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Postdivorce variables related to children's adjustment to their parents' divorce

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Abstract

The divorce rate has steadily increased in the United States. In 1960, fewer than 10 out of every 1,000 marriages ended in divorce, but the figure more than doubled by 1980 (Cherlin, 1981, cited in Emery, Hetherington & DiLalla, 1985). In 1984, 50 percent of all first marriages ended in divorce (Glick, 1984) with an even higher rate of divorce for remarriages (Berns, 1985). Many of these divorces involve children. With estimates of at least 50 percent of the children born in the 1980s likely to find themselves in a divorce situation before their 18th birthday (Glick & Lin, 1986), divorce has become a fact of life for many children. It is also expected that by the year 2000, 60% of U.S. children will spend some part of their lives in single-parent homes (Jellinek & Klavan, 1988). Even though the divorce rate has leveled off in recent years (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989), it is clear that children in the 1990s are much more likely to experience the disruption of their parents' marriage and to live with a single parent than were children in the 1960s (Demo, 1992).

POSTDIVORCE VARIABLES RELATED TO CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT
TO THEIR PARENTS' DIVORCE

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Introduction

The divorce rate has steadily increased in the United States. In 1960, fewer than 10 out of every 1,000 marriages ended in divorce, but the figure more than doubled by 1980 (Cherlin, 1981, cited in Emery, Hetherington & DiLalla, 1985). In 1984, 50 percent of all first marriages ended in divorce (Glick, 1984) with an even higher rate of divorce for remarriages (Berns, 1985). Many of these divorces involve children. With estimates of at least 50 percent of the children born in the 1980s likely to find themselves in a divorce situation before their 18th birthday (Glick & Lin, 1986), divorce has become a fact of life for many children. It is also expected that by the year 2000, 60% of U.S. children will spend some part of their lives in single-parent homes (Jellinek & Klavan, 1988). Even though the divorce rate has leveled off in recent years (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989), it is clear that children in the 1990s are much more likely to experience the disruption of their parents' marriage and to live with a single parent than were children in the 1960s (Demo, 1992).

School age children who have experienced a divorce are considered a population at risk (Drake, 1979; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981; Wallerstein, 1985, 1987; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976, 1980). Both clinically based (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980)

and empirically based (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978, 1982) longitudinal studies have shown that the first and second years after separation represent a crisis point for the family. Most children initially experience their parents' separation as stressful; however, children's responses to their parents marital transitions are diverse. While some children show remarkable resiliency, other children continue to have divorce-related difficulties for years after the separation, or show delayed effects that emerge at a later time (Hetherington et al., 1989). While there is some controversy on the extent and longevity of the effects of divorce, there tends to be agreement among investigators that divorce disrupts the family and places the children at risk for adjustment problems. It appears, then, that even in the best of situations, divorce is a painful process for everyone (Hetherington et al., 1989).

Although the events associated with divorce can have negative effects on the children who are involved, it would be inappropriate to assume that child maladjustment is the inevitable consequence of divorce (Hetherington et al., 1989). Questions arise as to why some children are not able to adjust to divorce and show more emotional and behavioral problems than do other children. Children do not appear, then, to be equally at risk for the problems that are brought out by divorce.

An increasing body of knowledge suggests that behavioral problems and general adjustment may be related less to the parents' separation or divorce itself, than to other mediating factors (Camara & Resnick, 1989; Emery, 1982; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989, 1990). At the present time, researchers are focusing more on the diversity of children's responses and to the factors that facilitate or disrupt the development and adjustment of children experiencing their parents' marital transitions (Hetherington et al., 1989; Portes, Haas, & Brown, 1991; Tschann, et al., 1989, 1990).

A review of recent literature on the effects of divorce on children indicates that a number of factors are associated with children's post-divorce adjustment. There are also certain factors that may make some children more "at risk" for maladjustment than other children. Some of these factors come into play before the separation, while others are set in motion at the time of the separation or divorce, and still others influence the children following the divorce (Portes et al., 1991).

Counselors need to be aware of the many factors identified as having a significant influence on a child's adjustment to divorce. Examination of these factors can provide guidance to parents, counselors, teachers, clinicians, and other educators about how to

decrease stress and improve the quality of life for these children.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the most prominent post-separation factors that have been identified in the literature as having a significant influence on the adjustment of children following a divorce. Post-separation factors that will be examined include the level of conflict between parents; the parent-child relationship; access to nonresident parent, including loss of parent; and selected social & environmental changes. Implications for counselors will also be presented.

Post-separation Factors

Level of Conflict Between Parents

Most clinicians and researchers agree that interparental conflict between parents has adverse effects on child development (Brown, Eichenberger, Portes, & Christiansen, 1991; Camara & Resnick, 1989; Emery, 1982; Hodges, 1991; Tschann et al., 1989, 1990). Considerable research suggests that the level of conflict a child is exposed to (both before and after the separation) has a greater impact on child adjustment than does the actual separation or divorce (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Brown et al., 1991; Demo, 1992; Emery, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979; Rutter, 1971). There also tends to be agreement that well-adjusted children come from homes where there is low interparent

conflict and hostility prior to and following the divorce (Brown, Portes, & Christiansen, 1989; Emery, 1982; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Rutter, 1971; Tschann et al., 1989, 1990).

The results of many different studies indicate that the post-divorce relationship between the parents is the most critical factor in the functioning of the family. One study (Luepnitz, 1982, cited in Peck, 1989) of nonclinical families with different types of custodial arrangements found that ongoing conflict was the only predictor of poor adjustment in children. Long, Slater, Forehand, and Fauber (1988) reported that continued parental conflict after divorce was associated with lower grades and greater anxiety and withdrawal for young adolescents than was conflict that was discontinued at the time of the divorce. It has also been documented (Hetherington, 1989) that high rates of continued aggression and conflict between the divorced parents is associated with the gradual loss of contact of the noncustodial parent, especially after the noncustodial parent remarries.

Emery (1982) suggested that conflict between parents that lasts for a long period of time and is more openly hostile will more negatively impact the child than will conflicts that are shorter in duration and less openly hostile. Parents who engage in quarrelsome

battles and openly criticize each other in the presence of their children stir up anxiety and anger in their children, who love both parents. Camara and Resnick (1989), in their study of 7- to 9-year olds from 82 families, found that the degree of conflict was not as much a factor in child adjustment as was the way in which parents managed or regulated conflict and whether they could work together in a cooperative relationship as parents. Although parents may feel angry or resentful, if they are able to control their anger, cooperate in parenting, negotiate differences, and not directly expose their children to quarrels or violence, children show fewer emotional and social problems (Hetherington et al., 1989).

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) noted in their study of 63 girls from middle-class families that at 10 years postdivorce, girls whose parents judged one another severely were doing poorly. These parents expressed dissatisfaction with the other parent's parenting and continued to place blame on the other parent for the divorce. All but one of the girls whose parents blamed each other were doing poorly. Girls whose parents accepted shared blame for the divorce were well-adjusted 10 years later.

Tschann and her colleagues (1989) developed a path model for predicting emotional adjustment based on 178 oldest children of divorce. Parental conflict again

stood out as an important predictor, indirectly affecting emotional adjustment. Marital conflict predicted less warm mother-child relationships, which in turn predicted poorer emotional adjustment in children. Children in this study who were better adjusted were female, had better infant temperament, visited the noncustodial parent more, and had better postseparation relationships with both parents.

Most of the above studies have not controlled for parent-child conflict. Hodges (1991) pointed out that it is likely that a parent who is aggressive toward the other parent is also aggressive toward the child. Hodges concluded that it would be difficult to ascertain which aggression is more negative for child development.

Tschann and her research partners (1990) noted that the effects of parental conflict have been documented more extensively than most other predictors of child adjustment. The most important findings of several studies indicate a relationship between higher levels of marital conflict before divorce and problems in the parent-child relationship after the separation of the spouses (Emery, 1982; Kline et al., 1991; Portes, et al., 1991; Tschann et al., 1989, 1990). A poorer parent-child relationship, in turn, is thought to negatively affect the emotional and behavioral adjustment in children after separation (Emery, 1982; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979; Portes et al., 1991;

Tschann et al., 1989, 1990).

Although marital conflict is significantly related to child adjustment regardless of other variables, the path models reported by Tschann and her colleagues (1989, 1990) show that marital conflict affects child outcomes only indirectly through its effect on parenting. This makes it more difficult for parents to meet the needs of their children during a time when they possibly have greater needs than ever before (Tschann, et al., 1989). These writers suggested that this relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment lends some support for the finding of some divorce researchers (e.g., Hess & Camara, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) that a good relationship with one or both parents is more important to child adjustment than is the extent of marital conflict. They also suggested that parenting during the divorcing period is itself affected by the amount of marital conflict that took place before separation (Tschann et al., 1989). If the parents are not able to separate their parental and spousal roles and continue to focus on their problems, their children will be at risk for more problems and more frequently come to the attention of professionals (Emery, 1982; Portes et al., 1989).

In addition to citations just presented which make the argument that parental conflict is a very powerful factor affecting children's adjustment, several

hypotheses have been proposed for studying more precisely how the children are affected. Six of these hypotheses will briefly be addressed.

The first hypothesis given for how marital conflict impacts child adjustment is that the conflict between parents may result in the child being pulled into the marital conflict and being expected to align with one or the other parent. This creates loyalty conflicts for the child (Brown et al., 1989). Tschann and her colleagues (1989) also discussed how children can be used as weapons in a conflict, resulting in problematic changes in the family role structure such that parental authority may be discredited, or children may assume parental or spousal roles, such as providing emotional support. In kind of environment, the child's ability to grow and develop is often at risk.

A second hypothesis proposed in the literature suggests that parents in families high in marital conflict may be so depressed and preoccupied with the problems in their marriage that they do not function well as parents (Tschann et al., 1989). As a result, they may be less nurturing or sensitive to their children, display a less warm or structured parenting style and exhibit more rejecting parental behaviors than those with less conflict in their marriage (Kline et al., 1991). These factors have been found to be associated with more emotional and behavioral problems

in the children (Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984).

The third hypothesis given for how parental conflict affects children is that some parents may be modeling poor problem-solving skills. Parents who are aggressive with each other may be unintentionally modeling the open expression of anger as a way of resolving interpersonal conflicts and frustration (Kalter, 1987). Kline and her colleagues (1991) reported that modeling is one of the most common explanations of how marital conflict affects children. They suggested that children not only observe and imitate the aggressive tactics of their parents but also may observe and model the avoidant strategies of conflict resolution as well. These researchers pointed out that this could explain why some children learn to withdraw from angry situations and turn their anger inward. Furthermore, Schwartz, (1979) suggested that interparental conflict may interfere with imitation of the same-sex parent or may lead to the rejection of both parents as models. Children may reject imitating both appropriate and inappropriate parental behaviors.

Tschann and her research partners (1989) presented the fourth hypothesis for how parental conflict may affect children. They proposed that the child, feeling angry and deprived by the separation, forms an alignment with one parent and angrily rejects the other. This sets forth a cycle of mutual rejection between parent and

child. In the Tschann study, rejecting/distancing parent-child relationships were associated with poor emotional adjustment.

A fifth hypothesis by which marital conflict may affect children is through changes in disciplinary practices. Emery (1982) pointed out that marital turmoil may lead to "a change in the use of important discipline techniques to the detriment of the child, or it may lead to increased inconsistency in discipline either between parents or in the practices of a single parent" (p. 321). Emery concluded that the "findings provide strong support for the hypothesis that inconsistent discipline is a mediating factor between marital turmoil and child behavior problems" (p. 322).

The sixth hypothesis regarding how parental conflict affects children is that stress produced by exposure to marital conflict may increase anxiety and pose problems for children. Coping with life's difficulties takes a psychological toll (Emery, 1982). A stress hypothesis is interesting to many researchers mainly because of the differential effects of marital conflict between boys and girls. In several studies it has been found that boys tend to react more negatively to divorce, both in intensity and in duration, than do girls (Emery, 1982; Kurdek & Berg, 1983). Explanations for this sex difference have not been very clear. It has been proposed that boys, as compared to girls, are

exposed to more stress, more parental conflict and less nurturance (Hetherington et al., 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), are less psychologically resilient (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), and are more likely to experience difficulties under the supervision of an opposite-sex parent (Santrock & Warshak, 1979). Evidence in the literature (Emery, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1989; Wallerstein, 1987) suggests that boys tend to externalize their stress through aggression, delinquency, noncompliant and acting out behaviors more than girls. Emery (1982) cautioned against drawing the conclusion that boys have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce than girls, stating that

girls are likely to be just as troubled by marital turmoil as boys are, but they may demonstrate their feelings in a manner that is more appropriate to their sex role, namely, by being anxious, withdrawn, or perhaps very well behaved. (p. 317)

Emery (1982) concluded that it is unlikely that any single hypothesis fully explains the relationship between marital and child problems, yet each may prove to have some merit. These and other processes are likely to operate collectively in affecting children exposed to marital conflict. Emery does add, however, that "in any given instance, one influence may predominate" (p. 324).

In summary, there appears to be strong evidence that the relationship between the parents is the single

most critical factor in the child's adjustment to family transitions. The post-divorce relationship between the parents appears to be of particular importance. Several hypotheses proposed as to how parental conflict affects children. Children may be more adversely affected if they (a) are pulled into parental conflicts, (b) experience less warmth and empathy from parents, (c) model aggressive or avoidant problem-solving strategies, (d) align with one parent, (e) experience inconsistent discipline, and (f) are unable to cope with stress. The modeling and stress hypotheses, in particular, have attracted a great deal of attention in the literature.

Parent-child Relationship

It has already been noted that a good relationship with at least one parent before separation has been found to lessen the negative effects of marital conflict for children (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This also seems to hold true after separation. Components of the parent-child relationship connected with better child adjustment have been found to include consistent discipline and warm and supportive parenting (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1982).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that the parent-child relationship often deteriorates during the divorcing period, when parents often exhibit a diminished ability to parent. Parents during this time

are emotionally stressed and tend to be less consistent in the use of discipline, less affectionate, less available emotionally and more rejecting of their children than before the divorcing period (Hetherington et al., 1982). They may also be more emotionally dependent on their children at this time (Tschann et al., 1989).

The parent-child relationship can change in many ways after divorce, but it is very important for the child that a positive relationship exists, especially with the custodial parent (Tschann et al., 1989). Pett (1982) identified several independent variables related to child adjustment following divorce and found that the new custodial parent-child relationship was the most significant contributor to the child's postdivorce social and emotional adjustment. It is worth noting, however, that there is evidence that the parent-child relationship deteriorates as a result of parental conflict (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979; Rutter, 1971). In these studies it was found that children from discordant marriages still had more problems than did children from happy marriages, despite the good parent-child relationship (Emery, 1982).

In summary, the parent-child relationship is an important factor that influences the adjustment of children to divorce. A particularly warm relationship with at least one parent can help the child adjust to

the new situation. Parental conflict is also a factor that influences the parent-child relationship. A very good relationship with at least one parent can reduce the negative effects of parental conflict on children.

Access to Nonresidential Parent and Loss of Parent

A significant factor in the adjustment of children in divorced families is the amount of access the child has to the nonresidential parent, usually the father. Research suggests that a continuing relationship between the child and both parents is correlated with better adjustment and generally viewed as important and desirable, except where parents remain in chronic conflict with each other (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Portes et al., 1991). Regular contact between the child and the non-custodial parent is also suggested for promoting child adjustment (Brown et al., 1989; Emery, 1982; Hess & Camara, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989).

Research indicates that loss of the parent-child relationship, especially during the formative years, may interfere with a child's emotional development (Tschann et al., 1989, 1990). The loss of a father in particular has been studied and used to explain the effects of divorce on children, especially boys. Tschann and her colleagues (1990) cited research that supported the hypothesis that the loss of a father may more negatively affect boys than girls, but research indicates that

there may be negative effects on female development as well, especially in adolescence and young adulthood (Kalter, Kloner, Schreier, & Okla, 1989; Tschann et al., 1990). Regarding the effect on boys, Kalter and her research partners (1989) explained the father-absence hypothesis by stating that

boys need a regular, ongoing, positive relationship with their father in order to develop a valued sense of masculinity, internalize controls over behavior, achieve appropriate development of conscience and perform up to their abilities academically. (p. 606)

These researchers (1989) pointed out for boys, failures in these developmental tasks are seen as being largely responsible for aggressive acting out behaviors, poor academic work, and social isolation from peers--common findings in the divorce literature.

The above findings relating to the effects of decreased contact and loss of the parent-child relationship following a divorce also hold true for intact families. Kline and her colleagues (1991) noted that in both intact and divorcing families, rejecting parent-child relationships have been linked repeatedly to child behavioral and emotional problems. Brown et al. (1989) also noted that in divorcing situations, maladjustment is related to the perceived loss of the non-custodial parent. On the other hand, children who

perceive their parents as warm and emotionally available tend to adjust better (Brown et al., 1989).

Tschann and her associates (1989) noted that after the separation, one parent, usually the father, will almost always be less available than before the separation. These researchers also noted, however, that the mother also may be less available emotionally, or even physically, if she begins working outside the home. In either case, there will be some type of loss for the child, making the relationship with both parents vulnerable.

In summary, a continuing relationship with both parents following separation and divorce and having access to both parents have been found to be important. The parent-child relationship is central to the adjustment of the child and the stress of the separation and divorce may make this relationship particularly vulnerable.

Social/Environmental Changes

The child's life experiences following family transitions also affect child adjustment (Hetherington et al., 1989; Tschann et al., 1990). After a separation, divorce or remarriage, children experience many changes in their life situation including family roles and relationships. Some of these changes directly impact the child, while others indirectly affect the child through the behavior of other family members (Hetherington et

al., 1989). Three significant life experiences that affect child adjustment are economic hardship, multiple stressors and use of support systems.

There is abundant evidence that families of divorce are adversely affected economically. Flynn (1984) reported that single-parent families are headed mostly by women (90% of custody is mother custody) and that women earn approximately 59 cents for every dollar earned by men. Flynn (1984) noted that 75% of the poor in this country are women and children. Three years after divorce, only 19% of divorced fathers continue to make child support payments. Hodges (1991) noted that even if support is paid, the amount of the award generally covers less than half the actual cost of raising a child. Other researchers (Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Sweet & Bumpass, 1987; Hetherington et al., 1989) have also suggested that family income decreases significantly when the mother gains custody of the children.

The effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on postdivorce adjustment of children are mixed. Hodges, Wechsler, and Ballantine (1979) studied 52 preschool children enrolled in five different schools in Boulder, Colorado. Half of the children were from divorced homes and half were from intact homes. These researchers found that low income in families of divorce predicted child maladjustment, whereas low income was not related to

maladjustment for children in intact families.

Guidubaldi and Perry (1984) evaluated 115 children from one school district in Ohio during the fall of the kindergarten school year. In this study, 26 of the children were from divorced homes 89 were from intact families. These researchers found that SES was not a significant factor in predicting child maladjustment. They did report, however, that single-parent status and SES were more powerful predictors than other family background variables.

In examining the inconsistencies among research studies regarding the effects of socio-economic status on child adjustment, Hodges (1991) suggested that methodological flaws may account for some of the differences. Economic factors are not always controlled in research. Hodges also cited research which noted that even when samples are matched for socioeconomic status, samples are not comparable (Blanchard & Biller, 1971; Blechman, 1982). Blechman explained that matching families by income necessarily selects families from the lower end of the income range in intact families and in the upper end of the income range for families of divorce. For example, Blanchard and Biller (1971) found that in a pool of 297 children, only 11 from divorced families were income matched with children from intact families.

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989), in their study of 63

girls from middle class families, found that when there was a major difference in income between parents (specifically when mothers were economically disadvantaged compared with fathers), the psychological adjustment of girls was poorer than when such a discrepancy was not present. Hodges (1991) noted that psychological problems were present regardless of whether the discrepancy in income was due to economic decline for the mother or economic advance for the father.

Hetherington and her colleagues (1989) noted that divorce was associated with a marked drop in income for households in which mothers retained custody. These and other researchers (Tschann et al., 1990) also pointed out that reduced economic resources are often coupled with dependence on welfare; changes in maternal employment; poorer quality in housing, neighborhoods, schools and child care; and geographic mobility. Such changes have been found to be related to a loss of social networks and support for the child from familiar friends, neighbors, and teachers (Hetherington et al., 1989) and to poor child adjustment following divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985).

Demo (1992) reported that economic hardship may result in "dire consequences" for parents and children, including lower levels of parental nurturance, inconsistent discipline and adolescent distress. Many of

the explanations for these negative consequences center around the changes that may take place following the separation or divorce. Hetherington et al. (1982) suggested that if a mother is forced to return to work around the time of divorce, the child may feel abandoned by both parents. Hetherington and her associates (1989) also noted that if a mother is resentful or feels unhappy working or manages only to obtain part-time or temporary jobs requiring frequent changes, the child may be negatively affected by interactions with an anxious, dissatisfied mother.

While economic hardship and the mother's return to work may result in negative consequences for children, there may be some potential benefits as well. Hetherington and her research partners (1989) suggested that the mother's entry into the workforce may not adversely affect the child if the timing is right, and if the mother wishes to work, is satisfied with her job, and obtains adequate child care. If these conditions exist, the mother's employment may improve the family finances, contribute to her social and psychological well-being, and have a more positive impact on child adjustment.

Fishel (1987) found that in mother-custody households, the higher the mother's occupational and educational status, the better adjusted were the children. She reasoned that more prestigious jobs may

give women enough self-esteem and independence so that they do not need to "clutch at their children" (p. 182), which in turn may affect the adjustment of the children.

Research cited in this section regarding the effects of socioeconomic status on child adjustment are inconclusive. It appears that generally speaking, the higher the household income the better adjusted are the children. Economic hardship following divorce may adversely affect the child if there is a lower level of nurturance and inconsistent discipline in the home. The mother's return to work may negatively affect some children but may have positive affects on other children.

Multiple stressors, as a second type of social/environmental change, has also received attention in the literature. Rutter (1980) reported that a single stressful event rarely creates lasting psychiatric problems for children but argued that when children are exposed to multiple stressors, the adverse effects increase dramatically. Several researchers (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kalter et al., 1989; Rutter, 1980) have suggested that it is not the separation or divorce itself that predicts maladjustment in children, but that other stressors occurring at or around the time of divorce interact with divorce to predict problems. When parents divorce, children are frequently exposed to many changes such as

residential shifts, absence of the noncustodial parent, decreased economic resources, changes in the custodial parent's availability and overall parenting style, and more chaotic household routines (Rutter, 1980).

Research suggests that if the stressors are kept to a minimum, the initial difficulties stemming from the parents' separation will decrease over time (Kalter et al., 1989).

Hetherington et al. (1989) reported that "most children and parents can adapt to their situation in a single-parent household within two to three years if their new situation is not compounded by continued or additional adversity" (p. 303). The problem is that the "new family structure and equilibrium is usually disrupted" (p. 303) by more transitions and reorganizations following the parents' initial separation and divorce. Hetherington et al. point out that 75% of divorced mothers and 80% of divorced fathers remarry, and that most of the remarriages occur within three to five years. They also note that adjustment to remarriage seems to take longer than does adjustment to a divorce. Additionally, divorces tend to occur sooner in remarriages. As a result, some children must confront a second divorce before they have had sufficient time to adjust to the parent's first divorce and subsequent remarriage. It is believed that each consecutive transition point will be associated with higher risk for

child adjustment problems.

Capaldi and Patterson (1991) also found a relationship between the number of parenting transitions and the magnitude of adjustment problems experienced by boys in the family. Intact, single-mother, stepfather, and multiple transition families were selected from a pool of 206 lower- and working-class families having children at grade 4. A linear relationship was found, such that boys who had experienced the most transitions showed the most adjustment problems across different measures of child adjustment. These researchers also found a relationship between the number of transitions and arrest records 3 to 4 years later. Boys with one transition showed twice as many first arrests as boys with no transitions, and boys with two or more transitions showed three times as many arrests as boys who experienced no transitions.

In an earlier study of stress on the child and the custodial parent, Hodges, Tierney, and Buchsbaum (1984) used a sample composed of 44 boys and 46 girls, 30 from divorced families and 60 from intact families. In this study, the families of divorce moved more often, had higher rated inadequacy of income, and had lower income than did the intact families. This study also examined whether the child's or the parents' stressful life events were stronger predictors of maladjustment problems in the child. In every case, parent life events

predicted adjustment better than did child life events. High levels of parental stress, independent of marital status, predicted dependency, poor ability to stay on tasks, and distractibility in the child. Hodges et al concluded that parental stress may have more effect on the child than does direct stress.

Other researchers who have studied the effects of multiple stressors and life change events on child adjustment have found significant relationships (Furstenberg & Seltzer, 1986; Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 1988). One study (Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, & Wells, 1987) even concluded that life change events are the single best predictor of postdivorce maladjustment in children. These researchers noted that frequent life change events, marital hostility, and parental maladjustment all predicted children's postdivorce maladjustment. There are, however, a few studies that indicate only a small number of children experience major adjustment difficulties at any of the transition points. Hetherington and her colleagues (1982, 1989), and Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) concluded that the majority of children move through these experiences with relatively minor effects.

The research findings cited above demonstrate a close relationship between the number of transitions and the adjustment of the child. As more changes take place over a relatively short period of time, problems are

more likely to occur. The processes that might lead to this relationship, however, are still unclear (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Hodges, 1991). Hodges (1991) reported that there are two likely pathways by which the effect of cumulative stress may impact the child. The first pathway is that of the child being directly affected by the stress on the family. The second pathway is that of the parents being under so much stress that they are less available than formerly to the child for emotional and physical support. The findings of Capaldi & Patterson (1991) support the second pathway. These researchers suggest that disruption resulting from the transitions may result in less discipline for the children, less monitoring of their behavior and the parents being less involved and available to their children.

A third type of social/environmental change is that of support systems. There is evidence that high levels of support from family members can help in counteracting the effects of stressful events (Brown et al., 1989; Cantor, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1989; Santrock & Warshak, 1979). The research indicates that when social support systems and other resources are available and used by parents and children the stress level is lower and the adjustment is better for both. In contrast, when social support systems and other resources are not available and used the adverse effects of stressors are

increased (Brown et al., 1989; Cantor, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1989; Santrock & Warshak, 1979).

Kurdek & Berg (1983), in their longitudinal study of 36 boys and 34 girls with a mean age of 10 years, found that children's postdivorce adjustment was significantly related to their mother's use of social support systems. Their findings are also in agreement with previous research (Hetherington et al., 1979; Kurdek et al., 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) who found that children's divorce adjustment was significantly related to their mothers' use of social support systems, to their mothers' own divorce adjustment, to low maternal stress levels, and to low interparental conflict. Data on the fathers' use of support systems were not available from these studies because of their focus on mother-custody households.

Supports offered by friends and family also can increase divorced parents' positive attitudes toward themselves and their life situation and facilitate the parenting role (Hetherington et al., 1989). These writers noted that between 25% and 33% of newly divorced custodial mothers resided with a relative, a factor which helped relieve the mother's financial concerns and sense of task overload. This also provided the child with another source of emotional support.

Researchers have found that in Black families children who lived with both mother and grandmother

adjusted better than did children who resided with a divorced mother alone (Kellam, Ensminges, & Turner, 1977). Other studies found that children adjusted better when they received support from sibling relationships, responsive peers and school personnel (Cantor, 1982; Cook & McBride, 1982; Drake, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1989). In short, children's postdivorce adjustment is associated with the extent to which family members develop and maintain a support system of friends and relatives (Brown et al., 1989).

Research also shows social support from such sources as churches and clergy, community groups, and shared interest groups can be very helpful (McNamee, 1982; Rutter, 1983). Rutter (1983) in summarizing the research on the effects of social networks on stress and coping in children concludes that the general pattern of findings is supportive of the suggestion that social supports may reduce the effects of stressful life events, and the lack of social supports may increase the adverse effects of stressors.

In summary, the review of literature provided strong evidence that social/environmental changes have a significant influence on the adjustment of children following parental divorce. Economic factors, multiple stressors and social support systems were all studied. Findings cited indicate that a drop in income and standard of living may play a major role in adjustment

problems for children following divorce but the effect of socioeconomic status may also depend on the presence or absence of many additional factors. Generally speaking, the higher the household income the better adjusted are the children. Regarding the role of multiple stressors, research suggests that as family structure and relationships become increasingly complex and more changes take place over a relatively short period of time, child adjustment becomes more and more difficult. Support systems can also serve as sources of practical and emotional assistance for both parents and children experiencing family transitions.

Implications for Counselors

Counselors who work in a variety of settings need to be aware of factors that have been found to facilitate a child's healthy adjustment to divorce. By having knowledge of these factors the counselor can be of assistance by providing information and support as well as consultative advice (Hodges, 1991).

Findings reported in preceding sections contain more implications for counselors than can be treated within the confines of this paper. Four implications that have particular significance for school counselors will briefly be addressed.

Besides working with parents and consulting with teachers, school counselors can directly help children adjust to divorce situations through individual or small

group counseling. A common suggestion in the literature is that children of all ages have someone who is available to listen to their concerns. Verbally discussing the issues or engaging the child in other emotional outlets can help facilitate child adjustment (Brown et al., 1989; Cantor, 1982; Cook & McBride, 1982; Drake, 1979; Hodges, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Several researchers (Brown et al., 1989; Hodges, 1991; Peck, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) have recommended that: children be helped to understand that they can love each parent without being disloyal to the other one; that regular visitation be established; and that children learn they can have a separate relationship with the non-custodial parent without interference from the custodial parent and vice versa. In addition, these children need to be continually reassured that their parents still love them even though the parents may not love each other. Counselors could help children understand these recommendations and convey them to parents when they have the opportunity to do so.

Another recommendation made by Brown et al. (1989) was that divorce adjustment groups be used that focus on (1) the identification of common feelings that children experience around divorce and (2) the expression of anger. The first area would focus on clarifying children's misconceptions about divorce. Children would

be encouraged to talk about divorce-related feelings and helped to understand that the painful feelings will not last forever. The emphasis in the second area would involve identifying sources of angry feelings in specific situations and examining what children are saying to themselves to trigger those feelings. Brown et al. recommended that children also be taught consequences of appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing anger. School counselors facilitating support groups for children of divorce could incorporate these two areas into their sessions.

Finally, the research suggests that it is important for children to increase their contact with additional adult caretakers, such as daycare professionals, babysitters, adult relatives, friends and neighbors (Brown et al., 1989; Cantor, 1982; Cook & McBride, 1982; Drake, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1989; Hodges, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Counselors could help in coordinating these contacts. Responsive peers and school personnel can also be sources of practical and emotional support for both parents and children experiencing family transitions (Cook & McBride, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1989).

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to examine the major Post-separation factors that have been identified in the literature as having a significant influence on the

adjustment of children following a divorce. A preliminary examination of mediating factors revealed that the potential number of such factors is very large and that their possible combinations are numerous.

This paper focused on the four following post-separation factors: level of conflict between parents, the parent-child relationship, access to nonresident parent, and selected social/environmental changes. Implications for counselors were also briefly presented.

The impact of conflicting and/or inaccessible parents is considerable. Children are more likely to adjust to divorce when relationships between the ex-spouses and between each parent and between each child remain open and there is a minimal level of conflict. A particularly close relationship with at least one parent can help the child adjust to the transition. The child's life experiences during and following family transitions also affect child adjustment. Most children and parents are able to adapt to their situation within two or three years if their new situation is not compounded by continued or additional adversity. Higher socioeconomic status, a minimal amount of stress and maintenance of a support system of family and friends all positively influence the adjustment of children following divorce.

There is still controversy on the extent and longevity of the effects of divorce. Strong agreement was found among investigators that most children

initially experience their parents' divorce as stressful and display disruptions in their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Although a majority of children appear to pull themselves together within two or three years and regain their developmental stride, a significant minority of children continue to have problems long after marital separation. In general, the more "difficult" the divorce, the more serious the impact on child adjustment.

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