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LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN: A Developmental Vulnerability Model

Neil Kalter, Ph.D.

Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Research and clinical work with children of divorce have focused primarily on parental separation as a traumatic event and its effects on children as a crisis situation. The present paper, based on clinical experience, considers potential long-term problems of these children in key developmental areas: handling anger and aggression, separation-individuation, and gender identity. Implications for prevention and service delivery are presented.

The dramatic rise in the rate of divorce in the United States between 1960 and 1980 is well documented. Nearly one child in three experiences parental divorce before attaining majority.[13] Although the rate of divorce has leveled off in recent years, there is no evidence to suggest that it will decline in the foreseeable future. Growing up divorced has become an alternative developmental path for a substantial number of children in this country.

The increasingly visible phenomenon of marital disruption has given rise to an exploding body of literature aimed at assessing the effects of divorce on the children involved. An emerging consensus is that divorce constitutes a major disequilibrium in the lives of nearly all children. Negative short-term effects have consistently been reported in the domains of academic performance, social adjustment, and emotional well-being.[16, 22, 41] There is considerably less agreement about possible long-term sequelae of divorce for children. However, several converging lines of evidence suggest that parental divorce exerts a lasting negative impact on at least a sizable minority of the offspring involved. A large national survey revealed that more than twice as many children of divorce, compared to youngsters from intact families, had seen a mental health professional.[45, 46] In a representative national sample, men and women who were 16 years of age or younger when their parents divorced reported significantly higher divorce rates, more work-related problems, and higher levels of emotional distress than did their counterparts who grew up in intact families.[29] In addition to these rigorous, cross-sectional studies, recent findings from two conceptually and methodologically diverse longitudinal research projects also indicate that divorce-related difficulties persist over time for many children.[23, 39, 40] It appears that the long-term legacy of parental divorce includes both emotional pain and developmental disruption for many youngsters.

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In recent years clinicians and researchers have sought to refine and extend their understanding of the ways in which marital disruption may affect children. Initially divorce was seen as a single, stationary event that traumatized some children. This view has been modified considerably by the introduction of two important concepts. First, divorce has come to be seen as a process rather than an event. The parameters of the divorce experience have been extended backward temporally to include predivorce spousal tension and disharmony[30, 36, 41] as well as the nature of preseparation parent-child relationships.[41] A child's responses to parental separation have come to be regarded, in part, as an outgrowth of these earlier experiences. Similarly, attention to children's reactions in the period of adjustment immediately following parental divorce has shifted from an exclusive focus on discrete outcomes to an emphasis on underlying mechanisms that can serve to explain variations in children's initial adaptations to marital disruption. Changes in parental behavior, parent-child interactions, and family role relationships add a valuable process dimension to the exploration of the effects of divorce on children.[18, 22, 43]

Concurrent with the introduction of the process view of divorce have been attempts to articulate divorce-specific psychosocial stressors. Here the aim is to elucidate components of the divorce experience that can increase or decrease the risk of developing especially intense or prolonged negative reactions to parental divorce. The degree of interparental hostility and conflict,[11] the extent of loss of the emotional relationship with a parent,[28, 39, 41] and economic distress[7, 44] have been widely recognized as important stressors.

Despite these conceptual advances, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the contribution of post-divorce factors to the long-term adjustment of children. It is widely held that a period of crisis attends the initial parental separation and lasts for some two years.[22] However, our understanding of the enduring negative effects of divorce on some children places considerably more weight on the host of life events, set in motion by divorce, that unfold for years after separation.[27] These include such potentially stressful circumstances as multiple shifts in residence, economic distress, continued interparental hostility, emotional loss of a non-resident parent, parental dating, and remarriage. Collectively, these factors may be regarded as a continuation of the divorce process which create new developmental challenges for youngsters and can be a source of developmental vulnerabilities or, under certain circumstances, enhanced growth.

When some of these factors have been noted as possibly affecting child adjustment, they have been addressed piecemeal and outside the context of the ebb and flow of post-divorce family life. The aim of this paper is to explicate the specific ways in which several of these key potential stressors, especially continued interparental hostility, emotional loss or very limited involvement of the nonresident parent, economic pressures, and parental dating affect family dynamics which, in their turn, affect the trajectory of child development. This perspective offers a more elaborated view of the extended divorce process and suggests clinically relevant parameters for consideration in implementing traditional and preventive interventions.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROBLEMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Clinical and research investigations have indicated that children of divorce constitute a population at risk for developing particular emotional, social, and behavioral problems that either persist or first appear years after the marital rupture. Prominent among these are aggressive and antisocial (externalizing) problems;[17, 23, 37] sadness, depression, and self-esteem (internalizing) problems;[17, 19, 26, 34] and difficulty establishing and maintaining mutually enhancing heterosexual relationships.[24, 26, 29, 39]

These long-term, divorce-related sequelae can be understood in a more richly textured, clinically useful way by focusing on impediments to children's attainment of certain developmental achievements: *1)* the capacity to modulate aggressive impulses, *2)* the ability to achieve emotional separation from primary caretakers, and *3)* the development of a valued sense of gender identity. Each of these achievements can be seen as the result of an ongoing, caring relationship between the child and each parent and the child-rearing practices and childhood experiences that flow from them. The mutual emotional support and respect between parents, which the child observes and absorbs, also contribute to these achievements. Growing up in a maritally intact household does not inoculate children against the sorts of problems described here. But because divorce so frequently involves substantial loss of the relationship between the nonresident parent and the child,[13] as well as interparental hostility[11] and the absence of mutual support and respect between parents, it provides a naturally occurring set of circumstances which can enrich our understanding of the broader relationship between family dynamics and individual child development.

The vicissitudes of these three developmental achievements will be considered as they unfold in the context of post-judgment, mother-headed, single-parent households. This configuration is still by far the most common among families after parental separation, accounting for the living arrangements of aproximately 90% of children of divorce.[13, 15] Since form and function are often so intimately intertwined in family relationships as well as in architecture, understanding the developmental implications for life within the structure of the new postseparation household seems of particular import.*

MODULATING AGGRESSION

It is generally accepted that successful modulation of aggression plays a central role in healthy child development: youngsters need to develop a balance between the realistic demands of family and society for appropriate, socially adaptive interpersonal conduct and the self-enhancing ability to be assertive.

It is helpful to conceptualize difficulties in modulating aggression as deriving from factors that serve to *1)* stimulate the level of aggressive impulses a child experiences, and *2)* interfere with the capacity to manage these impulses adaptively. Circumstances that increase either of these sets of parameters elevate the likelihood of a child developing disturbances in modulating aggression. These include not only the emergence of direct expressions of externalizing, aggressive behavior problems, especially common among boys whose parents have divorced, but also the more silent manifestations of maladaptive defenses against anxiety and guilt often associated with aggression, *e.g.*, depression, inhibitions, and passivity (or lack of appropriate assertiveness).

Aggressive Impulses

There appear to be several major sources of stimulation of aggressive impulses in children who grow up in the particular postdivorce circumstances we have described. First, children often feel abandoned or rejected by the parent who leaves the family home: younger children, especially, experience it as evidence of their own lack of worth. This blow to pride and self-esteem provokes anger in many children of divorce.[41] While we agree with this formulation, and have observed it clinically, the emphasis has been nearly exclusively on the initial loss of the nonresident parent. We have been impressed, both in our traditional clinical work with children and families post-divorce and in our preventive program for children years after divorce,[27] by the continuous nature of this injury to self-worth. The nonresident parent who visits infrequently or inconsistently or forgets special occasions such as the child's birthday keeps this wound open and painful.

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* An analysis of the impact on children of growing up in a remarried household, a point farther along in the post-separation divorce process, will be addressed in a forthcoming paper.

Another important contribution to this source of aggression, one which has received considerably less attention in the divorce literature, stems from feelings of abandonment and rejection experienced by youngsters when their mother becomes emotionally involved in work and social relationships after the divorce. The mother may immerse herself in work appropriately, to cope with economic pressures or as a way to repair her own damaged self-esteem; nevertheless her children may see her action as partial abandonment. Similarly, a mother who, in perfectly healthy fashion, seeks new social and intimate relationships, can stimulate in her child feelings of rejection and of competition with her friends.

A second factor that appears to intensify children's aggression is related to interparental hostility. Anger between parents is a widely acknowledged stressor for children, irrespective of marital disruption. However, it is so often in palpable evidence when divorce occurs that it has received much attention.[11] Here, again, the emphasis has been on the predivorce and crisis periods. But the continuation of hostilities between ex-spouses, even years beyond the final separation, is by no means uncommon. It can take many forms: parents "badmouthing" one another in front of the child, enlisting the child in the conflict (*e.g.*, spying on the other parent when visiting, carrying angry messages from one to the other), and relitigation around financial, custody, or visiting arrangements. Perhaps even more remarkable are the number of verbal, and even physical, battles between parents years after the divorce is "over." It is our impression that children mightily resent all these interparental hostilities. Through their love for each parent, the child develops a natural wish to protect them; when either is attacked, the child is understandably angry at the aggressor. But it also appears that children experience their parents' hostilities as attacks upon themselves. Via appropriate identification with each parent, a missile aimed by one parent at the other also finds the youngster and, in doing so, provokes a retaliatory impulse. The result is further stimulation of anger in the child.

A third contribution to post-divorce aggression in children is also related to interparental hostility. Parents who fight are modeling particular ways of resolving conflicts and interacting socially. Social learning theory has taught us that parents are especially powerful models for behavior. The child who observes repeated parental battles is in effect learning how to solve problems and cope with disagreements. Closely related to this factor is the psychodynamic notion of identification with the aggressor. If the child who is made helpless by a parental act of aggression defensively identifies with the aggressive image of that parent, fear and helplessness are replaced by a sense of power and hurtfulness. Although the postulated motivation and process differ from social learning theory explanations of modeling, in both theories, the parents' behavior, attitude, and affect ultimately become the psychological property of the youngster.

All children experience frustration and blows to their pride in the normal course of family life. Inevitably, conflicts between parents are an inherent part of an intimate adult relationship. The focus here has been on those potential sources of intense, prolonged anger in children that are more common in maritally disrupted families.

Managing Aggression

The sustained anger referred to above is often of such duration and intensity that it constitutes a major barrier to the management of aggressive impulses. It interferes with the child's developing capacity to deal effectively with such impulses. A number of other factors also have the potential to interfere with the management of aggression among children of divorce.

Lack of clearly defined and consistent limits on expressing aggression is another important factor. In many families, the father is primarily responsible for establishing and enforcing these boundaries, either through direct supervision or as an authority invoked by the mother (*e.g.*, "Wait 'til your father gets home"). When the father is absent or uninvolved in child rearing, such limits may be more difficult to set. Certainly this is so when the responsibility must be shouldered solely by the mother. The demands on the energy and time of single mothers make this arduous task even more difficult to carry out consistently and firmly.[21]

Psychological theories differ somewhat in their views of how parental limit-setting facilitates the child's abilities to modulate aggression. But whether it is the process of internalization, as psychodynamic theory holds, or the modeling of behavior, as social learning theory postulates, the setting of appropriate and consistent limits to aggressive behavior is seen as crucial to a child becoming able to control aggression independently. The absence of involvement of the father in so many post-divorce families,[13] coupled with the overburdened state of many single mothers, seems at least partly responsible for the prevalence of externalizing, aggressive behavior problems among children of divorce.

Both implicit and explicit in this discussion of family factors that make the management of aggression especially problematic for children is the contribution of these *post-*divorce parameters to the development of externalizing aggressive behavior problems. However, a youngster's particular constellation of intrapsychic conflicts and defenses ultimately determines the ways in which problems modulating aggression are manifested. When a child is vulnerable to anxiety or guilt about angry, hurtful feelings, the result is likely to be the establishment of intrapsychic defenses against consciously experiencing, much less expressing, anger. Under certain conditions this may take the form of depression in response to extreme feelings of guilt and anger turned inward, or inhibitions about asserting oneself appropriately in school, in extracurricular activities, or with peers. Pervasive inhibition can be seen in a passive retreat from achievement, accomplishment, and involvement across an array of activities and relationships. These more silent less interpersonally disruptive problems are also the result of difficulties in modulating aggression.

Overview of Aggression Problems

In the aftermath of parental divorce, children often confront family interactions which serve to stimulate intense angry feelings. At the same time, family processes that help youngsters develop internalized modes of coping with anger and expressing aggression in modulated, adaptive ways are less likely to be in evidence. Depending on a variety of factors specific to an individual child, these circumstances may result in externalizing, aggressive behavior problems or maladaptive defenses which yield internalizing difficulties.

This same framework can be applied to nondivorced families. Children who develop problems related to failures in appropriately modulating aggression may well be experiencing similar family environments despite the presence within the home of both parents. Ongoing hostility between parents, parental emotional investment in outside activities, and failures of fathers to be involved in child rearing are by no means restricted to post-divorce families. Conversely, co-parenting relationships characterized by mutual respect and minimal hostility, empathic awareness of children's needs to feel loved and valued, and fathers' continued involvement in limit-setting and other aspects of raising children are not only possible but observable among post-divorce families. When this is the case, we would expect children of such divorced parents to develop adaptive ways of dealing with their aggression.

ACHIEVING EMOTIONAL SEPARATION

It is useful to conceptualize the child's task of attaining emotional separation from a parent as qualitatively different depending upon the developmental stage of the youngster. Separation issues will be considered here according to the child's age: preschool, elementary school (latency), and adolescence, though more fine-grained distinctions are possible within these levels.

Rather than the malignant outcomes associated with profound, early problems in separation,[9, 32] the emphasis here is on more developmentally advanced and less debilitating forms of separation difficulties. These may help explain certain observations that have been made about children of divorce, such as: increased levels of separation anxiety and attendant regressive behavior among preschool youngsters;[33, 41] greater evidence of dependency among elementary school children;[17, 41] and more intense, embroiled mother-daughter conflicts and antisocial acting out among adolescent boys and girls.[25, 26, 41] While one often sees direct expression of the separation conflict (*e.g.*, clinging, frequently choosing to be with mother rather than peers), at times it is the vigorous effort to break free of the relationship with mother that is most prominent, especially in adolescence.

The Preschool Child

Developmental[2] and psychodynamic[1, 8] theories have taught that the capacity to separate emotionally from a primary caretaker (a term that will be used here interchangeably with mother for simplicity of exposition) depends greatly on the nature of the mother-child bond. To the extent that this important relationship is positive, secure, and mutually gratifying, youngsters appear better able to go forth into the wider social world as separate and confident individuals. Further, it appears that the presence of a second parent, the father, serves to help the young preschooler begin to relinquish the intensely gratifying relationship with mother and seek pleasure in other relationships.[1, 8, 31] In this way a child's relationship with father acts as a bridge between mother and the extrafamilial world. Parental separation may interfere with both of these processes—secure bonding and the formation of important attachments with people other than the primary caretaker.

The disruption of a marriage often precipitates intense emotional pain and upset in the adults. Feelings of loss, rage, anxiety, and depression are not uncommon.[5, 41] At the same time, economic pressures often demand the mother's return to or increased involvement in the work force.[44] Thus, both the mother's pain and her diminished time and energy can disrupt her relationship with the child. These very real changes can also fuel a youngster's fantasies about losing mother entirely; she may leave as father did.

Just as the basic sense of security in the mother-child relationship may be disrupted, the often increasingly peripheral role of father in the child's life serves as a threat to successful emotional disengagement from mother. Without that important bridging relationship firmly in place, the task of separating emotionally from mother may be more difficult.

These two related difficulties, interferences in the child's secure base within the mother-child relationship and the reduced availability of father to facilitate the process of separating from mother, can result in problems in achieving emotional separation from the primary caretaker.

The Elementary School Child

Children who were preschoolers at the time of their parents' marital rupture may come to this developmental period with the achievement of separation from mother only tenuously held. These youngsters are especially vulnerable to new pressures to remain emotionally tied to mother. But even for those who traversed the preschool years successfully, certain dynamics seen in many single-parent households can threaten to disrupt the further development of their sense of separateness and independence from the primary caretaker.

The increased cognitive and emotional maturity of elementary school children—and their mothers' correct perception of that maturity—can result in new family dynamics that impede appropriate emotional separation from mother and development of peer relationships. For boys, the potential pressure to become the "man of the house" can lead to an overinvolvement with the mother and in household decisions and tasks. This can take a superficially positive form, as in a case we saw in which the mother earnestly consulted her nine-year-old son regularly about major purchases, such as when to buy a car or whether it was wise for mother to change jobs. Or it may be expressed in more obviously negative ways such as the mother who came for psychological evaluation of her seven-year-old boy who she claimed had become verbally abusive and arrogantly demanding. She felt angry and frightened by his behavior, yet helpless to do anything about it in much the same way that had characterized her behavior vis-á-vis her husband in her marriage.

Boys and girls too often seem to be drafted by their lonely and overwhelmed single-parent mother into the role of caretaker and confidant. Youngsters' natural wishes both to alleviate their own anxiety in the face of a troubled and upset parent and to be genuinely helpful to her can mesh all too well with a mother's neediness. Preparing mother's meals, remaining home from school to be with her when she is ill, staying up late to chat with mother about the date she had that night illustrate behavior typical of the child who has become a caretaker/confidant. Further, it is not uncommon for children to be invited or pulled into mother's physical orbit as well as by having the child sleep in her bed regularly.

A variation on this theme is the child as surrogate parent. Here, the child's difficulties shift from problems in separating from mother to difficulties moving out of the family system into the wider and more age-appropriate environment. In these families a child, usually the eldest, takes on the day-to-day responsibilities of parent vis-á-vis the younger children. Getting little brothers and sisters dressed and fed before going off to school or day care, cooking and doing laundry—not as mother's occasional or even regular helper, but as an independent stand-in for mother—are ways in which children can become a substitute mother. Though this may prove useful to the family as a social unit in the short run, it can exact a high price from the elementary school child who is sacrificing a childhood.

In each of these situations the confluence of the realistic abilities of the child, the child's own wishes, and the parent's intense difficulties in adjusting to divorce can result in clear violations of traditionally maintained generational boundaries within families. Ultimately, the child gives up, to some degree, appropriate emotional investment in establishing peer relationships and withdraws from them in favor of being centrally and powerfully involved with the mother specifically, or with the family system more broadly.

The Adolescent

Developmental tasks central to adolescence include de-idealization of parents, a new integration of the sense of self as emotionally separate from parents, and a renewed investment in intimate, enduring relationships with peers.[6] The peer culture becomes decisively ascendant in the emotional life of adolescents while ties to parents are loosened and changed. But by the time a child of divorce reaches adolescence, the trajectory of separation achievements may well have been interfered with substantially.

While the same family dynamic pressures that affect elementary school children often are present in adolescence, they are compounded by the tendency to recapitulate earlier separation-individuation issues.[6] This occurs within a peer context which, in its own right, exerts pressure on youngsters to reduce involvement with family in favor of allegiance to friends.

Among adolescents whose parents have divorced, often years before, there are three common resolutions of these competing demands. In the first, the teenager regressively retreats from adolescence and appears—in dress, interests, and interactional style—to be a middle or late elementary school child. Grooming is either unimportant or decidedly latency-age in style. Usual adolescent interests in music, parties, and dating do not develop. The child behaves with the apparent naivete and unself-consciousness of someone much younger. Clinicians often are struck by the need to keep reminding themselves that the youngster is really 14, not 10 or 11 years old.

The second resolution is at the opposite extreme. The adolescent appears much older and more mature than his or her years. This pseudomaturity can be expressed in dress, interests, and general conduct. Such youngsters appear especially responsible, stable, and much more of their parents' generation than their own. The costs, in terms of adolescent separation tasks left undone and lost opportunities for growth-enhancing peer relationships, can be considerable.

The regressive and pseudomature teenagers have in common an avoidance of the primary tasks of adolescence and a failure to be involved centrally in their peer group. They are socially isolated and, in different ways, emotionally overinvested in their families. The regressive teenager remains a child within the family, whereas the pseudomature youngster becomes a new "adult" resource for the family.

It is the third mode of resolving separation conflicts that has received the greatest attention from parents, teachers, and the courts, as well as from clinicians. This is represented by the rebellious youngster, whose antisocial behavior and conflict with parental authority represents a desperate struggle to escape an overly close, troubled relationship with the custodial parent or an enmeshed family system of that parent (or any parent-like authority having influence or control over the teenager). The increased delinquency or behavior problems found to be elevated significantly in adolescent boys and girls from divorced families[19, 25, 28] may be linked, in part, to this way of coping with separation conflicts.

Overview of Separation Problems

When parents divorce, a new nuclear household is established, usually consisting of the mother and her minor children. The normal developmental needs and wishes of children, coupled with the understandable difficulties many single mothers experience in adapting to the new life circumstances, can interact synergistically to create developmental interferences in the child's achievement of emotional separation from mother and social separation from the family. The absence of another emotionally involved adult, father, to facilitate children's development and to act as a healthy buffer and alternative to the potentially powerful mother-child relationship, is an important component in establishing this developmental vulnerability around separation issues.

Though parental divorce serves to spotlight these issues, it is easy to see how the absence of a constructive co-parenting relationship and the failure of fathers to be involved centrally with their children can produce a similar developmental vulnerability in children reared in two-parent households.

GENDER IDENTITY

In examining threats to the development of a firmly internalized sense and acceptance of one's gender identity, the focus will be on difficulties in feeling worthwhile within a particular gender role rather than upon more exotic and obvious problems in establishing appropriate gender identity.

Problems in Masculine Development

The importance of fathers in the development and consolidation of a boy's sense of masculinity has received a great deal of attention in both the developmental[3, 4] and psychoanalytic[6] literatures. The weight of evidence suggests that boys who do not have an ongoing and close relationship with their fathers are more vulnerable to encountering difficulties related to the development of a stable and valued internal sense of masculinity.[3] Problems bearing this stamp have been associated with boys growing up in post-divorce households. They include inhibition of assertiveness,[14] deficient impulse control,[25, 41] and lowered academic performance.[38] Research and clinical evidence indicate that a boy's identification with father is the primary vehicle for the internalization of an appropriate sense of masculine identity. Further, it has been suggested that the absence of an appropriate male model for such identification leaves a boy open to developing pronounced feminine identifications which, in most instances, must be defended against vigorously in adolescence.[35] In sum, the position of a father in his son's development appears crucial, and disruptions in the father-son relationship have been linked to a multitude of developmental interferences.

While studies have noted local variations, the nonresident father generally becomes increasingly less visible to his youngsters.[13] Even when fathers stay substantially involved (*i.e.*, seeing their children every other weekend), often there appears to be an unnatural, stilted quality to the interactions. Visiting arrangements need to be maintained regularly to accommodate the complex schedules of the various parties. Thus, visits tend to become more of a set piece, either to maximize the quality of precious little time together or to defend against mutual feelings of awkwardness and unease. The relationship between father and son can become stylized and devoid of emotional richness.

For these reasons, a boy growing up in a post-divorce household faces the likelihood of a weakened or unrealistic tie to his father. Day-to-day modeling of masculinity, even when father and son are not necessarily the primary characters in some interaction, is diminished. Father becomes a peripheral player in the ebb and flow of daily experience, and thus may be experienced as an idealized, distant, and unrealistic figure. This particular aspect of post-divorce life must be understood from the point of view of the child's experience. In our work with clinical and nonclinical populations of children, we have noted how different children feel about their relationships with father after a marital disruption. Though many continue to love their father, are often concerned about him and his welfare, and long to be close to him,[41] there is nonetheless a sense of distance and loss that permeates the child's experience of father.

After divorce, boys find themselves in a complicated relationship with their mothers. Time spent in this relationship can be curtailed significantly by the economic necessity of mother's employment. A custodial mother, faced with financial constraints and work demands and having an understandable wish to repair divorce-related injuries to her self-esteem, may in fact experience herself as more in conflict in her maternal role. And emotional wounds sustained in the context of her relationship with her ex-husband can emerge in attitudes toward her son. The boy's loss of an ongoing relationship with his father is then compounded by complementary loss of involvement with his mother, or by partial, usually covert, emotional rejection by her.

Yet at the same time that a boy's mother may be less emotionally available to him, he must also wrestle with accepting her as sole authority within the household. For boys who are used to experiencing father in the role of limit-setter and disciplinarian, this change may prove troublesome. Boys may feel less confident that behavioral limits will be maintained firmly and consistently, an expectation often fulfilled by a mother with substantially increased responsibilities and anxieties of her own.[21] Further, while many boys can identify with the authority and firmness of father in the wake of having been disciplined, this "developmental payoff" is less available in the single-parent, mother-headed household. To give in to mother's wishes can be experienced by boys as feminine and weak.

A further complication, one that can be intertwined with limit-setting and disciplinary matters, is the boy's emerging sense of sexuality. For youngsters at the oedipal stage and for early adolescents this can be a source of considerable anxiety and guilt. With father out of the household, if not entirely out of the family picture, these boys can experience anxiety due to unconscious, forbidden sexual curiosities and feelings directed toward mother. When a father is at home, even if his relationship with his wife or son is not particularly good, his very presence serves as an implicit and powerful deterrent to a boy's anxieties about fantasies of actually becoming "the man of the house." In our clinical work with sons of divorce, this factor is an ongoing source of anxiety for those whose developmental agendas include a need to cope with emerging sexual feelings. Typically, these children withdraw from mother, avoid her hugs and kisses, and at times must find ways to gain as much distance from her as possible.[10] Mothers may respond by feeling puzzled and hurt and either redouble their efforts to be close or derogate the boy, defensively. Other boys become defensively aggressive and physically combative with mother. Denial of any tender, loving feelings serves to protect the boy against his unconscious, unacceptable wishes to be close, while physical aggression provides a relatively safe and disguised way to gratify exciting wishes for physical contact. Still other boys respond with a regressive defense in which active, assertive strivings are inhibited severely and wishes to possess mother find expression only in less mature forms. We have seen boys who forsake age-appropriate masculine strivings and substitute younger ways of engaging their mothers, such as coming to her feeling hurt, hungry, or inadequate to some task that requires her assistance. These youngsters seem to sacrifice an active masculine orientation in favor of less assertive and thus less anxiety-arousing ways of being close to mother.

Problems in Feminine Development

Divorce-related difficulties in female development have received far less attention than have problems in male development. Over the last decade, there appears to be an emerging consensus among clinicians and researchers that divorce has less of an impact on girls.[12] It has been argued that boys are exposed more directly to marital conflict, experience more inconsistency in limit setting, and receive less social support than girls.[12]

Studies of children of divorce more frequently have yielded significant findings of negative effects for boys than for girls. Reviews of the literature suggest that this is true for personality adjustment[4, 20] and cognitive development.[38] In reviewing this literature it appears that the majority of these studies focus on preadolescent samples of children, usually observed in the immediate aftermath of parental separation. When one examines the thrust of research findings based largely on adolescents or adults, daughters of divorce seem to cope no better than sons, but the domains and timing of conflict expression appear to be different. Preadolescent girls may initially adjust to parental separation better than their male peers. But from adolescence onward, females and males differ in their modes of expression rather than in the degree of anguish and general developmental interference after marital disruption. (A more detailed consideration of this issue has been presented elsewhere.[28])

Among teenage and adult populations of females, parental divorce has been associated with lower self-esteem,[19, 28, 39] precocious sexual activity,[19, 26] greater delinquent-like behavior,[28] and more difficulty establishing gratifying, lasting adult heterosexual relationships.[24, 29, 39] It is especially intriguing to note that, in these studies, the parental divorce typically occurred years before any difficulties were observed.

It has been hypothesized[26, 28] that separation conflicts and interferences in healthy feminine self-esteem (rather than general feelings of self-worth) help explain these difficulties. The dynamics of separation conflict have been discussed; our focus here is on developmental interferences in achieving a valued sense of one's femininity among daughters of divorce.

At the time of the marital disruption, when (as is typical) father leaves the family home and becomes progressively less involved with his children over the ensuing years,[13] it appears that young girls experience the emotional loss of father egocentrically as a rejection of them. While more common among preschool and early elementary school girls, we have observed this phenomenon clinically in later elementary school and young adolescent children. Here the continued lack of involvement of the father is experienced as an ongoing rejection by him. Many girls attribute this rejection to their not being pretty enough, affectionate enough, athletic enough, or smart enough to please father and engage him in regular, frequent contacts.

Feelings of rejection attributed to being female also occur as a by-product of the normal processes of identification. When things go well, it is expected that youngsters will form special and centrally important identifications with the same-sexed parent. This certainly seems to be the case for girls who live with their mothers after divorce. The opportunities for identification may be even more varied, frequent, and emotionally charged than for girls in a two-parent household. And daughters of divorce do seem to internalize a clear sense of what it means to be feminine. Yet, as part and parcel of the identification process, some girls appear to internalize the sense that their mother was rejected by father in the specifically feminine role of wife and lover. For these girls, the developmentally appropriate identifications with mother carry with them a pervasive and painful sense of having been inadequate and unloved in a centrally important heterosexual relationship. This dynamic is most salient when a mother herself experiences the divorce as a rejection and abandonment.

Finally, girls whose parents divorce may grow up without the day-to-day experience of interacting with a man who is attentive, caring, and loving. The continuous sense of being valued and loved as a female seems an especially key element in the development of the conviction that one is indeed femininely lovable. Without this regular source of nourishment, a girl's sense of being valued as a female does not seem to thrive. As Machtlinger[31] put it when describing a father's contribution to his daughter's development, "a loving interaction between father and daughter provides a girl with a masculine foil for her growing femininity" (p. 147).

Overview of Gender Problems

It is our view that these threats to the development of a healthy sense of masculinity and femininity are *not* primarily the product of feelings, conflicts, misperceptions, and maladaptive defenses against painful affects aroused *at the time of* the parental separation. It appears that the ongoing absence of father and the structural and interactional features characteristic of single-mother, post-divorce households exert special pressures on the course of development of gender identity in children.

It is important to note that youngsters who grow up in two-parent households are not immune to these difficulties in achieving a valued sense of gender identity. Fathers who hold themselves aloof from their sons and are only minimally involved in their emotional growth and development, who are subtly or directly rejecting of daughters and their femininity, who are peripheral figures in day-to-day family life, and who derogate their wives can be found in all too many two-parent homes. We would expect children in such families to be vulnerable to problems similar to those of their counterparts from divorced single-parent households. Conversely, the post-divorce father who stays centrally involved with his children, who values them, and who can put to rest tendencies to disparage or not communicate with his ex-wife can continue to contribute to the growth in his children of an unshakable, valued, and prized sense of gender identity.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described potential impediments to children's attainment of three key developmental goals and has discussed their role as central factors in the emergence of specific emotional, social, and behavioral problems associated with children of divorce. These are considered in the context of a post-divorce, single-mother household with a markedly peripheral father or an ongoing, mutually antagonistic ex-spousal relationship. It should be reiterated that the interplay between particular family dynamics and the intrapsychic development of children described here, though more easily discerned in a post-divorce family, is applicable to many families in which a divorce has never occurred.

The long-term negative effects of divorce on a sizable minority of youngsters can be understood as due in large measure to developmental vulnerabilities sustained or created by these post-separation issues. Problems that are first seen in the crisis period of the divorce and that persist for years may draw their staying power from the ongoing contributions of particular family interactions as well as the effect of these systemic stresses on the individual child. Similarly, the sorts of difficulties which arise *de novo* years after divorce may have their roots in the post-divorce interaction of family dynamics and child development that has been articulated here; it is as if these unfolding post-divorce processes are tantamount to laying multiple land mines in the path of child development.

The conceptual framework presented in this paper has direct implications for the delivery of both preventive and traditional clinical services to children and families in post-divorce circumstances. On the preventive side it follows from our position that brief, one-shot interventions timed as close to the parental separation as possible (the crisis intervention perspective that has been supported by the National Institute of Mental Health and many clinical agencies) hold limited promise for having a significant, long-term impact on the quality of children's lives. The family dynamic-child development processes described here can be expected to overwhelm any brief, single effort at preventive intervention. Potentially more fruitful strategies would include: *1)* efforts to educate parents about the importance of a positive co-parental, post-divorce relationship and the involvement of both parents to healthy child development; and *2)* adopting the notion of serial or intermittent brief interventions with children and families. These approaches recognize the contribution of ongoing family interactions to the persistence or emergence of post-divorce problems in child adjustment. Similarly, the delivery of traditional clinical services to children and parents after divorce may be more effective when the interplay between these family dynamics and the inner lives of children are recognized.

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For reprints: Neil Kalter, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109