CHILDREN OF DIVORCE
Challenge for the 1990s

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The combined psychological and economic impact of divorce on children and adolescents is often severe and long-lasting. Despite rising public concern, community response has been halting and sporadic. Religious and educational institutions, social agencies, and the court system offer few programs or services. Even fewer draw on recent research findings to provide support and guidance to families confronting separation, divorce, and remarriage. Societal institutions and continuing community interest and support are needed to strengthen marriage, to improve parent-child relationships, and to alleviate the plight of divorced families.

Growing up in America has changed radically within the past two decades. The expectation that a child will be raised by both biological parents has sharply diminished. The startling prediction made in the early 1970s, when divorce began its steep rise, that children born in the 1980s would have a 40% chance of experiencing their parents' divorce has long been overtaken by reality (Norton, 1985). By now, the magnitude of these changes within the family has become a commonplace.

American society has been slow to consider the serious implications of marital disruption for children. Communities have done relatively little to accommodate the special needs of children in divorced and remarried families during the past two decades. Although divorced and remarried families frequently constitute the majority of clients seeking help from social agencies, only a few programs have been designed to provide support or guidance to families during their difficult transitions. Even fewer educational programs have been established to help parents make the critical decisions of custody and visitation that are required of them at the height of the marital crisis or to prepare parents for the perplexing new tasks posed by single parenting, by the blending of families in remarriage, or by the ambiguous and stressful role of being a visiting parent. Only a few local religious institutions or individual religious leaders in either the Jewish or the Christian communities have attempted in a systematic way to address the anguish of families as the marriage comes to an end or to offer solace and support to either adult or adolescent members of their congregations during the aftermath of divorce. Public, private, and parochial schools, which have historically depended on available parents as active participants in the educational process, have done little to adjust their expectations and methods to the growing absence of these traditional supports for children's learning. The legal system, historically resistant to change, has been particularly reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which divorce has gridlocked court calendars and baffled judges, who find themselves poorly equipped to address the passions of family interactions at the breaking point, especially in those conflicts that endure long after the marriage has dissolved.

Moreover, few professional disciplines prepare their graduate students to work with the issues of divorce or remarriage, despite two decades of accumulated research in the behavioral and social sciences. Most law schools fail to impress their students with a clear understanding of the impact of divorce on the child or on the parent-child relationship, although family practice has grown apace and practitioners now acknowledge that the hidden client in the divorce proceedings is the child, whose entire future

may well depend on the outcome of the legal negotiations. Training of students in child psychiatry, psychology, social work, or psychiatric nursing includes little of the recent research or clinical divorce literature, although divorced and remarried adults and children from these families will comprise a very large percentage of clients in professional mental health practice over the forthcoming years. The impact of divorce on children receives little attention in pediatric training, even though pediatricians are being barraged by questions from anxious parents. Educators, too, receive little preparation for the learning difficulties that many of their students from disrupted families will demonstrate in the classroom or the aggressive behaviors that they will show on the playground, especially during the years immediately after the marital separation. Even theological schools and seminaries do not prepare religious leaders to deal with the spiritual and moral needs of adolescents and adults, many of whom are profoundly conflicted about standards of morality in their own disrupted families.

All of the evidence suggests that there is a deep reluctance in our society to acknowledge the consequences for children of family breakup and an equally profound hesitation to intervene into what is regarded as the very private domain of family relationships. This reluctance may reflect worry about a possible contagious or domino effect, an unconscious or barely conscious fear that the breakup of a neighbor's marriage will highlight the cracks in those (including one's own) that remain standing. Yet, it is also fair to say that the changes in the American family have occurred so rapidly that they have caught local communities and the larger society off guard. It is true as well that people are confused and discouraged by the ambiguity of values and the complexity of current social issues that were entirely unanticipated when no-fault divorce legislation was adopted throughout the country.

At the same time an increasing unease has gradually found expression over the years. As research findings have multiplied, documenting the widespread suffering of children, there has been increasing concern that the divorced family may indeed be less protective and less nurturant of children than the intact family. Joined with this concern has been the bitter and unwelcome recognition that there may indeed be a conflict of interest between the needs of children and the needs and wishes of adults. The sad result is that the delay in acknowledging the economic, social, and psychological effects of divorce has placed a heavy toll on the lives of millions of children who might otherwise have been helped and who are themselves, as young adults, contributing to the continuing high incidence of marital breakdown.

A major obstacle to the development of interventions has been a lack of theoretical clarity about the nature of the divorced or remarried family. It has been insufficiently remarked that our theoretical conceptualizations of the divorced family have all evolved within the central paradigm of the two-parent family and the psychopathological distortions within the intact family. It has taken us a while to recognize that the divorced family cannot be accurately viewed as a merely truncated or cut-off version of the two-parent family. Nor can the remarried family be understood as a second edition of a first marriage.

As the marital bond breaks apart, all of the relationships within the family change radically, and new roles and new relationships are created. Relationships between parents and children that were taken for granted within the intact family are newly perceived by the child as being more fragile, less permanent, and less reliable. One immediate consequence is the eruption of intense anxiety in the child and the setting into motion of an anxiety-driven tracking by the child of all family relationships, including those between parents, between parents and lovers, between parents and siblings and stepsiblings, and between the child and each parent. This intense, hyperalert monitoring by the child is likely to continue over

many years after the divorce and to persist into young adulthood.

The visiting parent-child relationship has no counterpart in the traditional family structure. We still do not know the potentialities or limitations of the visiting parent in fulfilling the complex demands of the parental role in the psychological, social, or moral development of the child. To what extent, and under what circumstances, is out of sight out of mind? To what extent and under what circumstances is out of sight *forever in mind*? We do not yet fully understand the impact of the breakup between husband and wife on the parent-child relationship, and especially on the capacity of the outside parent to remain committed to the child. And what about the pressing needs of divorced partners to bring their unhappy marital relationship to closure? To what extent is it reasonable to expect a parent-child relationship to persist, separate from the parent's relationship to that child's mother or father and without the daily contact with the child that is assumed in the intact family? How shall we distinguish that which is expectable from that which is heroic?

Similar questions obtain with regard to relationships within remarriage. How long is it reasonable to expect that a man's love for his children will outlive the divorce once he enters a second marriage and has new children in that second marriage? Is it any different for a woman who remarries? Under what circumstances, if ever, does the stepparent replace the biological parent as the major figure in the child's development? To what extent can the love and commitment of the stepparent undo the child's pain from abandonment by the biological parent? And what are the reasonable expectations for cooperative relationships among all of the adults in this complex play?

These questions are not academic. Millions of American families confront them daily. Moreover, we who work in the field of mental health encounter them regularly among our patients and clients. In my own long-term study of divorced families, only half of the children in the remarried families felt included at all within the emotional orbit of the new household (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Over and over, they said, "It's a good marriage for my Mom (or 'for my Dad'). But not for me." The answers to these questions about the significance of family relationships within new family forms cannot be garnered from clinical knowledge gained over many years of work with troubled but still intact families. This turf is new, the rules are different, and the old maps, though sometimes helpful, may also lead us far astray.

I have often pointed to the fact that it is not only that the roles are new and their parameters are still in the process of being delineated but also that the changed relationships within divorced and remarried families give rise to complex issues of changed internal images and identifications. Who are the primary identification figures for the child of divorce, and under what circumstances do these identifications persist, fade, or change? Does the child of divorce internalize a temporary or a more lasting image of a failed man-woman relationship? What are the expectable vicissitudes of conscience in high-conflict families, especially when the conflict between the parents long preceded the divorce and long outlives it? We are indeed in the difficult position of having to build the psychological theory that we need as we go.

Given these bewildering social and professional issues, it is not surprising that many clinicians turn to familiar models from their work with children and parents. And, in fact, the dominant model governing the divorce interventions that have been developed has been the traditional crisis model. Bereavement therapy was the paradigmatic intervention in crisis theory, and the early view of divorce was certainly that of a short-lived crisis. Put simply, the central idea was that divorce, like death, was an acute crisis and that the analogous treatment of choice was to help the child mourn

the absent parent and the loss of the intact family. The expectation was that the child who is able to express feelings of sorrow, anger, and guilt and to confront feelings of loss will find relief from these oppressive feelings. Gradually, the child will be enabled in this way to master the trauma and to resume normal developmental progress.

STAGES OF DIVORCE

Yet, our work has shown clearly that divorce is not a brief, time-limited crisis. Divorce is a long-term experience that radically changes the entire trajectory of the child's growing-up years. It is correctly understood as an extended process of changing family relationships that evolve differently than do those within the intact family. The divorce process is characterized by multiple stages, beginning, in many instances, with a long period of parental conflict or misery within the pre-divorce but technically intact family. Indeed, recent studies in both England and the United States have shown that many children come to the divorce already severely symptomatic and emotionally depleted (Cherlin et al., 1991).

If we begin with the separation itself, and not with the troubled relationship that may extend back to the earliest period of the marriage, then the first stage of divorce is the acute phase; namely, the period of time surrounding the marital rupture and its immediate aftermath. Because in most divorcing families with children the decision to divorce is unilateral, the period surrounding the breakup represents the most unhappy period of the entire lives of all the family members. During this time men and women alike often behave in ways entirely uncharacteristic of their previous behaviors. Many are overwhelmed with rage that spills over into acting-out, including violence, which may not have been present during the marriage. When abuse was already present during the marriage, the violence can surely become homicidal in response to the narcissistic injury and the wretchedness of rejection. Some partners are overcome by feelings of abandonment that can consolidate into a long-lasting, debilitating depression. Sexual jealousy reinforced by betrayal can surely become a powerful and potentially lasting obsession.

Accompanying the disarray that occurs in the usual defenses and inner controls of the parents during the acute phase, there is additionally an undermining of the parenting function. This undermining is revealed in a decreasing awareness of the child's needs, reduced sensitivity to his or her feelings, greater displays of anger by the parent, less consistent discipline, and a general confusion in the household routines that the child often interprets as reflecting a parent's displeasure or, at the very least, a loss of interest in the child's needs and welfare. This phenomenon, which I have described as "the diminished capacity to parent," is widespread and should be considered an expectable divorce-specific change in parent-child relationships. Children often fear that they will be forgotten or lost in the shuffle. Their fears are by no means unrealistic because many parents at this time are truly unable to separate their own needs and wishes from those of their children. One youngster dreamed repeatedly that she was on the crowded stage of *Aida*, in danger of being trampled by strange armies and wild elephants. Children at this time also fear abandonment by both parents. The logic of the child is impeccable: If one parent can leave the other, what is to prevent both from leaving the child? Children who have never been hungry in their lives develop a fear of starvation. Noting their parents' distress, some children worry continually about the possibility of a parent's suicide: "Will my Mom jump off the Golden Gate Bridge?," asked one child with anxious repetition (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The acute stage of the separation subsides after a year or so, and the transitional stage of the divorced family takes its place. During this stage, which usually lasts for several years, the disequilibrium continues in a new mode as parents try out new rela-

tionships, new jobs, new educational opportunities. Frequent relocations are common at this time, as are school changes and a declining, in many instances, a severely depressed standard of living for the custodial parent and the child. One youngster in my study attended ten different schools during the 5 years immediately after the divorce, as her mother wandered disconsolately up and down the West Coast. During this transitional stage, the walls of the family appear permeable, and it is often hard to know who is in the family and who is excluded from it.

The third stage of the divorce process may well bring stabilization to the divorced family, or it may herald the beginning of a hopeful, albeit difficult, chapter of entry into remarriage. The remarried relationship, as we have come to recognize, is very different from the one that established the new family of the first marriage. It carries with it not only the conscious memories of the initial failure and the fear of repeating that failure but also the need to acknowledge the very real presence of real children from that first failure and the difficulties of integrating these children into a marriage that is itself hardly established.

And so, we see that a complex set of changes, many unanticipated and some unforeseeable, is put into motion by the marital breakdown and is likely to occupy a significant portion if not all of the child's or adolescent's growing-up years. Many of the children whom I have studied over the 10, 15, and 20 years since their parents' divorce said to me, "I grew up in the shadow of my parents' divorce" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

GROWING UP IN THE SHADOW OF DIVORCE

Although many children weather the stress of marital discord and divorce without long-term psychological difficulties, a large number fall into a troubled population. Children of divorce are significantly over-represented in outpatient psychiatric, family agency, and private practice populations compared with children in the general population (Gardner, 1976; Kalter, 1977). The best predictors of mental health referrals for school-aged children are parental divorce and parental loss through death (Felner, Stolberg, & Cowan, 1975). A significant survey of adolescents whose parents separated and divorced by the time the children were 7 years old found that 30% had received psychiatric or psychological therapy by the time they reached adolescence compared with 10% of adolescents in intact families (Zill, 1983). Several large-scale surveys have reported a higher incidence of disrupted learning, erratic attendance, higher dropout rates, increased tardiness, and deteriorated social behavior, especially among boys, in this group (Brown, 1980; Guidubaldi et al., 1983).

A recent report from the National Center for Health Statistics is particularly troublesome (Zill & Schoenborn, 1990). Their analysis noted that the frequency of emotional and behavioral problems among children in single-parent and stepfamilies was significantly higher than in two-biological-parent families. Children from single-parent or stepfamilies were two to three times more likely to have had emotional or behavioral problems than those who had both of their biological parents present in the home.

Although there are few studies of the long-term effects of divorce as young people enter adulthood, my own work shows a striking delayed, or sleeper, effect, especially among young women (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Ten years after the divorce, when these youngsters reached ages 19 to the mid-twenties, they continued to regard their parents' divorce as the major formative experience of their lives. A significant number were still burdened by vivid memories and flashbacks of the breakup, or of the violence and abuse between their parents, however occasionally that occurred. The predominant feeling as they looked back over the years was a rueful sense of having missed out on growing up in an intact family. It is also true that many were

proud of their enhanced maturity and independence and spoke of themselves triumphantly as survivors, and indeed many showed a special capacity for empathy and kindness.

Almost all, however, confronted the issues of young adulthood with anxiety: establishing intimacy, believing in love and commitment, risking themselves in marriage. As one young woman said, "I'm afraid to use the word *love*. You can hope for it, but you can't expect it." They were intensely frightened about repeating their parents' unhappy mistakes during their own adulthood and were eager to avoid divorce for themselves and for the sake of their own future children. One of the unexpected findings was that they continued, well into adulthood, to think of themselves as "children of divorce," as if this had become a fixed identity. What was most tragic was their acute anxiety about their high chances of failure. As one 23-year-old bride told me, "My husband and I have two strikes against us. We are both from divorced families" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Surely, this is a sad way to enter a marriage.

Preliminary findings from my beginning study of children of divorce at the 23-year post-divorce mark shows that young women currently in their late twenties and early thirties continue to experience serious difficulties in their relationships with men, including sexual inhibitions. Several young women report numbness of their feelings if the sexual relationship is with a man they love. As one woman stated, "Love and intimacy are foreign to me. Sometimes I think I was brought up on a desert island" (Wallerstein, 1993).

Several demographers have reported a so-called intergenerational transmission of marital instability. In one major report, divorce and separation for white female children of divorce were 60% greater than for white females from intact families. The divorce or separation rate for white male children of divorce was 35% higher than for white male children from intact families. The demographer suggested that the higher incidence of divorce among children of divorce was related to a lower commitment to marriage and that women from divorced families tend to marry at an early age and are therefore more prone to divorce (Glenn & Kramer, 1987).

INTERVENTIONS ON BEHALF OF FAMILIES OF DIVORCE

These findings are alarming, especially when one considers that since the early 1970s parental divorce has involved at least one million new children yearly. It should be remembered, however, that these unhappy outcomes are occurring within a society that has up to now taken few steps to intervene. It is by no means predictable from the current sorry state of these children how they might fare in a society that addressed their needs with compassion and understanding. It is evident from our work to date that the divorced family is inherently weaker than the well-functioning intact family in fulfilling the child-rearing and protective functions of parenting. The question remains: Is this weakness an inevitable consequence of divorce, or are there measures that can and should be taken to prevent, or at least alleviate, the suffering and the unhappy outcomes that are reported so widely? How much would these poor psychological and educational outcomes change if our society were more protective of its children's welfare after divorce?

There are major lacunae in our knowledge that hinder the development of effective remedies. These lacunae are especially striking in issues of public policy. There is, for instance, a marked disparity between the power of the joint custody movement and the sufficiency of evidence that joint custody can accomplish what is expected of it. There are many unanswered questions about the significance of the visiting parent and whether public policies designed to protect that relationship would improve outcomes for children. A major question that state legislatures throughout the country confront

at present is whether the custodial mother who wishes to relocate should be permitted to take the child with her, if doing so involves moving a considerable distance from the child's father. Should public policy be directed at keeping divorced parents in the same geographical vicinity during their child's growing-up years?

Furthermore, there is almost no research on the psychological effects of the lowered standards of living that so many children and parents endure after divorce and on how these deprivations may affect not only the child but also the parent-child relationship. It may be that maintaining both the mother's and father' households at the same economic level after divorce would significantly change the psychological functioning of children. My own work shows that the reduced educational opportunity that results when child support stops as the youngster reaches age 18 has a chilling effect on educational ambition and achievement (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). This closing-out of child support at age 18 may well be related to the alarming high school dropout rate among children of divorce. Moreover, there is the real possibility that the adversarial system in the courts, even when modified by the brief mediation currently available in some jurisdictions, adds significantly to the stresses of the divorce process. And we might ask how all of these outcomes would be affected if access to divorce were made more restrictive via a mandatory waiting period or if we elected to return to fault divorce laws.

A corollary question is: Are the serious problems that have been reported inherent in the nature of divorce, and do they represent its inevitable legacy? If so, would children and parents enjoy happier lives if they were less psychologically isolated and better supported by local religious and social institutions? Finally, would they respond to appropriately designed educational and clinical programs that could be introduced within current community agencies and institutions and supported by the work of agencies that have traditionally served families with children?

There are some encouraging reports from the few programs that have been introduced in various sections of the country. For example, some schools have been willing to refer underachieving children from divorced families to groups that meet in the schools. Although these groups have been conducted with different curricula and over varying amounts of time, they are alike in that teachers have found significant improvement in the participating children's learning. Whether this improvement comes from the curriculum used by the group, or whether the central dynamic is that the group support undoes the child's loneliness, or whether the primary agent of change is the teacher's attitude that undergoes a significant change after consultation with the group leader, or whether it is some fortuitous combination of all of these factors is less important than are the positive changes in these children's capacity to learn that have been reported.

A more ambitious spectrum of programs has been offered to the community at the Center for the Family in Transition, a freestanding nonprofit agency situated just outside San Francisco, which was established in 1980 to bring together under one banner research, professional education, and a wide range of interventions on behalf of families in separation, divorce, and remarriage. These programs are based on a vigorous outreach effort spearheaded by a personal letter addressed to every family with children that filed for divorce within the county during the previous year. The letter invites the participation of both parents in planning for the family transition, with particular regard to their children at this critical time. A range of clinical and educational programs designed to address different subgroups within the divorce population includes short-term counseling for the divorcing family, assessment and counseling of their children aged 2 to 18 years old, educational programs, individual and group pro-

grams for young and older adolescents, mediation of child-related issues, groups for parents with joint physical custody, special programs for high-conflict families, and groups for young adults whose parents had divorced when they were children. Programs include a built-in follow-up at 1- and 2-years post-separation, so that families receive help not only at the time of breakup but also throughout the immediate post-divorce years, during the time when so many families experience crisis after crisis and often feel abandoned by the community.

Overall assessments of these programs have been very promising. The incidence of father abandonment was significantly lessened and visiting was improved. Many men and women seemed to have benefited directly from guidance, becoming more aware and more supportive of their children's concerns. Many children who came to us with such serious symptoms as phobias, severe regressions, and sleep disorders that occurred at the breakup were helped by a combination of interpretive interventions and restored parenting, and they seemed at the 2-year follow-up to have resumed their developmental progress.

In sum, although concern about the effects of divorce on children has increased in recent years, we have hardly begun to deal with the wide range of problems that children and their parents face in our stressful society. We are in the paradoxical situation of knowing much more about troubled marriages and divorce than we do about happy, well-functioning marriages and how to bring them about. There may be many ways by which society, through its various institutions and the influence of public opinion, can strengthen marriage, especially young marriage. This is an agenda that deserves priority considering the fact that two-thirds of divorces occur during the first 9 years of marriage.

There surely must also be ways that can be explored to help improve the quality of married life in general, and this too requires our urgent attention, as our scientific knowledge is not yet adequate to this complex task. Many marriages that come to divorce show serious longstanding individual pathology and tragically painful interactions between the married partners. We need to keep in mind that most divorces do not occur out of the blue. The downhill course may be gradual or it may be steep, but it is rarely a sudden drop. Often, several separations precede the final breakup. As noted earlier, many of the children in disintegrating families are already seriously disturbed long before their parents reach the decision to divorce, and often, parent-child relationships have already begun to deteriorate.

Yet, there are surely ways that the plight of divorced families, and especially the long-lasting difficulties that children experience, can be prevented or at least alleviated. The knowledge we need to begin this task is already within our possession, if only because we know what does not work. The time has long passed to put to use the knowledge that we have acquired.

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