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## Children of divorce: Educational interventions

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to 1) identify developmental responses to divorce, 2) identify the changes in life style and family functioning caused by divorce, and 3) identify how educators can effectively intervene when appropriate. This paper relates the developmental responses of children to divorce from preschool age through adolescence as reviewed in the longintudinal studies of Judith Wallerstein and colleagues, and other studies and articles. The review of literature, as it relates divorce to the effect on children's academic progress, highlights the lack of studies with this focus and the need for further research in the area.

Children of Divorce: Educational Interventions

A Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of the University of Northern Iowa

by

Carolyn L.H. Stephenson

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts/Educational Psychology

April 29, 1988

**This Research Paper by:** Carolyn L.H. Stephenson

**Entitled:** Children of Divorce: Educational Interventions

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Education: General Educational Psychology.

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Date Approved

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

The American Family has undergone many changes since today's teachers were growing up in the Forties, Fifties, and Sixties. The changing roles of women and men have redefined marriage, and divorce has redefined the composition of the family. In a presentation on "The Teacher and the Child of Divorce", JoAnne Elmore stated: "With the changes in American Family life, it is even more important for classroom teachers to possess attitudes and skills which will produce a comfortable learning climate for those students whose families are in transition" (Paper presented at the Annual Families Alive Conference, Ogden, UT., September, 1986). Many teachers have experienced the effects of divorce on children through their own divorce, and most teachers have had children from divorced families in their classrooms.

"In spite of the potential that divorce has for disrupting a child's development, there is little in the literature dealing with helping children to cope with the crisis of divorce" (Cantor, 1977, p.184). Even today there is still little research to indicate what schools are doing to help children of divorce. Kalter, Pickar, and Lesowitz (1984) commented that there are numerous reports in the popular media and at professional meetings indicating that new efforts to help children cope with the crisis of divorce are more widespread than the professional and scientific literature currently reflects. There needs to be more scientific research to build a theoretical base for understanding the particular stresses engendered by divorce.

#### Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to: 1) identify developmental responses to divorce, 2) identify the changes in life style and family functioning caused by divorce, and 3) identify how educators can effectively intervene when appropriate. Children of divorce have the potential for disturbing school behaviors. Teachers and parents

need to know when a child's divorce-engendered classroom behavior is typical and temporary, or symptomatic of psychological dysfunctioning which requires intervention. The recent research on the effects of divorce on children raises serious questions for educators: Can educators ignore this problem and still carry out their primary task, which is to create an optimal school learning environment for all children?

### Significance of the Problem

Some researchers feel that divorce is one of the most serious and complex mental health crisis for children in the 1980's. Researchers have concluded that adjusting to divorce is a long-term process, not an event timed with the legal separation of parent and child (Hetherington, 1980; Kalter, Pickar, & Lesowitz, 1984; McNamee, et. al., 1982; Scherman, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Although the single parent family has become the fastest growing family type in this country, the effects of living with only one parent are still being investigated (PTA Today, 1984). In a ten-year study of divorced families, Wallerstein (1985) found widespread potential in the post-divorce family at all socioeconomic levels for the emotional and physical neglect of previously well-cared-for children.

The number of children living with one parent is formidable. The Census Bureau projects that 48% of all children born in 1980 will live "a considerable time" with only one parent before they reach the age of 18. Forty percent of the 1980 births resulted in 12 million children living in single-family homes, and that figure is growing at the rate of more than one million a year (Brown, 1980). The average length of time between divorce and remarriage is 3.2-3.5 years (Brown, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Add to this the period between the separation and actual divorce, and it adds up to about 4 years in which a child will live with a single parent. For an eight-year-old child, this is half of his or her lifetime, and for a twelve-year-old, a third of his or her childhood has been spent with one parent.



Brown (1980) stated that in this country, little or no attention has been paid to the school needs of children from single-parent homes. Schools today are burdened by the need to cope with a variety of social problems not directly related to education. Divorce is one of those problems. Brown (1980) reported data from a study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the Kettering Foundation. The study was conducted in nine states, and found that students from single-parent homes were disproportionately represented in tardiness, discipline problems, and suspensions. Twice as many students from single-parent homes were suspended although they made up only 25% of the school population. Students from single-parent homes also made up a disproportionate number of students moving from school to school, truancy, and participation in Title 1 programs. In this study, all school expulsions were children from single-parent homes. The percentage of dropouts from single-parent homes was 40% when they made up only 25% of the school population.

This study was conducted with 15 schools (11 elementary and 4 high schools) with a total enrollment of 8,556 students. It included single-parent homes caused by divorce, death, and unmarried mothers, so the direct effects of divorce are not discernible in this study. But the study does indicate the degree of the problems associated with single-parent homes regardless of origin. Even with the problems this study encountered in factoring in income and rural and urban populations, the results perhaps indicate that our educational systems may not know how to deal with children from less than "ideal" home environments.

### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this review, the following definitions will be used:

Developmental changes. The changes as a result of the child's growth, which take place over time and are internally controlled; and development, which is his or her response to learning.

Developmental changes may be influenced by personality

temperament, psychological adjustment, and sex difference.

(McNamee, 1982).

Family functioning and life styles. The degree to which the remaining family members function as a family unit; the ability of both the custodial and non-custodial parent to provide parenting; and the economic and social forces which effect the way the family lives and the help available for coping. (Colletta, 1983; Elmore, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Stress. Stress is any demand placed on a person's ability to function effectively. Stress can be either physical or psychological; in practice the body and mind tend to interact with one another depending on the person's perception of the stressor, or stress producing agent. Stress in children may be expressed as anger, anxiety, depression, aggression, and withdrawal. (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Wallerstein, 1985).

School intervention. Assistance initiated by the school to the child and parent to mediate the effects of divorce. Examples of mediating interventions are: after-school child care, group counseling, teacher observations and recommendations (Drake, 1979; Elmore, 1986).

#### Procedures for Obtaining Literature

A computer search was conducted of both ERIC and psychology documents using these descriptors: elementary-school-students/stress/divorce. Bibliographies from these journal articles yielded relevant articles, as did a review of the Current Index to Journals in Education. A few articles were found in popular magazines, such as Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report.

### Limitations of Study

A limitation in this review of research is the lack of current articles. There are numerous articles on divorce, but few examine the effects of divorce on children, and even fewer look at the role of the school with children of divorce. The major studies in this field are not recent, but the data from these studies has provided the foundation for more recent research. Other researchers (Guidubaldi, Perry, Cleminshaw, & McLoughlin, 1983) have commented on the lack of data concerning how the school climate may moderate the adverse effects of divorce.

The major studies were conducted primarily with Caucasian, middle-income families, and their results lack generalization to non-white, lower-socioeconomic groups which may have different family and social structures. Also, the major studies did not deal with clinically-referred clients, so the volunteer nature of the participants will influence the findings.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

#### Introduction

Wallerstein (1983) defined three stages of the divorce process. The first stage, the acute phase, is when the married couple separate. This is usually accompanied by the legal filing for divorce and by the father's departure from the home. This phase may last several months or over a year from the beginning of the legal process. The second stage, the transitional phase, spans several years during which the adults and children assume new roles and relationships within the new family structure. Parent-child relationships are likely to alter drastically, particularly with the non-custodial parent. Often the new family unit will change residences, life styles, and economic conditions. Such radical changes require complex and painful adaptation (Wallerstein, in Garnezy & Rutter, Eds., 1983). The third stage, the stabilizing phase, is achieved when the post-divorce family is reestablished as a stable, functioning unit. Relationships within the family, as well as economic and social roles, are those that developed during the transitional phase.

Wallerstein (1983) pointed out that not all families progress through all of these stages. Some become fixated at the acute phase, in which the acute stress remains high and soon becomes chronic. The stress is not resolved nor does it substantially subside. Other families may remain in a stage of transition, referred to as the "chronically reconstituting family" (Hunter & Schuman, 1980). In these families, the continued psychological, social, economic, or geographic instability reflects an inability to bring closure to the divorce.

The sense of powerlessness that children feel with the loss of a parent, and the most common early responses of anger, fear, depression, and guilt (Hetherington, 1980) may not subside within the length of time adults consider "reasonable". Time has a different dimension and meaning to children (Elmore, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly,

1980). It is usually not until after the first year following divorce that tension reduction and an increased sense of well-being begin to emerge (Hetherington, 1980).

The research evidence (Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein, 1984 ; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) suggested that most children can cope with and adapt to the short-term crisis of divorce within a few years. However, if the divorce crisis is compounded by multiple stresses and continued animosity between parents, developmental problems may occur (Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). As children mature in their intellectual capacity they examine the divorce anew and attempt to explain events in ways which fit their enhanced intellectual capacity (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In this way, the intellectual and emotional efforts of children to cope with the family disintegration are reorganized at each developmental stage and extended throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Although each divorce is as unique as the individuals involved, there are some common behaviors and feelings, and some generalizations which have been made concerning children of divorce (Elmore, 1986). People at all ages need the affection and friendly, sustained support of others. Children especially need the help of caring adults at a time of crisis, such as divorce. Children recognize that they are dependent on adults for their care and well-being, and this knowledge contributes to their insecurity when the adults they depend on are troubled (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Researchers have consistently pointed out that divorce is a process, not an event. And coping with the divorce of one's parents is a long, perhaps life-long, difficult process (McNamee, 1982). In research on the effects of divorce on fathers and their perceived parenting changes, Judith Brown Grief noted, "Divorce is more than a status; it is also a process, which eventuates in increased distance between family members, some of whom may not have wished to separate" (Grief, 1979, p. 302).

The pattern of stress created by the divorce is similar for children of all ages. In the six months to one year following the separation, there is turmoil of various kinds. The emotional upheaval of family members is the most likely cause of the

turmoil. The feelings of disruption, agony, insecurity, guilt, isolation, and feelings of being different are prevalent (Elmore, 1986). The first reactions of many family members are shock, disbelief, anxiety and fear (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Although the child and parent may initially seek the security of each other's support, the child suffers from the dilemma of accurately perceiving that the very person they rely on for their security is also the person that voluntarily initiated or participated in the crisis which causes the child so much distress and pain. An accurate understanding and perception of the cause of stress is crucial to coping, and the child of divorce carries the knowledge of the parent's role in their suffering as an additional burden in his or her successful mastery of the stress.

The limited cognitive and social competencies of the young child, the young child's dependency on parents and more exclusive restriction to the home will be associated with different responses and coping strategies from those of the more mature and self-sufficient older child or adolescent who operates in a wider social community (Hetherington, 1980).

Children's fears are many: some being realistic, some not. Two recurring concerns of children participating in the ten-year California Children of Divorce study (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) were: 1) Who will take care of me? and 2) Will my relationship with both parents last? Children and adolescents alike experienced a heightened sense of their own vulnerability. In their investigations with these children, Wallerstein and Kelly discovered that children in kindergarten and first grade were very concerned with basic caretaking issues such as food, clothing, housing, etc. The children's world suddenly appeared to be less reliable, less predictable, and less likely in their view to provide for their needs and expectations (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The fear of abandonment by both parents is a common concern (Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children reason that if one parent can leave the

other parent, then surely both parents can leave the child. This belief is widespread, especially among young children at the height of the marital crisis.

Another common concern of many youngsters is that no one is in charge: no one adult to make or enforce rules, no one to hold them to proper conduct, and perhaps most of all, no one to take over in the event of an emergency (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). With preschool children, organization of the home and authority control are important to the adjustment of the child. Young children have more difficulty than older children in exerting self-control and ordering their changed lives. They require more external control and structure in time of stress and transition (Hetherington, 1980). Older children and adolescents also desire a parent who will set limits and enforce self-controlling behaviors.

The intensity of the child's or adolescent's response to the divorce may vary widely, reflecting individual differences, as well as differences of family style and culture. Families who are restrained in expressing emotions and feelings will be less likely to openly express feelings about the divorce. Other families may be very emotional and verbal in their response. The underlying feelings may differ very little, however. Wallerstein and Kelly noted that "the specific content of the worry varied with the age and child and family, but the anxiety itself was a widespread phenomenon, and appeared as a central response" (1980, p. 45).

#### Children's Developmental Responses to Divorce

This section will review children's developmental responses to divorce, including children's temperament differences, coping abilities, age-related responses, and sex-related responses. McNamee (1982) pointed out that it seems the divorce itself is not the crucial factor in determining children's adjustment; rather, crucial factors are the degree of instability in the child's daily routine, the relationship between parent and child, and the meeting of the child's developmental needs. The child's ability to cope and adapt will vary with the child's developmental status (Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and their temperament. The

responses of the child and the immediate, as well as the long-term, consequences of the stressful experience appear to be profoundly influenced by the developmental factors in ways which are still insufficiently identified or understood (Wallerstein, in Garnezy & Rutter, Eds., 1983). The lack of knowledge regarding normal responses to divorce and the expected length of these responses has contributed to the difficulty of identifying children who need psychological intervention.

Many children regress to earlier stages of development, particularly in toileting, sleeping, and eating patterns. Some develop physical symptoms or continue with those apparent during the family discord. Other children become withdrawn or hostile, especially toward those "safe" friends or acquaintances outside the immediate family toward whom such behavior is less risky than it is with parents (McNamee, 1982).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that children and adolescents of all ages experienced a rise in aggression, although other research has failed to support this with preschoolers (Hodges, Wechsler, & Ballantine, 1979). Older children and adolescents expressed anger directly, sometimes in very pointed verbal attacks. "Since parents often exhibit anger during the divorce period, it is not surprising that children may have the same reaction" (Elmore, 1986, p. 4).

Many children are heavily burdened by an enormous sense of loss. More than one half of the 131 children in the California Children of Divorce study (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) were openly tearful, moody, and pervasively sad. Even eighteen months after the initial crisis, when most of the other symptoms that children had developed at the time of the break-up had diminished or disappeared, depression was the most widespread remaining symptom of psychological dysfunctioning. Other symptoms of depression included: poor self-esteem, school performance well below potential, difficulty in concentrating, preoccupation with the parental divorce, play inhibition, social withdrawal, self-blame for the divorce, petty stealing, compulsive overeating to the point of obesity, chronic irritability, sexual promiscuity, restlessness,



and a narrowing of their interests and creativity (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Elmore, 1986). Depression is sometimes overlooked in the classroom because it is passive and not usually disruptive.

Loneliness may be intense in children and adolescents who have a prior history of poor adjustment and low self-esteem. Loneliness was associated with a yearning for the departed parent or the intact family, and a sense of rejection. Well-functioning adolescents were less likely to experience loneliness because of their ability to use their peers, school, and other activities as sources of information, satisfaction, and support (Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

#### Children's temperaments and coping abilities.

A child's ability to cope with the stresses of divorce depends in part upon the internal and external resources available to, and utilized by, the child. McNamee (1982) defined a child's internal resources as the child's neurological, biological, and psychological attributes. She defined external resources as the persons who intervene before, during and/or after exposure to a stress factor. These persons could include a friend, parent, teacher, counselor, or psychologist.

How a child will react to a stressful life experience is dependent upon the child's perception of self and of the experience. These perceptions grow during childhood as the child reacts to stressful life experiences, and utilizes internal and external resources (McNamee, 1982). McNamee (1982) described the child's perception of self:

As one who: is competent and strong; possesses the ability, power, and control necessary to avoid, minimize or terminate an anticipated or actual stressful life experience; is helpless and vulnerable; does not possess the ability, power and control necessary to avoid, minimize, or terminate an anticipated or actual stressful life experience. (p. 6)

McNamee (1982) described the child's perception of experience:

As insurmountable, a challenge; can be avoided, minimized or terminated; as insurmountable, a threat; cannot be avoided, minimized or terminated. (p. 6).

McNamee goes on to explain that a child grows in perceiving himself or herself as generally able or unable to manage, and in perceiving stressful life experiences as facilitating or debilitating the ability to manage. A child's perceptions may be accurate or inaccurate depending upon whether they are based on real strengths or vulnerabilities or imagined ones.

McNamee (1982) described three levels of coping ability for children. Exceptionally Good Copers (Level I) are children who cope easily with stressful situations, who recover readily, and who integrate the experience into their lives in a positive way. They feel successful and build a reserve of successful alternatives upon which they can draw in coping with future stressful experiences. Their belief in themselves as competent persons increases over time and with each new situation handled successfully.

Adequate Copers (Level II) are children who often have to work at coping with stressful experiences. They may or may not manage to integrate such experiences into their life styles in positive ways. Frequently they manage to cope adequately. When successful, their self-confidence grows, but their successes are less frequent and their reserve of successful alternatives grows more slowly than that of exceptionally good copers.

Exceptionally Poor Copers (Level III) are children who become extremely disorganized by stressful life experiences. They may struggle much harder to surmount the experiences and seldom manage to build resources of alternatives for coping with future stressful life experiences (McNamee, 1982).

The variability in coping skills and temperament, the past experiences of the child, and the child's developmental status all contribute to individual differences in coping with divorce (Hetherington, 1980). Some researchers have suggested that

temperamentally difficult children are less adaptable to change and more vulnerable to adversity than are temperamentally easy children (Hetherington, 1980). Age-specific responses to divorce will be reviewed in the following sections.

#### Characteristics of preschool- kindergarten children.

Guidubaldi and Perry (1984) noted that the prevailing conclusion of the literature is that family conditions, especially during the preschool years, markedly influence a child's competence in developing coping skills. And due to the rapidly accelerating divorce rate, family environments have been irreversibly altered for many preschoolers whose development is now guided by a single parent.

Fear is expressed through reluctance to be separated from the remaining parent, and results in clinging, crying children when the parent tries to leave. Anxieties increase at nighttime, and peak at bedtime when children are afraid to sleep. This often results in a battle of wills between an exhausted, frustrated parent and a panic-stricken child. Children may become anxious about going to school, or about riding home in the carpool if their parent is not driving. They may be cranky or cry when parents return to pick them up, a sign of the relief they feel after worrying about it all day.

Young children frequently regress to earlier forms of security, such as blankets, thumbs, and toys. Overwhelmed by their anxiety, lapses in toilet training and increased masturbatory activity were noted. Children who regress are telling us by their behavior that it is all too much, that they must hold back in development, mark time or move backward in order to gain strength for the next step forward (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This study found that the regressions lasted only a short time, a few weeks or months at the most, but the disruptions they created in the household and the increased demand for care came at a time when the custodial parent lacked both time and patience.

Children's concepts of the dependability of human relationships and personal ties had been profoundly shaken. Sometimes the fear of being hurt or

betrayed in a relationship spread to the relationship with their teacher at school (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Another conclusion reached by the four-to-five-year-olds was that the departed parent had rejected them and left to replace them with another family elsewhere. Although it may be accurate that the departed parent has remarried and has stepchildren or others, it was impossible for the young child to see that the parent's departure was directed at the other parent and not at them.

Daydreaming and fantasy were used extensively by young children, especially little girls. The fantasy of "he loves me best" appeared to be a coping strategy to undo the sense of rejection, and to maintain a sense of self-esteem and lovability. These fantasies gradually came to occupy increasing amounts of time and psychic energy of the children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Several little girls in the Wallerstein and Kelly study remained nourished for years by vivid fantasies of their father and his expected return. Boys used fantasy, also, to undo the painful reality of the family's division, but they appeared less able than girls to deny the father's departure. Perhaps this attraction to the father by girls of this age reflects the Oedipus/Electra complex in which the child has a romantic attraction to the parent of the opposite sex. Boys at this age are identifying with their fathers, and the absence of this role model may be what makes it less possible for boys to deny his absence. Both boys and girls were equally committed to the fantasy of an intact family.

One of the immediate impacts of divorce is play inhibition in young children. One indication of distress in preschool-age children is in their creation of unsafe play worlds where hungry animals or assaultive persons attack children. This is not typical behavior for preschoolers, and teachers need to be aware of the significance of this type of play.

Aggression was exhibited in greater irritability and rising tempers. Parent and teacher observations, as well as researcher observations, cited an increase in

temper tantrums and hitting of other children and siblings in the youngest children (Elmore, 1986). On the other hand, some children feared signs of aggression, and shrunk back from perceived dangers. In a study with preschoolers, Hodges et. al. (1979) did not find increased aggression in children from divorcing families. Their research examined whether preschool children of divorce would manifest greater problems than children from intact homes with regard to aggression, withdrawal, dependency, and other signs of emotional upset. There were few statistically significant differences in their results (Hodges, et.al., 1979). One should be cautious about stereotyping children from divorced families as more aggressive than children from intact homes.

Guilt in younger children often took the form of self-blame. These self-accusations were very troubling to children, and were very resistant to change undertaken by educational measures or by explanations from parents or teachers. "Their feelings of helplessness on the one side, and of total responsibility for the disaster on the other, were both present in their thinking and they suffered from both" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 62). Perhaps this reflects the child's desire to have control, even to assume responsibility for something they couldn't control, but wished they could.

Emotional neediness expressed itself in children who randomly reached out to new adults, climbed into strange laps, and exhibited other behaviors reflecting a diffuse need for physical contact, nurturance, and protection. Teachers in preschool and kindergarten noted the same behaviors. This hunger for affection and physical contact lingered after some of the other immediate responses mentioned earlier had subsided.

Some of the young children interviewed showed a remarkable capacity for perception in regard to their family. They were able to accept the family dissolution with a minimum of self-blame, and showed a mastery of social sensitivity. These youngsters had a relatively intact ability to relate to adults, and did not appear as

psychologically disturbed. These children would be classified as Exceptionally Good Copers by McNamee's definition. Some of these children made exceptional efforts at mastery to bring order to their lives and reestablish some meaning (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

#### Characteristics of young school-aged children (6-8 year-olds).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) observed that the most striking response among this age group was pervasive sadness and grief. The impact of the parental separation seemed to overwhelm their usual coping and defense strategies, and crying and sobbing were not uncommon responses, especially among boys. These children were more intensely conscious of their sorrow than any other age group in the Wallerstein and Kelly study, and had great difficulty obtaining relief from their grief. Other children kept their feelings in careful check and relied on complicated coping maneuvers to enable them to maintain their surface composure.

Fear, manifested by young school-aged children, led to severely disorganized behavior and panic set in on occasion. These children also maintained fantasies of being deprived of food, toys, and other important aspects of their lives. These feelings of deprivation may have been a result of the deprivation of love, affection, and attention.

This age group was characterized by a strong yearning for the father (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). More than half of the children in the study missed their fathers acutely. "It seemed clear to us in confronting the despair and sadness of these children and their intense, almost physical longing for the father, that inner psychological needs of great power and intensity were being expressed" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 68). The authors concluded that separation from the father at this critical age, may threaten to disrupt the process of identification with the father. According to psychoanalytic theory, the threat of regression at this age may be particularly frightening for boys because of the newly resolved Oedipal conflict, and their anxiety with being alone with the mother without the reassuring and

constraining presence of the father. Some children assumed behaviors and attitudes of the father in an effort to represent him in the household.

Few children in this age group criticized their fathers in the immediate period following the separation. In fact, children who were aggressive towards their mothers, siblings, and playmates were subdued with their fathers. In contrast to their restraint at expressing anger toward the father, there were some children who expressed considerable anger at the mother. These children, mostly boys, blamed their mothers for causing the divorce or driving the father away. Children who were most hurt and anxious due to the loss of the father tended to be those most outraged at the mother. Perhaps children express this anger toward the mother because they feel more secure in her love, that their anger will not drive her away; whereas if the anger is expressed towards the father, he may never return.

At times, anger was expressed directly, but more often it was displaced towards teachers, friends, siblings; persons with whom they had fewer emotional attachments. Often times, anger was expressed through temper tantrums.

This age group also had fantasies of reconciliation and self-blame similar to the younger age group. These youngsters continued to be loyal to both parents, frequently in secret, and often at great psychological cost and suffering. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found the child's capacity and courage to remain loyal to both parents despite the pressure to divide their loyalty, moving and impressive.

#### Characteristics of older school-aged children (9-12 year-olds).

The findings in Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) study point to the eighth to ninth year as a time of rapid growth and strengthening in ego as evidenced by a newly available repertoire of coping skills, a time of greatly enhanced capacity to understand a complex reality and to withstand stress without regression. There appeared to be very significant changes in relationships with parents, also.

These youngsters tried various methods to manage the distress they were feeling: bravado, courage, trying to understand, refusing to believe the divorce,

reaching out to others for help, keeping in constant motion, and consciously trying not to think about the divorce. Their efforts were in part attended by what Wallerstein and Kelly refer to as a layered response, involving simultaneous denial and distress. The denial was sometimes an attempt to deceive the interviewer, but it also helped the child to deal with his own anguish, feelings of loss and rejection, helplessness and fear of loneliness. This age group were very resourceful in their efforts to keep from being overwhelmed by their powerful feelings and fears.

Older school-aged children were ashamed of what was happening in their families and to them, and they tried to conceal the event and their feelings from others. Children in this age group may not voluntarily tell a teacher that his or her parents are divorcing.

Unlike the younger children (many of whom regressed behaviorally or became depressed in response to the divorce) the unhappiness the older-school-aged children experienced motivated them to action. Such activity represented a variety of coping and defensive strategies designed to help overcome those feelings of powerlessness which the children in this age group experienced as humiliating and threatening to their equilibrium. Shaken by the knowledge that they had little influence on their parent's behavior, several youngsters directly undertook to undo the parental separation. It is possible that some children may use eating disorders as something they can control which then might unite the parents. Vigorous physical activity is a healthy coping mechanism, and one that fits this age group appropriately as they become involved in team and individual sports.

"The single feeling that most clearly identified this age group from the younger children was a fully conscious, intense anger" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 74). It helped to temporarily obliterate and obscure more painful feelings, such as sadness and helplessness. While younger children are more irritable and aggressive following parental separation, the anger these older children felt was well organized and direct.



One of the threats sensed by children in this age group was a threat to their integrity and identity. Children felt that their ability to make good moral choices had been weakened by the disillusionment with their parents' behavior, particularly with the parent who had more often than not acted as their moral authority. Several children in the study became involved in petty stealing and lying immediately following parental separation.

The most useful allies in divorce-related fighting between parents were the nine-to-twelve year olds. Children at this age have the capacity to be a loyal team member or friend, and this capacity was used by parents to wage battle against the other parent. Mothers were more successful at recruiting their sons as allies and fathers were more successful with their daughters. There is evidence which suggests that children who participated in alignments were less psychologically stable than their brothers or sisters who refused to be drawn into battle (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The youngsters who did join one parent against the other were highly distressed at the time of the separation and felt especially vulnerable. "Children who are emotionally hungry are likely to find the parental seduction dazzling and irresistible" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p.78).

Nine-to-twelve-year-old children who are standing on the threshold of adolescence are especially vulnerable to participation in alignments. There are several reasons why this behavior fits the developmental needs of this age group. The immediate result of this alignment relationship, when viewed as a coping strategy, is that it serves to reduce other symptomatic responses among this age group. It wards off depression, loneliness, and sadness. It gives them new activity, authority, permission to express hostility and to engage in mischief, and it gives them a gratifying closeness with one parent. By aligning with one parent and rejecting the other, children are able to resolve an ambivalent relationship with both parents into a clear and simple good parent and bad parent.

This division of the good parent and bad parent reflects the immature conscience of youngsters at this age. The "good" parent is viewed as all virtuous and powerful, and the "bad" parent conveniently bears all the burden of sin. These youngsters not only enjoy the sense of righteousness and the permission they receive from the "good" parent to inflict pain on the "bad" parent, but this enhances their sense of power and control when they can humiliate the vulnerable adult.

#### Characteristics of adolescents (13-18 year-olds).

The threat divorce poses to adolescent development occurs because of the changes it precipitates: in perception of the parents, the relationship with parents, and the diminished availability of the family as a support structure. Elementary-school-aged youngsters and adolescents are pressured to function in a more mature, autonomous manner at an earlier age (Hetherington, 1980). Because adolescents typically seesaw back and forth over several years between the safety of their home and the exciting but risky world of their peers, they need a stable family structure in which to return when needed. Being pushed toward early independence and the assumption of adult responsibilities leads adolescents to feelings of being overwhelmed by unsolvable problems, incompetence, resentment over the lack of support and availability of the mother, and to precocious sexual concerns in some school-aged and adolescent children (Hetherington, 1980). "An important purpose of the family during these adolescent years is to replenish emotional supplies that have been depleted, to restore battered self-esteem, to regress briefly, to retreat temporarily, and finally to gather courage for the next venture into independence" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 82).

The adolescents who participated in the California Children of Divorce study felt that the change in the family had limited or removed entirely the family as a safe base for refueling. The parents' needs seem to have preempted the needs of the adolescents. One of the consequences was that these adolescents felt the time available to them for growing up has been drastically foreshortened.

They felt hurried and pressed to achieve independence more quickly than they might have otherwise. They felt deprived of playtime and a sense of leisure. In accord with these formulations, one potential major impact of divorce is either to drive adolescent development forward at a greatly accelerated tempo, or to bring it to a grinding halt. Some found the challenge congenial and rewarding, and matured rapidly. Others were unable to make it without the family supports and fell behind (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 83).

Other family functions critical to adolescent development were also diminished by the divorce. The tenuous nature of the family, combined with the parental self-absorption or distress, reduced the structure, controls and discipline needed by the adolescents. Some of the adolescents lacked inner controls and the consolidated conscience and independent capacity to make sound judgements without strong parental support and guidance. The divorce also left them feeling vulnerable to their own newly strengthened sexual and aggressive impulses. They felt surrounded by the temptations of the adolescent world without the supports that could hold them to a straight course (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In addition, many parents felt pressured to rethink sexual, vocational, and life style choices, not unlike their adolescent children. The parents also found themselves back in a sexual marketplace which resembles the world of the older adolescent. Some parents regressed to adolescent or pseudoadolescent behaviors at the time of the divorce. The parents' psychological distress was very disturbing to adolescents who felt the need for stable and strong adults who could provide a steady, reliable, and supportive presence during the many crises of growing up. In some cases, the adolescents felt the tables had been turned and they had become responsible for the needy parent. They worried about sex and marriage, and felt they would repeat their parents' failure.

The adolescents responded to the loss of their family with profound grief. They reported feelings of emptiness, tearfulness, difficulty in concentrating, chronic

fatigue, and very troublesome dreams, all symptoms of mourning. They mourned the loss of the family of their childhood. As they mourned its passing, they reviewed good memories and recalled separate incidents in detail. Their sorrowful sense of loss because of the divorce joined with their adolescent feelings of outgrowing the family of their childhood. They grieved for a family in which one parent had already left, and which they too would soon be leaving. The family break-up dramatized their sense of being psychologically in limbo, poised between the dependency of childhood and the independence of adulthood.

As with all the other age groups, anger was a common response. The anger served to express their resentment at one or the other parent for putting their own needs before those of their adolescent children. Even intelligent, well-informed adolescents who understood the reasons behind their parents' decision to divorce were still angry at their parents and considered them selfish and inconsiderate for seeking the divorce at this time.

There was some indication that children grew angrier as they grew older. It is suggested that the unresolved anger of the younger child joins with the characteristic rebelliousness of adolescence as the young person enters that developmental stage. "In this way, the initial anger was fueled by the developmental process as well as by the initial family crisis" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 233). The anger these adolescents felt expressed itself behaviorally in several ways: explosive outbursts; repeated rejection of the parents' overtures and offers of friendship; delinquent behavior including arson, drug involvement, stealing, and breaking and entering; and school failure which included poor learning, truancy, and dropping out. Girls were more likely to become involved in early sexual activity and promiscuity, as well as some drug use and school failure.

The way they perceived their parents was in flux, even without their realization. Their sympathies also changed back and forth, and there were some

loyalty conflicts, but this age group tended to "stay in the middle" more than the younger age groups.

As with the nine-to-twelve-year-olds, the adolescents felt obliged to assign blame and responsibility to one or the other parent for the failure of the marriage. They felt disappointed in their parents' failure to behave in accord with their standards of proper conduct. This led them to worry about issues of right and wrong in general. Their purpose was serious as they sought to determine standards to guide their own behavior in the present and the future (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Adolescents created distance from their parents at the height of the struggle. This strategic withdrawal helped them maintain their intactness and separation from fighting and the crisis. This distance helped save them from overwhelming anguish, humiliation, and emotional depletion, and enabled them at a later date, at a time appropriate to their own internal timetable and when the external turmoil had subsided somewhat, to be supportive, empathetic, and sensitive to needy parents. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) suggested their withdrawal served to maintain the integrity of their development. These observations add evidence to the usefulness of defensive withdrawal and denial in the normal development of children and adolescents.

Not all adolescents followed these developmental steps in coping with the divorce of their parents and the loss of their family as they had known it. Some followed different paths. Temporary regressions were made not only by the youngest children in the study, but by adolescents also. Forms of regression among adolescents included: withdrawal from age-appropriate activities, choosing much younger children as playmates, and spending increasing amounts of time at home, either alone or in the company of the parent. When the retreat to more childish behavior lasted only a few months, the effect on development was minimal. Parents were sometimes alarmed by temporary disruptions in school attendance, and falling grades had a more serious impact on older adolescents preparing for college than on younger adolescents.

Regressions were more likely to cause delayed entry into adolescence when one parent relied heavily on the adolescent child and consciously or unconsciously encouraged the son or daughter to give up age-appropriate activities and interests in order to devote increasing amounts of time, energy, and affection to the needy adult.

Adolescents struggled with the development of their conscience, and self-control. They needed the protective structure provided by parents, often the father, to reinforce and organize their insufficiently mature conscience and self-control. Youngsters sometimes became overwhelmed with anxiety in the face of their own heightened sexual and aggressive impulses, and lacked familiar limits. "The general weakening of the family structure burdened many youngsters because it imposed on them the responsibility for controls on their own behavior for which they were not ready" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 94). They responded in sometimes dramatic ways, such as delinquent acting out, running away, acute depression, and sexual acting out. Although this latter behavior was sometimes brief, it had the potential for an enduring effect on the youngster's lives. It sometimes led to dropping out of school and other major decisions that are difficult to reverse.

#### Sex-related differences.

Hetherington maintained that the impact of marital discord and divorce is more pervasive and enduring for boys than for girls. She noted, "Boys from divorced families, in contrast with girls from divorced families and children from nuclear families, show a higher rate of behavior disorders and problems in interpersonal relations in the home and in school with teachers and peers" (Hetherington, 1980, p. 281).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) observed few sex-related differences at the time of the marital breakup. Girls were initially judged to be more able than boys to establish good relationships with adults and other children. They were also more empathetic, more sensitive of others, significantly more independent, and generally more able to enjoy play and to make use of fantasy. This could be related to cultural

expectations and socialization of girls, rather than a specific response to divorce. Also, the girls still had a female role model, whereas the boys lacked a male role model in the home.

In an eighteen-month follow-up with the children in Wallerstein and Kelly's study, the differences between boys and girls was striking. Boys remained significantly more opposed to the divorce than their sisters; they felt more stressed within the post-divorce family and more of them had remained intensely preoccupied with the divorce. Daydreaming was more prevalent among boys than girls at this point in time, and they frequently fantasized about a reconciliation of the broken marriage. More boys longed intensely for their father, and felt rejected by him. The girls, on the other hand, were happier at the eighteen-month assessment than their brothers. They were more likely to view the post-divorce family as an improvement over the pre-divorce family. More girls had friends and used them as a support system: a socially learned behavior for girls but not for boys. On a wide variety of measures, the girls appeared to be coping more successfully than their brothers. This may indicate that we need to encourage boys to enrich their friendships and improve their communication skills at an earlier age.

Hetherington(1980) also suggested that the loss of the father is more stressful for boys than for girls when the mother is the custodial parent. Without the father's male role model in the home, young boys particularly may have difficulty in finding another male with which to closely identify.

Hetherington (1980) cited research in which boys received less positive support and nurturance, and were viewed more negatively by mothers, teachers, and peers in the period immediately following divorce than were girls ( Santrock & Trace, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Divorced mothers of boys reported feeling more stress and depression than divorced mothers of girls. It may be that the increased aggressiveness frequently observed in boys necessitates the use of firmer, more consistent discipline practices for boys than for girls. Boys are less compliant than

girls, and children are generally less compliant with their mothers than with their fathers (Hetherington, 1980). Boys may be exposed to more frustration, stress, and aggression and have fewer available supports in a female-headed household. They also needed to adjust to greater change in the father-child relationship than did their sisters (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

All children experienced feelings of rejection by the departed parent, usually the father, but six-to-twelve-year-old boys felt the most rejected, regardless of their psychological condition (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Some boys identified with the departed father and experienced every criticism directed towards the father by the mother as directed towards them. Angry or grieving mothers contributed to the child's sense of rejection by exclaiming, "He left us. He no longer cares about us" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 48). The children's feelings of rejection led them to doubt their own loveability, and to question whether they were in some way unworthy of the departed parent's esteem and affection.

There were sex-related differences in children's depression. Depression in young boys was significantly linked to infrequent visits from the father and continued disappointment in the father, anger at both parents, and feelings of rejection by the mother (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). There was also a significant link between depression in younger boys and the reduced social and economic circumstances in their post-divorce family. Depression in younger girls was linked to poor relationships with their mothers and diminished parenting. Younger girls appeared to be more affected than younger boys by their custodial mother's psychological problems. These responses fit their developmental stage when younger girls identify with their mothers and younger boys identify with their fathers. Although this identification is a normal developmental response, young children in these situations need an even stronger positive relationship with another adult of their sex.

At eighteen months following the onset of the divorce crisis, some of the children who complained about the post-divorce family included boys who



complained that their sense of masculinity was threatened by living with their mothers and sisters (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This complaint came particularly from boys entering adolescence, in the nine-to-thirteen-year-old group. Even when there was regular visitation with the non-custodial father, several of these boys felt this contact was insufficient to meet their needs.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) cautioned that the finding at eighteen months that girls had achieved equilibrium sooner than boys is not necessarily an indicator of their future psychological well-being. These findings do not rule out the possibility of a delayed response among girls during adolescence.

#### Summary.

The developmental responses identified in children of divorce do not follow a set pattern, and vary with the age, temperament, and sex of the child at the time of the divorce. And their relationships with both parents, as well as economic and life style changes, will influence their adjustment. Some of the responses are short-lived, others may linger and persist. The sudden, often unanticipated changes created by the initial crises can cause children to feel very vulnerable and uncertain of their future. This initial reaction should subside within a few months, unless there is continued talk within their home of moving or if the parents and children become fixated at the acute crisis stage.

Feelings of loneliness and emotional neediness may persist, remaining intense five years after the divorce. Children complained of coming home to empty houses after school to await the return of the working parent. On weekends, youngsters often felt ignored because of the social life of both divorced parents (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Community and human supports must be available to children, but children need help to reach out and to use them. We should not assume that children know what supports are available and are simply choosing not to use them. Children need to create supportive relationships with others, and may need help in doing so. Sometimes children who need supportive relationships the most, are those least able

to develop such relationships. Wallerstein and Kelly(1980) discovered that the children who found support in other adults such as neighbors, teachers, and parents of friends, had to make their plight known before they could be aided. Many children, particularly during the latency period, are ashamed of what is happening to them, and are reluctant to tell others (Cantor, 1982). Children who withdraw into themselves only increase their deprivation. Teachers should be sensitive to the needs of withdrawn, shy children for meaningful, supportive relationships with adults and peers.

Anxiety decreased for many children by twelve to eighteen months following the break-up. Initially, about 50 percent of the children had suffered from anxiety, but eighteen months later only 20 percent reported feelings of anxiety. However, one in every five children is still a rather high figure. If children had resumed their usual schedules at school, developed new routines at home, and had consciously put the divorce aside, they were less likely to feel anxious. By this eighteen-month point, most of the other acute symptoms of anxiety such as sleep disturbances, phobias, regression, whimpering, fear of being lost in the shuffle or forgotten by the preoccupied adult, and sharp drops in school performance had been mastered by most children, with or without adult help.

Moderate depression did not seem to interfere with the youngsters' developmental progress in all aspects of their functioning. At least half of the children who were depressed were able to move ahead at age-appropriate tasks in several important areas. These children seemed to be those who had functioned well or reasonably well through their earlier development. But another 50 percent or slightly less of depressed children were not functioning adequately at age-appropriate tasks. These are the children who need intervention and counseling. Depression appeared to be frequently associated with three other factors: intense anger, a profound sense of rejection by one or both parents, and strong disapproval of the divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Anger had considerable staying power. At eighteen months post-divorce, when fears of abandonment and disaster had subsided, many children remained angry. Children who were functioning adequately, or somewhat unevenly, showed significant residues of their anger in their persistent emotional neediness, unhappiness, and somewhat diminished self-esteem. The intensity of their anger had diminished and patterns of control had shifted, indicating some successful coping was happening. However, at five years post-divorce, anger was still a significant factor for 23 percent of the children in Wallerstein and Kelly's study. This anger was significantly linked to poor adjustment, school failure, and acting-out behaviors of various kinds. It would seem critical to identify children who remain visibly angry at one and one-half to two-years following a parental divorce. These children need intervention to help them resolve their anger before they reach adolescence. Anger expressed through aggression is serious in younger children, and has an effect on their development, but anger expressed by adolescents has the potential for long-ranging consequences.

Aggression may not be the bid for attention as teachers may interpret hitting and other aggressive behaviors. It may be an acting out of anger for lack of other more appropriate methods to express anger, particularly for younger children with fewer verbal skills.

Children's internal coping mechanisms which are used to help them maintain their equilibrium at the time of the marital rupture, are distinctly different from the coping skills they develop to keep themselves moving along their developmental path (McNamee, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children who are exceptionally good copers according to McNamee's description, and who develop successful coping strategies to divorce, may have succeeded not only in managing the immediate stresses, but may have surpassed their developmental stage because of the independence and maturity acquired in the successful struggle.

### Changes in Family Functioning & Life Style

The changes which occur in family life style and functioning play a major role in children's response to divorce. Children's temperaments and developmental responses are only part of the puzzle pieces that must fit together in the reconstituted family. Their internal and personal responses to their immense feelings about the parental separation are interrelated to their responses to other changes in their lives. "In addition to this legal divorce, there must also be an emotional divorce in the family unit, whereby former support systems are terminated. In addition to both the legal and emotional divorce there is also the financial divorce" (Scherman, 1979, p. 8).

#### Economic changes.

Money problems generally increase when one or both parents' earnings are spread over two households instead of one. Children's financial security, as well as emotional security, are shaken. Scherman (1979) cited research conducted twelve years ago in which the economic condition of the fathers improved for the most part, while the economic condition of the mothers significantly declined. With recent gains in the employment status of women, perhaps both single-parent mothers and married mothers have improved their financial security, and more fathers are requesting and receiving custody of their children. Regardless of which parent receives custody, there is a greater financial burden for the custodial parent than for the non-custodial parent. If the child is unaccustomed to both parents being employed outside of the home, the employment of the custodial parent may seem like the loss of both parents. This may result in a higher rate of behavior disorders among preschool-age children (Hetherington, 1980).

Economic factors such as reduced family income, less adequate housing, and employment for single-parents have been suggested as the cause of many of the negative findings for children (Hetherington, 1980; Scherman, 1979). Hodges' (1979) research found that limited financial resources, relatively young divorced parents, and geographic mobility predicted negative adjustment for preschool-age children.

Some researchers argue that it is the economic and social impact of divorce which causes stress for children and families, not divorce per se (Scherman, 1979). Often, in one-parent families, economic strain may be displaced into non-economic relationships, particularly those between mother and child (Colletta, 1983). Relocation, whether due to economic factors or others factors, resulted not only in the loss of friends, neighbors, and a familiar school, but sometimes resulted in living in an area with a higher delinquency rate, greater risks to personal safety, fewer recreational facilities, and inadequate schools (Hetherington, 1980). Even the talk of anticipating a move tended to produce as much anxiety and sense of uncertainty as the actual event (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In an article on the situations of divorced mothers and their children, Colletta (1983) related that besides adequate income and job satisfaction, community services are needed to support single-parents, such as assistance during illness and routine shopping. The combined roles of economic provider, mother, and full-time manager seem to present insurmountable problems to women who are trying to advance themselves economically by improving their training and education (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). "One of the ironies of the woman's move towards independence, increased self-esteem, and personal growth was that the children did not always share in the benefits, at least not in the first year" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 25). When mothers lacked both sufficient funds for adequate help and a supportive network in their communities to ease the strain, many felt defeated and their children experienced diminished care as a result of their very striving to improve their situation.

#### Parenting changes.

Children have a difficult time understanding that it is their parents who divorce, since they perceive that they too, are being separated from one of their parents. Who will provide for the emotional needs of children during the crises of divorce? When a marriage falters and fails, the adults are most often caught up in

their own emotional needs, focusing their energies inward. "Meanwhile, the children, perhaps because they are presumed to be unaware of what is happening, or unaffected by it, or perhaps because there is just no energy left for them, are expected to fend for themselves. Such an expectation places tremendous stress on children..." (Cantor, 1982, p. 77). Children need to be allowed to express the hurt and angry feelings that they have been abandoned and divorced (Seagull & Seagull, 1977).

One of the first things parents must do when they decide to divorce is for both of them to explain to the children what is happening. McNamee (1982) stated that it is unrealistic of parents to think that the child already knows and understands what is going on. "Children hear but do not understand; they often know that something is terribly wrong, but not what it will mean to them" (McNamee, 1982, p. 41). Children need to be told that they are not the cause, and that their desires, fantasies, dreams, or behavior was not a factor (Seagull & Seagull, 1977). Parents must talk honestly, and assure children that they will be secure and will receive needed care. The child must be reassured that whatever the relationship of the parents, s/he will still be loved by both.

Many children consider divorce an act of selfishness in which the parents have given primary consideration to their own needs and only secondary consideration to the needs of their children. Some children bitterly resent the destruction of their family and their home, and feel betrayed by what they consider the unbecoming, immoral behavior of a parent. They are also stressed by the bitterness expressed by their parents (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children in families where parents raged over custody and visitation are likely to be immensely anxious and preoccupied with details of their parents' battles. They also worry about their own future, and sometimes with the issue of maintaining fairness and loyalty to both parents. "Children need loving relationships with two caring parents, even if those parents no longer care for one another. While divorce seems to be an acceptable solution for an

unworkable marriage, parents should not be allowed to divorce their children" (Grief, 1979, p. 302).

The desired outcome of divorce is to improve the lives of the adults, but if the changes do not include the parent-child relationship, the child may not benefit from the improvements in the parents' lives. "The developmental process for young children in particular moves forward at a rapid and increasingly complex pace, and its successful course is dependent in part on the assistance of attentive, nurturing parents. Children cannot mark time for an extended period while parents integrate their own lives if such integration excludes, or fails to take seriously, the youngsters needs for continued support" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 158-159). At their five-year follow-up, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) were surprised to find that 56% of the children and adolescents continued to find little or no improvement over the predivorce family. A child's need for two parents in an intact family, and an adult's need for a psychologically healthy marriage conflict when divorce is sought as an answer to the adult needs.

A good relationship with the custodial parent is crucial to good functioning in the post-divorce family of all children and adolescents. "A close, nurturant, dependable mother-child relationship was highly related to the youngsters competent ego functioning, to successful performance at school, social maturity, empathetic relationships with adults and peers, and to feeling good about oneself in the world" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 217). Since most children remain in the custody of their mothers, the well-being of the mother and the quality of the mother-child relationship is central to the adjustment of the child (Eiduson, 1983; Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Marital breakdown can accompany or cause severe and sometimes lasting disorganization in adults. Some distressed parents, both custodial and non-custodial, may expect the child to fulfill a wide range of psychological and social needs (Wallerstein, 1985). At five years following the divorce, children who had been in

the custody of an unsupportive and/or troubled parent and who were rejected by the non-custodial parent, viewed the divorce as the continuing disaster in their lives (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In families where the mother is hostile and critical of the father, children view the father in a more ambivalent or negative manner, and as a less acceptable role model (Hetherington, 1980). For young boys, this is associated with a disruption in sex typing, and for girls it may be associated with disruptions of heterosexual relations at adolescence (Hetherington, 1980).

The average time required by women to reestablish a sense of continuity in their lives was 3 to 3 1/2 years. The research evidence clearly shows that divorce has a direct and specific impact on both adults' capacity to parent. There is greater disorganization, poorly enforced discipline, and inconsistency in enforcing household routines.

The root causes underlying the deteriorating household order we have found to be, in addition to fatigue and overloading, the mother's fear of rejection by her children. Her wish to avoid reproach for the divorce and a fear of the children's anger lead her to yield to the children's clamor, and to retreat from the requirement that standards be maintained in the home (Wallerstein, in Garnezy & Rutter, Eds., 1983, p. 277).

In most families, the disorganization which contributes to poor parenting is overcome, and most custodial parents are likely to resume earlier levels of caregiving within seven years following the marital crisis (Wallerstein, 1985). But seven years is a long time in the life of a child. And unfortunately, many parents remain psychologically troubled or continue to be disinterested in parenting.

The mother who must cope with non-compliant, acting-out behavior, particularly in sons, may become increasingly frustrated and incompetent in her parenting. Hetherington noted that divorced mothers and their sons are more likely to become involved in an escalating cycle of mutual coercion than mothers and sons in



intact families (Hetherington, 1980). Two-thirds of the children in the California Children of Divorce study became more difficult to manage: they were more irritable, and more unruly. Older children tended to be angry, and the younger children expressed their emotional neediness through clinging and dependent behaviors (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Beyond the change in the family structure, the parents' willingness or capacity to maintain the generational distance between themselves and their children may alter the experiences of children growing up (Wallerstein, 1985). Some children are expected to accompany their parents as though they are the parent's "date". Some parents have a regressed dependence on the child's presence, and even the partial absence of the child engenders acute anxiety in the parent. Wallerstein (1985) categorized children as "overburdened" who: 1) take on the responsibility for their own upbringing beyond their capacities; 2) acquire special psychological significance to the family in response to the regressed need of one or both troubled parents; 3) are the continued target of litigation and dispute between their parents; and 4) experience a second parental divorce and who cannot cope with the multiplying impact of two disruptions. These children are rarely referred for help by their parents with whom their lives are so entangled, or by teachers who fail to grasp the significance of their student's loneliness or anxiety.

Hetherington (1980) maintained that the most effective support system for divorced women in their parenting role and for their children is a continued mutually supportive relationship and the involvement of the father (Hetherington, 1980). Paradoxically, the separation of children and their father by divorce comes at a time when father-child relations are being redefined by men's increased participation in their children's development (Grief, 1979). Children need the active involvement of both parents, and Grief's research supports the findings that fathers with joint custody are more likely to have a high degree of influence on their children's growth and development.

For some fathers who were closely attached to their children prior to the divorce, the intermittent parenting of the visitation arrangement is painful and they withdraw from their children (Hetherington, 1980). In her study which focused on non-custodial fathers, Grief (1979) found that those fathers who had infrequent visits with their children were concerned about their child's distress and their inability to deal with it at a distance. Non-custodial fathers also noted their children's reluctance to discuss upsetting issues with them during their limited time together. Not only does the lack of time during visits inhibit a child from sharing their distress, but the absence of daily contact limits the opportunity of the father to provide comfort during times of transitory distress in their children. For fathers with more than one child, their limited visitation time restricts the opportunity for time alone with each child.

Denied contact with their children, being forced into the situation of getting permission from the custodial parent for extra time, often being denied access to their child's teachers, who won't discuss school performance with non-custodial parents, these fathers see themselves less and less as parents and eventually act in accordance with the role that had been assigned to them: the absent parent (Grief, 1979, p. 300).

In Hodges' (1979) study with preschool children, a significant relationship was found between increased frequency of father visits and lowered scores on mother-child cooperation. Seagull and Seagull (1977) commented that in most instances, the child will unconsciously make those choices which will make his or her life easiest at the home of the custodial parent, in most cases the mother's home. Since the child spends the majority of time with the mother, and it is she who makes the major decisions affecting him daily, the child will seek to make things smoother there. The father may resent this, and may involve the child in needless anguish by making issues into a "secret love test" (Seagull & Seagull, 1977). Mothers may become angry at the "Christmas" atmosphere of non-custodial parent visitation because of the

unreal quality of this unfair competition. Overcoming the urge to buy unnecessary gifts for children will help normalize relations between the father, child, and mother.

Aside from desires to reunite their parents, children in the California Children of Divorce study requested more visiting with their non-custodial parent. An intense longing for greater contact persisted over the years. In awarding visitation rights, "the best interests of the child" have more often been a matter of the perceived best interests of each parent as negotiated by his or her attorney (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Visitation creates an artificial atmosphere for father-child interaction. Seagull and Seagull (1977) pointed out that the most difficult part of any visit are hello and good-bye. Good-byes can be especially painful for children and fathers alike.

Whether the father maintained his presence with regular visits or never contacted his children, he influenced their thoughts, feelings, and most particularly, their self-concept and self-esteem. Children seemed unable to recognize or understand that it was the father's failings which accounted for the quality and quantity of the relationship. They perceived that they were in some way not worthy of his continued love and interest. Youngsters who lacked a relationship with their fathers experienced a heightened need to establish some type of relationship as they reached adolescence, particularly girls.

Only 30 percent of the children and fathers in Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) study were able to build and maintain a mutually rewarding relationship which still remained five years after the divorce. The great majority of father-child relationships had become emotionally limited despite the fact that they continued to see each other fairly often. These relationships were insufficient to promote or even facilitate the growth and development of the child. The poorest father-child relationships were those with boys in the thirteen-to-sixteen-year-old group, the next most impoverished were the older male adolescents and young adults (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Father-child relationships which failed to thrive included: those

where the father did not change his perception of the child despite the child's growth and development; visits which resembled "dates"; and visiting patterns which met parental needs and ignored the changing needs of the growing child (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In some cases, visits with the non-custodial parent were halted due to the psychological illness of the father. Unfortunately, prohibiting visitation was as likely to strengthen the father-child relationship as to weaken it, and the well-intentioned strategy may backfire because children, out of their own intense need, can all too readily idealize the parent they are prohibited from seeing (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The fathers and children who succeeded in building an emotionally satisfying relationship, did so in part because of the father's capacity to adjust to changing circumstances and his ability to adapt to the specific demands and limitations of the non-custodial role. These fathers also shared an awareness of their children as individuals, and were reasonably sensitive to children's changing development and interests over the years. Creating new relationships out of the configurations of divorce takes time, patience, understanding, flexibility, creativity, and commitment on the part of children, non-custodial parent, and custodial parent.

#### Extra-familial support.

Hetherington noted that "extrafamilial factors such as stresses and supports in other social institutions or networks, the quality of housing, neighborhoods, child care, the need for the mother to work, economic status, and geographic mobility will moderate or potentiate stresses associated with divorce" (Hetherington, 1980, p. 280). As Wallerstein and Kelly assessed the factors that impact families; they became concerned with the lack of social supports and networks for many middle-class, white families. They felt that the lack of these supports may have put the children of such families at more risk during periods of stress than children in other ethnic and socioeconomic groups who have a sense of extended family and community (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Hetherington's (1980) research review indicated that

extended family and community services play a more active role as support systems for low-income families than for moderate-income families.

This research review did not indicate whether or to what extent supportive services are able to fill in the gaps of the family structure, but prior experience indicates that the divorced family is at high risk when it stands alone. In order to fulfill the responsibility of child rearing and to provide even minimally for the needs of the adult, many divorced families are in urgent need of both formal and informal networks of services that are not now available to them in their communities. Some services may exist, but families who traditionally have not utilized them may be unfamiliar with the process necessary to obtain those services. Even families who have lived in a community several years and have maintained a stable residence, may have few resources outside of the immediate family to help with the children during the divorce crisis. In general, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) recommended enhancing the lives of divorced families by providing: child support at a level that realistically represents the cost of raising children; educational, vocational and financial counseling combined with training and employment programs for adults returning to the economic or professional marketplace after a several-year absence; enriched child-care and after-school programs and facilities for children of various ages as well as divorce specific counseling programs.

Except for school, few institutions supported the children in Wallerstein and Kelly's study. Fewer than five percent of the children were counseled or sustained by a church congregation or minister. Some children were helped by neighbors and the parents of some of their friends. School was helpful to distressed children, largely because of its continuing presence in their lives. Regular attendance and the need to be on task at school helped to organize their lives. It also provided a refuge from family difficulties and distressed parents. In all, less than ten percent of the children received help from their community or family friends.

Friendships were found not to compensate for a lack of support at home (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children whose divorce experience was relatively conflict-free and whose families were supportive were best able to turn to friends for additional support. The peer group may not be a support for the troubled child because he or she is not likely to seek it out, although several troubled youngsters and adolescents who turned to peer groups were caught up in delinquent behavior and gangs. Those children who had extended families, especially grandparents, who were geographically close or who kept up a supporting presence even from a distance, were very much helped by this support system. "Essentially, aside from school, the children who did well used their family as the major support system, and within that relied most on their mothers, their fathers, and their own resources" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 222).

#### Summary.

The major impact on the psychological health and development of children and adolescents is due to the diminished or disrupted parenting which so often follows in the wake of divorce. Children seem to pass through the acute phase of the divorce-engendered crisis sooner than their parents.

Even though the children who coped successfully with the divorce were dependent on the mother-child relationship, their good adjustment remained conditional on their not feeling rejected by the non-custodial father. The importance of a good father-child relationship remains significant and may, in fact, increase as the child approaches early adolescence (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Friendliness or at least the absence of conflict between parents, was important to the successful coping of children.

An important aspect of successful adjustment at five-years post-divorce was the quality of the present parent-child relationship. The relationship of the past was not sufficient to supply the child with what he or she required at this stage of development. Children whose ego functioning was good or very good at the five-year

mark were children who received what they needed for their present development. "Because of the discontinuity in many parent-child relationships following divorce, the importance of the present relationship is especially great" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 208).

Successful family relationships were maintained when the divorce was undertaken by parents who had carefully considered the consequences, rather than parents who divorced as a unilateral decision which humiliated, angered, or grieved the other adult. Parents who had taken into consideration the possible psychological, social, and economic consequences for themselves and their children were better able to take reasonable measures to provide comfort and appropriate levels of understanding for the children. Parents who continued to feel humiliated, angry and sad and who did not experience relief from marital stress were likely to poorly support and inform their children. "The end results of a successfully established post-divorce family can be an improved quality of life for adults and children. The results of a failed divorce are likely to be low self-esteem and depression, accompanied by a continued feeling of deprivation or continued anger for children and adolescents which can endure for many years" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 317).

Further research is needed to distinguish between the effects of single-parent homes and low socioeconomic conditions. It is difficult to ascertain how much of the stress children experience as a result of divorce can be attributed to the changes created by reduced economic conditions. We know that children experience physical and psychological changes when a previously at-home parent assumes new employment. A new job may be just one of the changes precipitated by divorce that causes reduced levels of parenting. Not only the non-custodial parent, but even the custodial parent becomes less available to children at a time when they have a greater need for reassurance and security. Parents are going through their own internal reorganization, and have less time and energy to spend on their children. In addition to the lessened attention of the the custodial parent, children must develop an entirely new

relationship with the other parent. All of this may occur with little support from friends, neighbors, or relatives who fail to understand the needs of the reorganizing family.

The atmosphere in the home, and particularly the child's sense of not being deprived, is a significant factor in the good adjustment of many children. This sense of "having enough" encompassed many of the child's feelings and perceptions, including the child's sense of economic stability, standard of living within the household, and quality of parenting. Unfortunately, those children who move frequently and who lack economic stability may need intervention if this is a pattern of continuing crisis in their lives. The new teacher who receives them into his or her classroom may be in a better position to intervene than the previous teacher. The guidance counselor is also in a position to help the new student from a recently divorced and relocated family by listening to and understanding their fears, and providing guidance to work through the student's feelings.

### School Intervention Strategies

What are the implications for schools of children's developmental responses to divorce? The child's personality and internal coping abilities are also factors in which the school has only an indirect role. But schools can play a direct role in helping to provide children with a supportive human network, and can help to identify the presence of continuing anger and depression in the child by the child's behavior in the classroom and in interaction with peers. "When school personnel have been made aware of the typical post-divorce adjustment pattern, that symptoms generally subside within the first year, they can learn to ride the storm. They can even reduce school pressures on the child when they are aware of the stresses of the home situation" (Cantor, 1982, p. 80). The school can provide services to support the child during stressful times, and can provide preventive services to reduce the likelihood of the emergence of a chronic problem (Drake, 1979). Such interventions



may relieve short-term stress, and prevent long-term effects of divorce-engendered developmental responses.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found teachers provided less help than expected, since over half of the the children in their study did not receive any support from teachers. In all fairness to teachers, many had little information about the divorce, or learned of it through the child. School personnel lacked information, and were reluctant to intrude on the family's right to privacy. Teachers are dependent on the parents for information which will help them understand and cope with abrupt changes in a child's behavior, and often require the parent's permission to discuss the matter with the student. Some families fear prejudicing the child's teacher by labeling him a child of divorce, and some parents feel that teachers cannot be trusted with such personal information.

Many parents fail to understand that a major crisis in the life of their child can reverberate in behavior and performance at school. They fail to perceive that the teacher's ability to deal constructively with the behaviors s/he encounters in the classroom may be enhanced by understanding the underlying problem (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The end result of these failures in communication is that the child receives less support than he might. For older youngsters, of course, there is no one central figure to whom they can convey vitally important information, moving as youngsters do from teacher to teacher each hour of the day. This is important, as no one may notice for months that a youngster's overall academic achievement is floundering (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 266).

In large school districts, some system needs to be in place to assure that all students have at least one teacher or guidance counselor in touch with what is happening on a daily basis. This could be accomplished by home room assignments, daily check-in with a counselor, or by student assistance programs set up to provide non-traditional counseling.

It is ironic that at a time when parents expect increased responsibility from schools for their children's well-being, some parents withhold vital information from teachers which would improve the teacher's ability to relate to the young person. Drake (1979) cautioned that children of divorce may exhibit problems at school that are not apparent at home and that parents have not identified. All school personnel, especially teachers, need to be knowledgeable of the common problems associated with divorce that surface in school settings.

Regardless of their academic and social functioning at school, many children are supported by the school simply because the school provides structure at a time when the major structure of their lives, the family, is crumbling. Schools are a natural place for the identification of problems (Cantor, 1977; Drake, 1979; Kalter et.al., 1984), and for some types of intervention. Cantor (1977) pointed out that the school is the social institution which, after the family, has the greatest influence on a child's development. All children attend school, and trained personnel - school psychologists, social workers, and guidance counselors - are available for leadership with divorce intervention groups. The ready-made peer structure of schools can serve to mediate the divorce process, and provide intervention in the familiar context of the school (Kalter et. al., 1984).

Some teachers who knew or suspected what was happening to the children in the California Study of Divorce were remarkably sensitive, and shared their lunches and laps with needy children. A few teachers in the lower elementary grades held angry and fretful children, recognizing the needs beneath the tantrums. But overall, preschool and kindergarten teachers were not able to provide enough nurturing in the classroom to contain the anxiety of their students, and many children could not be comforted at all or only temporarily (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Even caring, concerned teachers cannot substitute for the lack of security and care children need from their parents.

A few teachers expected children to continue to function academically as if nothing had happened. They became impatient with daydreaming and incomplete work, and failed to recognize the significance of this behavior. Not all children experience school difficulties as a result of divorce; some older children may even improve their school performance as they utilize school as a diversion from the crisis at home. However, teachers need to be sensitive to individual differences. Children who become withdrawn may be easier to overlook than children who act out, but both children need intervention.

Teachers who participated in Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) study noted that the onset of divorce-engendered behaviors seemed to be unpredictable. Teachers reported a high level of anxiety in more than half of their students, although this subsided within the first year. Most often this anxiety was exhibited as restlessness, and students who used to sit and do their work now roamed the room constantly and began to interrupt classroom activities with this behavior. Difficulty in concentrating increased and an increase in daydreaming followed the breakup. Children were preoccupied with their parents' well-being and their own future, and brought these worries into the classroom. Twenty-five percent of the children seemed unable to put their worries aside for some time after the separation. It may be tempting for teachers attempting to comfort worried children to make assurances such as "I'm sure you won't be moving, etc...". In an attempt to be helpful and comforting, teachers may inadvertently create more mistrust of adults if the reassurance proves false. Teachers noted either considerable sadness or depression in one-fifth of the youngsters. This was more evident in younger children who were more open about revealing their feelings in the school setting. The combination of intense sadness, daydreaming, and concentration problems resulted in a significant decline in academic achievement for 20 percent of the children for several months following the separation (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

One of the unfortunate consequences of divorce-engendered behaviors is the spread to relationships with peers (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children's behaviors often alienated, at least temporarily, the very youngsters from whom they normally would have received comfort and companionship. Friends did not understand the children's confusing changes in behavior, and teachers did not help these children or their peers understand what was happening. While teachers called the child's attention to their classroom behavior or personally comforted the child, they did not intervene in inappropriate peer interactions. It would be helpful if teachers clarified to children and their peers the effects of stress on relationships.

What can classroom teachers do to more effectively intervene with children of divorce? First of all, teachers need to receive training in recognizing the typical emotions and responses of children of divorce, and need to learn techniques to deal with the behaviors exhibited in the classroom (Elmore, 1986). Teachers can be non-judgmental listeners, and can use the following sequence of mediating alternative to help a child cope. These alternative begin with the non-verbal interaction of allowing time to consider what might be said, and move toward verbal interaction. First, recognize the child's cue from a behavior change, then be physically supportive by touching or holding the child. State or restate the stressful situation and share your feelings and the child's. Then give information related to the stressful situation intended to make the child feel more secure, and close the conversation with a promise of re-opening it when needed (McNamee, 1982). The child may need clarification that while venting feelings is all right, some behavior is not acceptable.

The classroom atmosphere should be one of calm, understanding and acceptance; an environment where stressful life experience is seen as an opportunity for the teacher to introduce, and the child to develop, effective, socially adaptive ways of moving through anxiety and coping (McNamee, 1982). It is important for teachers to analyze their own attitudes toward divorce and children from single-parent homes,

and to recognize whether they always expect behavior problems from children of divorce.

It is especially important for teachers to realize that divorce need not cause academic and behavioral problems although prior research suggests that teacher expectations of student achievement may influence the students' actual performance. Therefore, educators need to guard against assumptions that children from "broken homes" will have problems with learning and social adjustment (Hammond, 1979).

In regard to school access, teachers need to know how parental rights are interpreted under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 which states that school districts must provide parents of students access to records that educational agencies and institutions maintain that are directly related to the student. "For the purpose of FERPA, a school district must accord a natural parent the rights the Act accords him or her unless the courts or a responsible party has provided a legally binding document that specifically removes that parent's right to have knowledge about and participate in his or her child's educational process" (Cantor, 1982, p. 79).

It is obvious that teachers are on the "front line" of defense in recognizing divorce-engendered behavior problems, but they need the help of support staff such as guidance counselors and school psychologists to provide group or individual counseling. The purpose of group intervention is to aid youngsters to negotiate more effectively the developmental tasks associated with both divorce and post-divorce experiences (Kalter, et. al., 1984).

The use of group-oriented preventive measures was recommended to deliver services through schools to a population which appears to be at risk for psychosocial problems. It was also suggested that intervention may be beneficial at one or more developmental points in a child's life, such as school entry, prepuberty-adolescence, and immediately prior to high school graduation (Kalter, et. al., 1984). At each developmental point, normative stresses are encountered, and previous conflicts are

more likely to resurface both to complicate development and to provide an opportunity for their reworking.

Facilitation groups can help to normalize the sense of being a child of divorce, and to clarify confusing and upsetting divorce issues. Groups can also provide a safe place for children to experience and rework emotionally painful aspects of divorce and post-divorce life, and assist children in the development of coping strategies. Group facilitators can share with parents the nature of the concerns of students regarding divorce and its aftermath. Kalter et. al. (1984) found that the use of a displacement format to elicit thoughts and feelings about divorce, and the fact that the group was not labeled troublemakers or kids in trouble, appeared to be major factors in the youngsters' immediate and highly personal involvement in the intervention groups. The sense of safety in the group, and the familiar setting of the school also seemed to be important factors in the success of the facilitation groups.

Scherman (1979) developed a nine session program addressing similar problems. Displacement activities were also used, such as having children draw an animal they would like to be, vignettes of divorce situations, and psychodrama. Although Scherman's (1979) study was conducted with a small group and lacks validity, his approach and activities deserve further study.

In a study conducted by Hammond (1979), children of divorce suggested ways in which school counselors could be helpful to them. "The children selected (in order of preference): 1) letting the child talk about his feelings, 2) group counseling with other children from divorced families, 3) providing books about divorce, and 4) talking to the students' parents if they asked the counselor to do so" (Hammond, 1979, p. 219).

What is the role of schools in regard to the changes that divorce creates in family life style and functioning? It is necessary for teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors to recognize the symptoms of psychological dysfunctioning in adults because it directly affects their children. The effects of poor parenting are reflected in children's behavior, and the school has little impact on whether the

custodial parent is performing adequately or the non-custodial parent is maintaining a healthy relationship with his or her children unless the school chooses to offer support services.

### Summary.

Divorce did not significantly alter school performance of the children in Wallerstein & Kelly's (1980) study as a group. There were changes in the direction of individual students academic progress. Some individuals improved their academic performance while others had deteriorating school performance. In another study, a comparison of children from divorced and intact homes found no significant differences in self-concept, mathematics and reading achievement, withdrawal, or peer relations (Hammond, 1979). More recent studies have found that considering all other predictors (family background, infant health, family size, birth order, etc.), single-parent status was by far the most powerful and consistent variable in predicting children's cognitive-social competence at school entry (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1984).

Teachers in the Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) study reported improvements in academic functioning and classroom behavior a year after the breakup. "Attitudes toward school appeared to have undergone changes and had become more positive" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 274). School can have a beneficial effect on children coping with divorce by providing a structured setting in which to channel energy into schoolwork, thereby easing the stress of sadness and anger.

Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) research also suggested that schools served as a good support system only to those children who were of above average intelligence, doing well academically to begin with, and were among the more psychologically healthy children. These children were not necessarily dependent upon the teacher to be a supportive figure, although a good relationship was helpful. This points out that schools need to examine their role with less capable students. Teachers who provided comfort helped to temporarily reduce anxiety among the children who sought them out.

But such nurturance did not necessarily have "staying power" in influencing the child's ultimate capacity to cope with the eroding effects of the divorce turmoil at home. It is important for the teacher who observes the continuing need of a child for reassurance and solace to discuss the child's vulnerability with his parents before progress in learning becomes seriously compromised (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 278).

Further research is needed to identify ways schools can more effectively help children of divorce who have social and academic problems.



## Chapter III

### Summary, Implications, and Conclusion

#### Summary

Although there are few longitudinal studies, and the body of research on the effects of divorce on children is not large, several common themes emerge from the research. Typical responses of children to divorce at all ages are fear, regression to earlier stages, aggression, loneliness, depression, and a sense of rejection and loss. These symptoms of stress were exhibited in different forms at each chronological stage of development, but the underlying feelings were the same. Children varied in the degree to which they experienced these symptoms, sometimes due to sex-related differences between boys and girls, and sometimes to differences in temperaments.

Schools are concerned with what effect these and other divorce-engendered feelings and behaviors may have on cognitive development. It is highly important that the classroom teacher know when a child's divorce-engendered behavior is typical and temporary or symptomatic of psychological dysfunctioning and developmental interference. Duration over time is a significant dimension of behavior. "Acute responses to stress are likely to be short-lived and are different in their implications for development from responses which endure. At what point relative fixity is reached is not always clear. With children the transition from acute to chronic is particularly difficult to establish" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

It is important for educators and parents to be able to distinguish between the distress of the child and psychologically damaging effects on various stages of development. Although as educators, we cannot overlook a child's acute distress, the real tragedy of divorce is that it may disrupt a child's developmental progress in ways which are hard to remedy. Distress and anxiety are expected and appropriate responses in the child's perception of the family break-up. Under such circumstances, unhappiness and temporary regression in the child's developmental progress is cause

for providing comfort, but not for alarm. Developmental interference or depression that endures beyond the acute phase is, however, cause for concern. Determining the length of the acute phase of the family dissolution, and correctly identifying developmental interferences, are difficult to accomplish at the time of the initial break-up.

### Implications for Teachers

The first step in attending to the special needs of the child of divorce is to provide in-service training for teachers on the stresses of divorce, and to help them recognize what responses are typical and temporary and what responses are symptomatic of serious developmental dysfunctioning. Teachers need to learn effective methods of responding to such divorce-engendered reactions as anxiety and aggression. Then in-service workshops should be offered and include all school personnel from the superintendent to the classroom aide and custodian. The in-service might focus on age-specific responses to divorce, changes in children's responses over time, and parenting disruptions. Workshops should include: a team approach for supporting adolescents, effective facilitation group techniques, sensitivity training, information about step-families, non-biased curriculum development, and school policies and procedures. Current statistical data will help teachers gain perspective on the incidence of divorced families in their communities.

Teachers should be sensitive to terminology and avoid using biased terms such as "broken home". Referring to a child's family is more positive than using the more restrictive term parents. All children have a family, whether the immediate members are two parents, one parent, grandparents, or non-relatives. And when making classroom gifts to send home, children with two sets of parents can make duplicates so they are not in the position of recognizing one parent instead of the other.

Teachers should avoid stereotypic ways of viewing and describing families. Curriculum materials should reflect children with one-parent, grandparents, and other family forms just as it reflects children of different ethnic backgrounds. From

preschool through high school, children need to see all types of families represented in their books, films, and worksheets. Teachers should be careful not to imply that "home" is a house, but may include apartments, duplexes, and shared housing. This should also involve talking about the changes that occur in families, and how we feel about such changes. Teachers can make certain their classrooms and libraries contain a variety of books on the subject of divorce, and can also share materials such as films, videos, and tapes on the stages of divorce.

Teachers who are open and accepting in their language and mannerisms, and who display a variety of family forms can help children recognize that they are not so different from many of their classmates. Because children often don't share what is happening at home when there is a divorce, they feel like they are the only student in their class who lives without both parents. This process of normalization can help children to be open about discussing the problems they are encountering, and their need for assistance in coping.

Teachers are in an optimal position to identify developmental problems manifested by children of divorced homes. Divorcing or divorced parents may be too preoccupied and overwhelmed with their own concerns to recognize problems in their children's behavior. Or children may not exhibit some behaviors at home that they do at school, such as aggression or anger. Some parents recognize that their children need professional intervention, but fail to initiate help. In these instances, it is recommended that the teacher observe and record children's behavior, and solicit appropriate help through the school system. Intervention is needed at each developmental stage, not only at the time of the initial family crisis, but as the child matures and struggles to put the divorce in a new perspective.

#### Implications for School Policy

Schools must look at some of their "mechanics" which put children from single-parent homes at a disadvantage. In the study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the Kettering Foundation cited by Brown (1980), it

was recommended that schools take some proactive measures. Most basically, schools need to review and update student records often since family status may change frequently. A change in address may mean that a student has not just moved, but is living with relatives other than the immediate family, or even with non-relatives. Identifying students from divorced families may prejudice some teachers, but will help most teachers and school personnel become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of these children.

School personnel need to assess their program priorities to stay current with the needs of students and families. Staffing changes may be needed to provide additional support services to facilitate divorce groups for children, and to provide one-on-one support when needed. Parent-teacher organizations need to become more involved in the planning and evaluation process with school personnel because of their unique perspective on home and classroom and its effect on children's learning. Parents, as well as teachers and administrators, need current statistical data about their school neighborhoods and districts to make more accurate descriptions of their communities. Many people are not aware of subtle changes in a neighborhood, and draw conclusions based on stereotypes, not facts. School policies should reflect current situations where traditional methods may not be the most effective form of management.

### Implications for School Services

School services must undergo revision to better accommodate the newly identified needs of a growing number of children from one-parent homes. What are school services? Examples include bussing after extra-curricular activities, which benefit children of working parents who cannot provide transportation for after-school activities. Another example of school services is on-site, before- and after-school programs which provide breakfast or nutritious snacks, supervised recreation, and study time for elementary-age children of working parents. Although some school districts may be reluctant to provide what many consider "babysitting services", other

school districts recognize that providing such services when there is a need helps to strengthen the relationship between school and home. Children benefit when there is increased cooperation and communication between home and school.

Another service schools could provide is a supervised area for students and siblings while parents are participating in teacher conferences. This service could benefit not only single-parent families for whom arranging child care for a twenty-minute conference can be a stumbling block to attending a conference, but for two-parent families who would both like to participate in parent-teacher conferences.

The alternative for many parents is to leave the children home alone, or to skip the conference. We can not assume that families have a support network of nearby family and friends to care for their children at such times. Indeed, many of the problems of single-parent families are compounded by the lack of an effective extra-familial support system. Recognizing the changes in families and being flexible enough to not stick with existing ways because "this is how its always been done", will make school-related matters function more smoothly for both intact and single-parent families.

It has been recommended that school systems, through their adult education programs, assume a major leadership role in providing effective parenting programs for both two-parent families and single-parent families. The needs and problems of the two family types are different, and parenting programs need to address both types of families. In many places, including several mid-sized urban communities in Iowa, such classes are available through the community technical school, County Extension Service, and numerous community agencies and churches. Parents are sometimes unaware that the fee for these classes can be waived or they feel there is a stigma attached to participation in parenting classes. Some parents feel that they are labeled as having "parenting problems" by school personnel and other parents if they participate in parent education classes. This seems to be less a problem in urban areas than in small, rural communities. It is a problem that needs to be addressed through

the recruitment and promotion methods of the sponsoring agency. Recruiting parents through a variety of places, such as the workplace, church, and community organizations helps to reach a broad base of people, not just a single target audience which might be subject to stereotypes. Promotional materials need to be sensitive to the language used and the artwork depicted on the brochure, posters, etc. Nighttime child care is a problem for single parents who may have to awaken sleeping children in order to take a sitter home. Scheduling for parenting classes needs to take these obstacles to single-parent participation into consideration. Perhaps parenting classes could be offered in the early evening (5:30-7:30 p.m.) with child care and a meal optional. These arrangements require additional planning, preparation, and expense, but could reduce the barriers to parent participation.

Why should schools use staff time and school facilities to provide classes for parents? Why not let other community organizations provide these services? In many communities, there are excellent resources for parenting classes. However, in smaller, rural communities, the public school system may provide the most effective service delivery. Parents undergo major adjustments in their lives due to divorce, and these changes have both positive and negative effects on their children. By providing education for parents, schools are directly affecting the lives of their students. Parents need training on adult life changes, healthy psychological adjustment, and how to maintain effective parenting as a single person. Parents also need to know what support services are available in the community and through the schools. Parents who have not needed before to know how to apply for the reduced lunch program may now need such information provided in a sensitive, tactful manner.

Many school guidance counselors are already providing facilitation groups for children of divorce, but heavy student loads and multiple building assignments create serious limitations for counselors. School districts need to examine their staffing patterns to make certain they are providing adequate counseling and support services. In-service training for counselors, and staff meetings to share ideas and problems will

better enable guidance counselors to identify and intervene in divorce-engendered behaviors. It is apparent that schools can play an important role in mediating the negative effects of divorce on children and families.

### Conclusions

In general, children who have a history of age-appropriate developmental achievements were better able to weather the storm of divorce. There are children who had been able to maintain themselves during conflict-ridden marriages, but who failed to adjust during the post-divorce period.

We can be fairly certain that children with coping skills at McNamee's (1982) Level I will weather the storm of divorce. Children with few successful coping strategies, the Level III copers, are going to need more help than is possible to provide through the school to survive the pitfalls of divorce-engendered stress. The most unpredictable changes, upward or downward, come from children who are in the middle, the Level II copers. The Level II copers are the children to whom teachers will need to be particularly sensitive for fluctuating changes in the child's development and coping abilities. Identification of problems associated with the divorce before they have compounded into learning problems, and appropriate intervention may make the difference between successful coping and failure to cope.

Guidance counselors, school psychologists, and teachers can be an effective team when they work together to identify children's divorce-engendered problems and when facilitation groups are available to help children work through their feelings about the changes in their lives. School administrators, school boards, and parent-teacher organizations can review policies which may hinder parental participation in their children's education. Blaming parents, who are often the victims of economic and social forces, fails to solve the problem of how to provide appropriate support to divorced families. Rather, educators need to recognize the typical responses of children and parents to divorce and be prepared to mediate those responses in the school setting through effective intervention. Parents and educators are all "in this

together", and need to work together so that teachers and schools can proceed with their mission of educating children.

#### Implications for Further Study

There needs to be further study, including more longitudinal studies, on the effects of divorce on children. There have not been sufficient data collected to assess these effects, or to suggest specific school interventions. There is also a lack of data on the effects of divorce on children from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Schools have been reluctant to become involved in providing services which they do not perceive to be within the school's domain. Administrators and school boards have been resistant to change the role of the school in relation to the family and community. They have preferred that other agencies or community services offer the support needed by divorced families. But school districts need to take a hard look at what is currently being offered in their communities, the frequency of such services, and its effectiveness. They need to conduct their own research of possible gaps in service which may exist in their district, and be prepared to be innovative in planning to fill the gaps.

We need much more data on what schools are currently doing to successfully cope with the challenges of children of divorce. Schools which are offering services of the types previously described need to document their successes and failures and encourage other schools to become more actively involved. This places a responsibility for thoughtful planning, careful conduct of the plan, and relevant evaluation on the guidance counselor, teacher, or administrator; but the value of such research will enable all of us to more effectively address this growing problem in our schools.



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