	22.4 (49)	35.4 (65)	41.3 (90)
decreased	20.6 (68)	21.6 (67)	11.5 (49)	40.3 (66)	56.8 (68)
stopped completely	23.2 (167)	23.8 (158)	25.4 (119)	28.7 (159)	48.0 (167)
How well do you and (FORMER SPOUSE) now get along?					
very well	13.1 (42)	18.8 (43)	12.5 (32)	48.4 (44)	43.9 (45)
fairly well	17.6 (75)	24.1 (72)	22.4 (57)	35.5 (71)	53.6 (75)
not well at all	18.3 (58)	15.6 (58)	12.1 (45)	35.5 (58)	57.3 (58)
no contact (not read)	24.3 (135)	24.1 (128)	27.3 (92)	22.5 (128)	45.9 (135)
In raising (CHILD) do you and (OUTSIDE PARENT) agree?					
always or usually	19.7 (72)	26.1 (71)	16.9 (58)	34.3 (71)	50.6 (72)
sometimes	12.7 (52)	26.1 (50)	12.8 (35)	53.9 (50)	58.6 (52)
never	10.2 (18)	14.3 (16)	— (12)	34.5 (18)	62.9 (18)
no-contact (explicitly stated)	24.9 (34)	13.7 (31)	44.2 (20)	15.2 (31)	53.5 (34)
never discussed	18.2 (50)	14.2 (50)	18.1 (34)	36.8 (50)	36.2 (50)

CHILD QUESTIONNAIRE  
 In matters concerning you, do your parents generally get along:



very well	16.7	(72)	24.9	(72)	18.8	(56)	27.9	(72)	45.9	(72)
fairly well	10.2	(99)	21.1	(99)	13.2	(71)	43.6	(99)	59.0	(99)
not well at all	20.8	(29)	18.0	(29)	11.1	(18)	51.0	(29)	55.6	(29)
no contact	24.1	(40)	11.5	(40)	32.3	(26)	20.4	(40)	36.7	(40)
Age of Child at Separation:										
less than 6 years	24.8	(226)	29.4	(215)	25.2	(159)	37.0	(217)	52.7	(227)
6 to 11 years	15.7	(94)	12.6	(91)	11.1	(72)	22.0	(90)	49.2	(94)
12 or more years	11.7	(26)	10.8	(25)	14.3	(16)	48.1	(25)	58.4	(26)
Duration since Separation										
less than 2 years	13.8	(30)	14.6	(28)	17.8	(18)	44.0	(28)	68.7	(30)
2 to 5 years	13.1	(37)	14.5	(37)	4.0	(33)	15.9	(36)	56.5	(37)
5 or more years	23.3	(279)	25.5	(266)	23.4	(196)	35.1	(268)	49.9	(280)
Did you discuss with (CHILD/CHILDREN) the possibility of your (separation/divorce):										
a month or more before it happened	18.1	(112)	18.7	(106)	16.1	(76)	37.6	(106)	55.2	(112)
just before it happened	9.0	(38)	30.6	(38)	13.7	(30)	29.2	(38)	44.7	(38)
not until it happened	25.6	(164)	21.2	(157)	24.7	(121)	27.9	(158)	47.6	(165)
Before you separated, how aware was (CHILD/CHILDREN) that you were not getting along?										
completely	23.1	(118)	23.1	(110)	20.6	(82)	35.4	(109)	52.6	(118)
somewhat	13.5	(102)	23.2	(100)	20.1	(71)	33.1	(102)	49.3	(102)
not at all	26.4	(94)	17.8	(91)	20.2	(75)	25.1	(91)	46.0	(94)
Was a settlement reached between you and (FORMER SPOUSE) on custody, visitation, and financial agreements?										
yes	13.5	(224)	17.8	(215)	19.7	(168)	32.7	(216)	50.0	(224)
no	37.9	(93)	30.7	(90)	23.0	(61)	28.3	(90)	50.7	(93)
Contact with Outside Biological Parent in Last Year										
none	24.9	(199)	27.0	(190)	28.2	(144)	22.8	(191)	51.1	(200)
1-13 days	18.5	(68)	19.7	(66)	18.6	(53)	33.1	(66)	53.3	(68)
14-51 days	15.5	(59)	18.4	(59)	14.6	(42)	26.4	(59)	46.7	(59)
52+ days	11.7	(62)	19.9	(61)	13.8	(44)	58.2	(60)	54.6	(62)

\*Restricted to children who are living with at least one biological parent and whose other biological parent is presumed alive. Children of never married parents are excluded.

\*\*The numbers in parentheses are the weighted N on which the percentage is based.

differences in well-being between children in maritally stable and unstable households. The disparity between the two groups of children is generally diminished when we hold constant the level of functioning among the parents. In some instances, this difference becomes negligible or disappears altogether, suggesting that parent functioning is the more potent influence on children's well-being.

Moreover, we can see from Table 2 that children from divorced families where parents state that they are content with their lives and who assess their childrearing abilities favorably usually fare better than their peers who have never experienced a family disruption but whose parents say that they do not perform well as caretakers. Our data support the insight of many previous investigators that parents' responses to divorce, specifically their ability to remain steady in the face of added pressures, may indeed mitigate the potentially adverse effects of marital disruption for the child.

One further conclusion is suggested by the data in Table 2. The various measures of parental resources do not always operate uniformly within the marital subgroups. Sometimes the presence or absence of the ability to cope makes a difference in one but not in the other. Assuming that they are not merely the result of small numbers, these interactions indicate that the picture can become quite complicated. Our interpretation of the data is that an inability to cope among the maritally stable almost always worsens the child's situation, but a high capacity to cope does not guarantee recovery for the child who has been through a difficult period. Thus, it seems easier to explain how things can go wrong in the socialization process than to account for why children are resilient in the face of adversity.

One potential set of mitigating circumstances involves the conditions surrounding the disruption. The process of separation, itself, may have created problems for children in the past and may continue to disturb the socialization process. Table 3 contains information on the nature of the separation process, and some indication of the kind of relations the formerly married couple have at present. Again, we have selected items which pertain to some of the dimensions discussed in the introductory section of this paper.

The findings are not as clear-cut as we might have expected from existing studies. However, one relationship which is consistent with the results from other studies is that the children's age at separation affects some of the consequences of divorce for children. This interaction is most apparent when we consider the child's school performance. Children who were under the age of six when the disruption occurred have adjustment problems throughout their school careers. Family satisfaction and the more general life situation of children do not seem to be related to how old they were when the marriage broke up, suggesting that mediating conditions may affect various outcomes differently. Children who have some years of schooling before the separation occurs may be better able to control their performance because they have a backlog of experience upon which

to draw. Children whose parents divorce before the child starts school are at an additional disadvantage because teachers frequently provide support and nurturance for young children in times of crisis. Thus, children not enrolled in school when their parents divorce do not have access to as many resources for coping with the disruption as do children who are older when they experience the event.

More recent separations, as Table 3 shows, are associated with a somewhat higher incidence of current distress and discontent with family life. Again this finding is consistent with the results of previous research. On the other hand, the greater the interval since separation, the more likely the child is to experience school problems. This finding, we show elsewhere, appears to be mainly a reverberation of the child's age at the time of separation (Furstenberg and Allison, 1985).

Children whose parents divorced longer ago are more likely to have experienced repeated family transitions, first from a two parent household to a single-parent household, then to a parent-stepparent household, and possibly back to a single-parent household. The cumulative effect of these transitions may account for the higher proportion of children of longstanding divorces with school problems. The school problems could be the direct consequence of the stress from the repeated disruptions, or the indirect consequence of disruption attributable to schooling interruptions associated with moves across school districts. (These possibilities are further explored in the paper by Furstenberg and Allison, 1985.)

In general, the nature of the separation process has little effect on the child's current well-being. Whether children were told about the separation, whether they knew that their parents were not getting along, and the amount of conflict they were exposed to just prior to the separation do not have large effects on the children's present adjustment in school, satisfaction with their family life, or general life adjustment as reported by their parents. Severe conflict, nonetheless, may have lasting effects on children. Children whose parents fought often and engaged in physical conflict had greater adjustment problems in most of the outcome measures than children who witnessed less conflict. The differences are not large, but they do suggest that intense hostility between the parents complicates the child's recovery from divorce (see also Jacobson, 1978; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

Also, if a settlement has not been reached long after the marriage broke up, children are more likely to have lingering problems in school. These cases, we know from earlier analyses, consist of families where the outside parent has little or no contact with the child and provides no financial assistance to the household. Lack of contact with the outside parent is also related to school problems, though not to current family satisfaction. It appears, then, that there is a cluster of related conditions that complicates adjustment to divorce for some children. We suspect that children who are deserted by their parents have greater long-term

difficulties, both because the process is so abrupt and because it is so severe. The abrogation of contact is also associated with less financial support, which undoubtedly creates greater hardship for the child.

Although the failure to achieve a settlement is associated with greater school difficulties, we find little evidence that harmonious relations between the parents buffered the effects of marital disruption for the children. There is no consistent relationship between how well the parents are currently getting along and how well their children were doing in school, how satisfied they were with their family life, or their general level of adjustment. This is true even for the small minority of cases where parents reported that the conflict had increased or remained at a constant level since their marriage dissolved.

This seemingly anomalous result may be explained by the fact that most children have so little to do with their outside parent that the quality of that relationship is simply not salient to their well-being. However, even when we confine our analysis to the group of children who see their outside parents regularly, the amount of conflict has little effect on the child's behavior or sense of well-being. The level of hostilities to which the child was exposed seems to have less importance for the child's development after the parent's marriage ends. We should, however, remember that all the children in our study are now in late childhood and early adolescence and most have endured a lengthy period of separation from the divorce process.

Another possible explanation for the attenuated effect of parental conflict is that many children who have experienced a family disruption are now living in a stepfamily. Some of these children have a more significant relationship with their stepparent, whom they see daily, than with their biological parent, whom they may see only irregularly or not at all.

Earlier, we discovered that children who are living in stepfamilies may be at a somewhat greater risk of experiencing developmental difficulties. Table 4 presents information that directly examines this possibility. Breaking our sample into the most prevalent family types—two biological parents, mother headed, mother with stepfather, and father with stepmother—we discover that there are consistent differences between the school performance of the children living with both biological parents and those living in other situations.

We already know from the results in Table 1 that children are distinctly more satisfied with their family life when they have not experienced a disruption and are reported by their parents to be doing somewhat better in their general life adjustment. The picture is less clear, when we look at the children who have experienced a disruption. Generally, children living with their mother and a stepfather are more distressed relative to children living with only their mother. The magnitude of the differences are quite small with the exception of children's assessment of their family life, where the disparity is a little larger. The group of children who are living with their fathers and stepmothers shows a less consistent pattern, sometimes outperforming the other categories, and sometimes showing

Table 4. Measures of Child Well-Being by Child's Family Composition and Relationship to Stepfather and Father\*

	Percent Children Reported Repeating a Grade	Percent Children Who Have Gotten into Trouble in the Past Year	Percent Children for Whom Note Sent Home from School	Percent Children -Who Are Not "Very Satisfied" with Their Family	Percent Children Whose Lives Are Not Going "Very Well"
<i>Child Lives With</i>					
two biological parents	11.9 (944)	13.4 (896)	12.2 (729)	18.0 (898)	41.5 (944)
mother only	22.0 (204)	20.6 (198)	20.8 (150)	27.1 (198)	51.3 (204)
mother and stepfather	22.2 (98)	23.9 (97)	25.5 (70)	39.5 (98)	56.9 (98)
father and stepmother	20.5 (27)	36.2 (24)	7.0 (15)	50.5 (24)	50.6 (27)
<i>Closeness to Stepfather</i>					
very or quite close	18.3 (55)	22.0 (55)	22.7 (45)	23.2 (56)	49.3 (55)
fairly or not close	25.7 (45)	25.0 (44)	30.4 (25)	60.1 (45)	65.8 (45)
<i>Closeness to Outside Father</i>					
very or quite close	12.3 (83)	20.7 (83)	16.3 (64)	32.8 (83)	44.9 (83)
fairly or not close	13.7 (60)	14.3 (60)	17.5 (45)	43.3 (60)	52.0 (60)
no contact	29.2 (165)	25.4 (158)	27.1 (115)	28.0 (159)	57.3 (165)

\*Restricted to children living with at least one biological parent and whose other biological parent is presumed alive. Children of never married parents are excluded.

the poorest record of adjustment. This fluctuating pattern might reflect the small size of this subgroup or, perhaps, its great diversity.

Part of the reason for the slightly higher incidence of problems among children living in stepfamilies may have to do with the recency of the child's transition to a reconstituted family. Children who entered stepfamilies recently may still be struggling with the loss of a parent and may be encountering greater difficulties in relating to a surrogate figure. It is clear from the information provided in Table 4 that the relationship with the stepparent is an important mitigating factor in the child's response to divorce and remarriage. Indeed, the relationship with the stepfather is a much more potent intervening variable than the relationship with the child's biological father. There are too few cases to make similar comparisons for the children living with stepmothers, but the available data show even stronger effects for the handful of children living with stepmothers. An important task in future analyses of the data will be to identify the situations that lead to a successful adaptation to stepfamily life and especially to the establishment of close ties between the children and their stepparents.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper presents the first in a series of findings from an ongoing analysis of the impact of family disruption on children. In the introductory section, we observed that a radical change has taken place in the way that researchers now approach the question of the consequences of divorce for children. The discovery of simple and direct relationships between marital disruption and child development is no longer expected. Instead, social scientists are trying to understand the particular circumstances that produce persistent problems as well as the conditions that mitigate the trauma accompanying divorce.

Our study has the singular advantage of having been designed to explore these questions using a representative sample of children and their parents at two points in time. We have not yet exploited the longitudinal data, but have plans to do so in future analyses that extend the exploration described in this preliminary paper. We have been content, for the present, merely to demonstrate the utility of looking at divorce as a social process that has manifold ramifications for children.

The findings we have reported generally are congruent with several recent investigations. We have stronger grounds for generalizing these results than researchers have hitherto been able to claim. First, the data are from a large, nationally representative sample. Second, the study includes a wide variety of child outcomes, so that multiple aspects of child welfare can be considered. And, finally, observations of the children's well-being were obtained from three sources, thus enabling a more thorough assessment of children's adjustment to divorce.

To recap some of the most important results, we found that:

1. Over the long-term, the vast majority of children whose parents have separated or divorced seem to fare rather well. We featured just a few outcome measures in our analysis, but these were selected from a much larger pool of items. In general, differences between children in maritally stable and unstable families, if they existed at all, were modest. Children are generally better off if their parents remain together, so long as their parents get along, but most seem to adapt rather successfully to circumstances that are less than ideal.
2. Much of our analysis was devoted to identifying some of the situations that may complicate the child's recovery. In particular, we found evidence that parents' coping ability affects their adolescent children's well-being. Children whose parents were frequently depressed and generally discontented, and those whose parents exhibited a lack of confidence and control in childrearing, were more likely to have behavioral and psychological symptoms of maladjustment. Our evidence suggested that psychological fragility on the parent's part could make matters worse; psychological robustness, however, did not necessarily protect the child. Possibly, too, parent's confidence in their own abilities flagged when their children experienced symptoms of the separation, which in turn made matters worse for the child.
3. At least in the arena of school, children who were younger at the time of separation seemed to have more adverse reactions. On the other hand, children who had undergone recent separations were more likely to experience distress at home than those who had some distance from the separation. One reason why greater differences among the groups of children in our study did not appear, undoubtedly stems from the fact that, for most, the disruption took place long ago. These findings highlight a point that we made at the outset—one cannot ignore the temporal dimensions affecting the child's response to divorce. The timing of the event in the child's life and the interval since the disruption will powerfully affect children's responses. Studies that do not take into account the timing of disruption and which observe the child at only one time necessarily present a distorted view of the process of children's adjustment to divorce.
4. The amount of time that has passed since the children in this sample experienced their parents' divorce might explain why the divorce process itself does not relate strongly to the outcome measures we examined. We did discover that the extent of conflict before the marriage dissolved, especially if there was physical fighting, had some lingering effects on the child's current adjustment. The absence of a settlement was also associated with ongoing difficulties for the child, probably because many of those cases where no settlement had been reached were either recent disruptions or desertions. Children in these families had received little or no support from the absent parent. The nature of the separation process

itself, however, seemed to be unrelated to the child's present state of well-being, and children were no better off if they had frequent contact with the parent living outside the home. Moreover, contrary to expectations, we found no evidence that good relations between the parents promoted better adaptations. Apparently, high communication and good feeling between the formerly married parents does not contribute significantly to the child's welfare, at least as indicated by the outcomes we examined.

5. Stepfamily relationships play a role in accounting for the counter-intuitive finding that parental relationships do not affect children's responses to disruption. We suspect that relations within the stepfamily, with both the biological parent and stepparent, are a more potent factor in the child's life, especially if the disruption occurred many years ago. We presented evidence consistent with this interpretation which shows that children experience fewer difficulties in school or at home if they are very close to their stepparent. In subsequent analyses which draw on our longitudinal data collection, we shall be able to determine whether remarriage directly influences the child's adjustment.

In the present analysis, we did not introduce additional components, such as children's gender, class, or race, that might further elaborate our results. Obviously, these conditions might refine or reverse some of the findings reported above. Our results do reveal, however, that the task of understanding the links between marital disruption and child development is enormously complex. Relatively few conditions produce uniform and strong results that point to a single set of mediating conditions which operate in the same way for all children. Our data suggest that there is no simple or reliable prescription for how to combat the potentially adverse effects of divorce. Yet our data also show that there are many paths to recovery for children who suffer the adverse effects of family disruption, even if none of those paths is secure or straightforward.

## NOTE

1. The respondent is referred to as she because, as mentioned above, in more than 90% of the cases the respondent was the child's biological mother.

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