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## The effects of divorce and resulting single-parent family environment on the social and educational development of the gifted child

George E. Lowry  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## The effects of divorce and resulting single-parent family environment on the social and educational development of the gifted child

### Abstract

Divorce can be a very difficult time for adults, but it can be even more difficult for the children, who often do not understand all that is happening around them or why it is happening. They have no control over events that are taking place. Worst of all, they often have no one to whom they can talk, no one who is not somehow involved in the divorce situation. Gifted children are among the children who are frequently caught up in such a situation, and who later must adapt to living in a single-parent family as a result of divorce. While current research does not provide an exact number of gifted children who are involved annually in a divorce situation, it can be assumed, based on broader population statistics, that the number is rather large and will probably continue to increase.

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE  
AND RESULTING SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY ENVIRONMENT  
ON THE  
SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
OF THE GIFTED CHILD

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum & Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education  
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George E. Lowry

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William Waack  
Director of Research Paper

July 23, 1990  
Date Approved

William Waack  
Graduate Faculty Advisor

July 23, 1990  
Date Approved

Mary Nan Aldridge  
Graduate Faculty Reader

July 24, 1990  
Date Approved

Roger A. Kueter  
Head, Department of Curriculum  
and Instruction

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

Divorce can be a very difficult time for adults, but it can be even more difficult for the children, who often do not understand all that is happening around them or why it is happening. They have no control over events that are taking place. Worst of all, they often have no one to whom they can talk, no one who is not somehow involved in the divorce situation.

Gifted children are among the children who are frequently caught up in such a situation, and who later must adapt to living in a single-parent family as a result of divorce. While current research does not provide an exact number of gifted children who are involved annually in a divorce situation, it can be assumed, based on broader population statistics, that the number is rather large and will probably continue to increase.

The World Almanac (1990) reported that one of every six children in the United States lives in a single-parent family. It further reported that divorce annually causes over one million more children to live in single-parent families. This source further states that the number of such children is expected to continue to rise, along with the divorce rate. It also

reports that 1,183,000 divorces occurred in 1988 alone--a 2% increase over 1987.

Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) estimated that approximately 40% of all marriages terminate in divorce. They also estimated the average length of marriage at 6 3/4 years. More current statistics appear to confirm their forecast. Hanson and Sporakowski (1986) stated that one-parent family households account for nearly 26% of family groups. They pointed out that single-parent families increased 117.6% from 1970 to 1983, while the total number of two-parent families declined 4.2%. Another study (Cantrell, 1986) predicted that, in the decade of the 1990s, one out of every three children under 18 will have divorced parents. According to Norton and Glick (1986), by the year 2004, 59% of all children will be living in one-parent families. They forecast that divorce will account for nearly 41% of this total, with factors like premarital birth, long-term separation, or death of one parent comprising the other 18%.

As noted, approximately 40% of all marriages now end in divorce; one out of every three children this decade live in single-parent families; and in the next decade, a majority of children will be living in single-parent families. These statistics and predictions reveal a change in the family structure that is occurring in America, and behind these cold statistics are large numbers of gifted children. For



these children, especially, the trauma of divorce is far more than mere statistics. For them, as for other children, divorce means a major changing of the family foundation in which they had previously found love, care, and a protective shelter from the cold and uncaring world. For them, as well as for other children, the family life they knew will never be quite the same. But these concerns are added to the social and emotional stress of being identified as "gifted" and of meeting the increased expectations of such identification. How gifted children in such a situation are able to adapt and adjust can have significant ramifications for their future development, behavior patterns, and educational success.

#### Statement of the Problem

The intent of this review of literature is to answer the following questions:

1. What does the literature reveal about the impact of divorce on gifted children?
2. Is the impact of divorce on the gifted child different from the impact on the nongifted child?
3. What does the literature reveal about the impact of divorce on the gifted child relative to school achievement?
4. What does the literature reveal about the role that parents and teachers can play in understanding and helping the gifted child adjust to a divorce situation?

### Importance of the Problem

Results of several studies have shown divorce to be a major crisis situation that many gifted and nongifted children will experience. Researchers reported that divorce can have a strong impact on the children's development, including the way they view themselves and the world around them, their behavior patterns, and their educational and social growth (Fry & Gover, 1983; Gardner, 1977; Hetherington, 1979).

An important reason for this review of literature concerning the impact of divorce on gifted children and the problems that may accompany that situation is the recent focus on the identification of at-risk students and the development of appropriate educational plans to meet their needs. Indeed, gifted children are considered at-risk because of divorce (Davis & Rimm, 1989; Rimm, 1986; Zilli, 1971).

Many gifted students often fail to achieve their full potential as a result of the trauma and reactions to divorce and the single-parent environments created by divorce (Rimm, 1986). This review can provide insight into social/psychological factors associated with divorce and considerations for identifying problem areas and planning educational strategies for the gifted child.

Another factor that needs to be considered is that many states, including Iowa, require school districts to identify and provide a differentiated curriculum for

gifted students. If, indeed, divorce plays a significant part in the lives of many gifted students, then it follows that strategies for dealing with the impact and negative effects of divorce on such children need to be addressed in the curricula designed to serve them.

#### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this review of literature, it is necessary to define the following operational terms and phrases used in this paper:

##### Divorce

In this review, the term divorce will be used to describe the legal dissolution of a marriage between a husband and wife in which children are involved in the legal separation process.

##### Gifted

In this review, the term gifted will be limited to the intellectually gifted person who is defined as an individual who demonstrates a high IQ and who shows the promise of functioning at high levels of intellectual ability.

##### Single-parent Family

In this review, the term single-parent family will be used to describe a family unit consisting of a child or children being cared for by only one adult parent. This single parent may be either the mother or the father.

Intact or Traditional Family

In this review, the term intact or traditional family will be used to refer to a family in which both mother and father are not divorced or separated and are present in the home.

## CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature sought to answer the following questions:

1. What does the literature reveal about the impact of divorce on gifted children?
2. Is the impact of divorce on the gifted child different from the impact on the nongifted child?
3. What does the literature reveal about the impact of divorce on the gifted child relative to school achievement?
4. What does the literature reveal about the role that parents and teachers can play in understanding and helping the gifted child adjust to a divorce situation?

Limited Research and Concomitant Problems

This review of literature was primarily limited to research published during the last 25 years, with the exception of the landmark long-term study by Terman (1948). This decision was made partly to limit the review to current information, and partly due to the fact that very little specialized research regarding divorce and the gifted child could be found prior to this period.

Due to the limited amount of available research which specifically concerned the impact of divorce on gifted children, additional research concerning the impact of divorce on all children has been included. As will be noted, the most common impacts of divorce on

children seem to occur in both the gifted and nongifted.

### Terman's Long-term Study

Before one can understand the factors related to the perception of divorce on gifted children, it is necessary to reexamine Terman's long-term of over 400 California children with IQ scores of over 140, identified as "intellectually gifted." Terman's study, undertaken in 1922, tracked these gifted children until his death in the 1950s. One of Terman's published findings was the observation that gifted children were most likely to be living in intact homes with both parents present (Terman, 1948). His findings left an impression that divorced family situations are rare, a misconception that continues to the present. This may be a factor in the limited amount of research related to the impact of divorce on gifted children.

Terman stated that the parents of gifted children are less likely to divorce, He noted:

Up to 1922, the percentage of parents who had been divorced was 5.2 and of those separated 1.9 making a total of 7.1 percent either divorced or separated. This incidence of broken families was definitely below that for the general population of comparable age in California in 1922, and has remained below since that date. (p. 17)

In an explanatory footnote, the 1922 figure was updated to 1940. Terman said, "By 1940, the incidence

of divorce among parents had increased to 13.9 percent. This is still below that of generality in California of comparable age range" (p. 17).

Two more recent studies would seem to confirm Terman's earlier findings that gifted children tend to be living with both parents. One study of 456 high school students identified as intellectually gifted found that 87.5% came from homes with both parents present (Barbe, 1956). A 1988 study (DeVaul & Davis, 1988) of children who were identified as gifted and who were taking part in talented and gifted classes offered by the Brooke County Schools in West Virginia found the number of children ranged between a low of 57% and a high of 95%, with a median of 86%. This West Virginia study also found that the school with the highest percentage of gifted students living in single-parent families also had the fewest identified gifted students (DeVaul & Davis, 1988).

#### Terman's Findings in Retrospect

In Terman's study, the percentage of his control group may have been low compared to the overall divorce rates in California during the 18-year period of 1922 to 1940 as he noted, but simple mathematics will show the incidence of divorce among the parents of gifted children in his study increased 37.4% or about 2% annually during that period. The trend toward more divorces between 1922 and 1940 reported by Terman for his study group seems to be consistent with the

historical, long-term annual increases in divorces of about 2% for the nation, a trend that continues today.

The percentages of gifted children not living in intact families would appear to be low based on the nearly 35-year-old study by Barbe (1956), as well as the more current 1988 study by DeVaul and Davis. However, it must be remembered that both studies were too limited in scope to be generalized nationwide. For example, the West Virginia study, as noted, found that the percentage of gifted students coming from single-parent families can vary dramatically from school to school within the same geographical region (DeVaul & Davis, 1988).

Thus, with the limited amount of current research available, the question of whether the gifted child today is most likely to be living in intact families can not be definitely established. To this writer's knowledge, how increasing divorce rates might have changed the historical findings has not been studied. Yet, general acceptance of Terman's findings that the gifted child is most often living in an intact family has become accepted opinion, and may have, in part, contributed to the limited amount and nature of current research.

#### Population Questions in Divorce Studies

With much of the research on children's reactions to divorce emanating principally from children identified as experiencing problems (Fry & Trifiletti,



1983; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980; Rosen, 1977; Springer & Wallerstein, 1983, 1984; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979, 1980), the results may not have taken into account the larger number of children who deny having problems or who appear, on the surface, not to be having problems (Allers, 1981). Allers found that all children are greatly affected by divorce, in spite of outward signs or appearances. Diamond (1985) concurred when she stated that many of the children who won't admit to having problems or even show signs of having problems with a divorce situation actually do not escape the pain and problems. Indeed, they may be the ones on which the impact can be the greatest (Diamond, 1985).

#### Research Related to Gifted Children of Divorce

In addition to the emphasis on children openly experiencing problems with divorce, an additional limitation must be noted. There are few specific available research studies based on gifted children's perceptions of divorce. The most recent study found by this researcher of gifted children's perceptions was made by Falk (1987). Her study involved interviews with 41 middle school students from various Connecticut schools and applied sampling techniques to select 21 students from intact homes and 20 from single-parent homes due to divorce. Of the sample, 25 were identified as gifted and the remainder were not identified as gifted. The sample was stratified to include students from private as well as public schools

and from city, suburban, and rural locations. The gender breakdown was 24 females and 17 males. Her study found that gifted children were better able to understand divorce in the abstract and to recognize long-term consequences better than could the nongifted children. While limited in scope, Falk's findings are in keeping with earlier findings in the areas of children's perceptions of divorce (Albert, 1971; Fry & Grover, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1987; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980; Springer & Wallerstein, 1983).

Falk's (1987) research found that gifted children tended to experience the same feelings and follow similar behavior patterns as nongifted children, and that they also expressed a greater interest in learning more about and what was happening around them during the time of the separation than did the nongifted children. Other researchers concurred with Falk, but added that perceptions are more strongly felt by gifted children (Davis & Rimm, 1986; Rimm, 1986; Zilli, 1971). Zilli, for example, reported that this can be particularly true of gifted children, who feel that they are somehow responsible for their parents' divorce.

The literature would seem to indicate that the impact of divorce is felt by all children, even those who do not exhibit visible signs of social or emotional problems. While the impact on gifted children is

similar to that of nongifted children, gifted children tend to feel the emotional perceptions far more strongly than do nongifted children. They are better able to understand divorce in the abstract and have a greater interest in the implications of the dissolution of the marriage.

### Divorce and School Achievement

When considering how divorce impacts on the gifted child's school achievement, many related factors, such as age and gender, need to be considered. How age and gender can affect behavior and perceptions of the gifted child and, in turn, school achievement, will be considered in this section. Since studies aimed specifically at gifted children are limited, material for this section has been supplemented with studies on the subject taken from the general population.

#### Age Factor

Preschool-aged children. Very little is known about the effects of divorce on gifted or nongifted children under 2 years of age. The research has been primarily concerned with children over 2 years old, generally in a preschool setting. These studies have not distinguished between gifted and nongifted, but the general findings about children in this age group reveal some indication of the behavior patterns one might expect in a preschool gifted child.

At this age, according to The Parents' Book about Divorce (Gardner, 1977), all children seem to view

divorce in a very similar fashion. They are often fearful, will resort to immature and/or aggressive behavior, and fear being left alone or abandoned. Gardner reported that old toys or security blankets can take on added importance in the lives of these young children. He stated that parents should be aware that it is common for these children to become less cooperative or friendly with other children. Whether they are alone or with others, sharper emotions ranging from anger to apathy to depression will often be noticed in preschool-aged children. He warned that preschoolers in divorce situations often seek attention and nearness of adults rather than other children; yet, they often resist any adult suggestions or commands.

Studies have found that while preschoolers are confused about divorce, they will try to make sense of what is happening. For example, Diamond (1985), in her book, Helping Children of Divorce, reported that these young children will often try various behaviors to gain acknowledgment that they are present. In addition, they may initiate behaviors as a means of involving themselves in a situation which can be in conflict with the parents' desire to shield the child from the divorce situation. For example, it is not uncommon for a preschooler in such a situation to be very well-behaved in the presence of both parents, but behave badly when with only one or the other of the parents.

On a positive note, research has found that preschool children in single-parent families tend to have higher scores in imaginativeness. They are reported to have more imaginary companions, to use more imaginative talk with fantasy friends, to play more imaginative games alone, and to engage in more imaginative outdoor games than those in two-parent families (Cornelius & Yawkey, 1985).

Elementary school-aged children. Younger elementary school-aged children have some understanding of what divorce means and the emotion of deep grief may be observed in children of this age (Diamond, 1985; Fry & Gover, 1983). A strong sense of self-blame, a particular problem with gifted children of this age, may also be noted. Conflict of parental loyalty is a major problem at this age, and boys left in custody of the mother tend to behave aggressively toward her (Diamond, 1985).

Diamond (1985) found that, in general, older elementary-aged children tend to hide emotions of loss, embarrassment, self-blame, and similar negative feelings they may have, and that results in increased stress. She stated that the dream world and imagination become part of the escape mechanisms they will often use to offset their negative feelings or to reduce stress. Davis and Rimm (1989) related these qualities to giftedness when they point out that gifted children often express such imagination in the form of

make-believe dreams that directly or indirectly concern their parents' divorce and can include long, detailed plans to reunite their parents.

Anger is a strong emotion for all children of this age group and is often directed at one or both parents (Diamond, 198). At this age, they also are more easily drawn in to parental efforts to get the children to prefer one parent over the other. Studies have found that all children involved in such parental conflicts tend to experience more difficulties in school and social situations than do children of divorce who are not coerced (Cantrell, 1986; Cox & Cox, 1978; Edgar & Headlam, 1982; Grollman, 1969; Hetherington, Camara, & Featherman, 1981; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978).

The time required by many children of this age to adjust to the change brought on by divorce can take 2 years or longer (Davis & Rimm, 1989; Diamond, 1985; Gardner, 1977). It often can be a time when behaviors will deteriorate (Diamond, 1985). In the case of elementary school-aged children, it can be a time when they adopt attitudes of aggression toward parents, teachers, and others and can channel the stress they feel into being aggravating and disruptive (Davis & Rimm, 1989).

Adolescents. Adolescents understand divorce better than young children, and gifted adolescents tend to be even more aware of and have a greater understanding of divorce than nongifted teenagers

(Falk, 1987). Davis and Rimm (1989) stated that gifted adolescents often feel that, as a result of the divorce, they are pushed into being adults. Such gifted teenagers seem to rush to their emerging sexuality, while at the same time they attempt to offset the unwanted rush to adulthood by being more rebellious (Davis & Rimm, 1989).

Davis and Rimm (1989) noted that many parents make the mistake of treating gifted children as adults during the divorce period. They warned:

Mother who confides in her adolescent gifted child in an adult manner during the immediate pre- and postdivorce period is likely to find herself with an unmanageable adolescent. It is almost as if the teenager who has been given adult status refuses to acknowledge the parent's right to parent him or her thereafter. (p. 412)

On the other hand, Diamond (1985) found that all adolescents become more mature following a divorce and that this can be positive. She stated that responsibilities at home, appreciation of money, and knowledge in particular areas may become very important to such adolescents. These areas of particular interest may range from self-understanding to intense interest in a particular field of study.

A related factor, particularly for gifted teenagers, can be the role of sibling parental substitution. Davis and Rimm (1989) found that the

gifted adolescent with younger siblings often feel the need to fill the role of the missing parent, while others may feel the need to fill the role of taking care of the single parent. They concluded that both of these behaviors can result in the student becoming more isolated from school and peers.

### Gender Factor

Just as age can be a factor regarding perceptions and behaviors of gifted children involved in a divorce situation, studies have found that children respond differently dependent on gender. Again, studies aimed specifically at gifted children are limited and material for this section has been supplemented with related studies taken from the general population.

Male children. Albert's (1978, 1980) research studies found that males and females seem to be affected differently by divorce. He found that boys tend to show more negative and long-lasting effects on behavior than girls. According to Wallerstein (1984), this negative effect appears to be truer in preschool boys than in older boys.

Another study found that boys raised by fathers tended to fare better in the long-term than did boys raised by mothers (Gardner, 1977). Diamond (1985) concurred, and adds that young boys raised by mothers alone tend to be more aggressive in behavior at school and at home. She also pointed out that boys in this



situation can have trouble playing with other boys their own age and often prefer spending time alone.

Because of this feeling of conflict and trouble with gender identification often found in boys raised by mothers alone, gifted boys, in particular, should have an older male to served a model, according to Rimm and Davis (1989). They stated that role models can be uncles, grandfathers, teachers, Boy Scout leaders, or other males. These role models can be very important to such a gifted boy in helping him to become comfortable with his masculinity.

Female children. Gardner (1977) found girls raised by mothers tended to fare better than girls raised by fathers. Davis and Rimm (1989), in their book on gifted children, concurred, stating that gifted girls raised by fathers are often more demanding and show less social maturity than do gifted girls from two-parent families or single-mother families. They also found that gifted girls from single-parent families headed by the father tend to have a hard time with independence.

#### Parent Role in Helping Children of Divorce

Parents can do many things to reduce the negative impact of divorce on gifted children. How they respond to such gifted children during and after divorce situations can have an impact not only on the children's behavior and perceptions, but also on the children's school achievement. This section will

consider strategies parents can implement separately and cooperatively to help gifted children in this time of crisis as well as to prevent the divorce situation from impacting negatively on school performance. Studies aimed specifically at gifted children are limited, and findings in this section have been supplemented with related studies taken from the general population.

A very important area in which parents can play a major role in helping a gifted child adjust to a divorce situation is the establishment of a consistent discipline and reward system. Parents can also minimize family conflicts and limit additional disruptions in the lifestyle of the gifted child.

#### Consistent Discipline

While love and affection are very important to a child in a divorce situation, both parents need to maintain and follow a consistent kind, yet firm, style of discipline (Diamond, 1985). Agreement on discipline and child-rearing strategies by both parents can help to provide continuity and a sense of order for the child in a divorce situation (Cantrell, 1986). In addition, Cantrell stated that divorced parents need to determine joint approaches that will show continued love and approval of the child as a way to help the child maintain a sense of well-being and self-worth during the divorce and later in adjustment to the single-parent situation.

### Minimizing Conflicts

Minimizing the conflict and hostility between parents following divorce can be a most important factor in a child's understanding and well-being (Brown, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Several researchers found that children caught in the middle of parental hostilities during divorce, as well as children caught up in an emotional effort to win the child's preference by one or both parents, tend to experience more difficulties in dealing with the divorce situation (Cantrell, 1986; Cox & Cox, 1978; Edgar & Headlam, 1982; Hetherington, Camara, & Featherman, 1981; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). Springer and Wallerstein (1983) stated that parents should be willing to discuss divorce conflicts and related concerns with the children and listen to their concerns. Rosen (1977) reported that children seem to adjust best when the ex-spouses can support each other in their roles as parents and that frequent contact with both parents is helpful.

### Limiting Disruptions

Often a child's concerns go beyond the divorce itself to how it may change his or her life. Research has found that children after the divorce become very concerned about questions like: Will they have to move? What will their new school be like? Will they have to make new friends? Will they lose their old friends? How will their lives change in the future?

These types of questions can be major concerns and causes of stress and conflicts to nongifted children after the divorce has been finalized (Allers, 1981; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980; Rosen, 1977). Falk (1987) stated that gifted children can see beyond the divorce to more abstract things, including future changes in their lives. Davis and Rimm (1989) concurred with Falk, and added that gifted children may be concerned about such postdivorce questions long before the nongifted child and, in many cases, even before the divorcing parents.

#### Teacher Role in Helping Children of Divorce

Next to parents, schools are very important to all children of divorce and can be a source of stability during the troubling times (Allers, 1981; Brown, 1980; Diamond, 1985; Salk, 1978). Gifted children tend to express this feeling more often than nongifted children (Falk, 1987).

#### Parent-teacher Cooperation

Diamond (1985) stated that parents have an obligation to make the school and the child's teachers aware of a divorce situation. She also felt that teachers and school counselors should make the child's parents aware of behavioral changes that the parents might not see. In addition, she emphasized that the development of a cooperative attitude between parents and teachers can be very important. As an example, she used the case of a young child who developed the

occasional strong fear of abandonment and how, with cooperation of the child's parents, the teacher was able to allay the child's fear by letting the child make a simple telephone call to them from school when such a problem developed.

#### Teacher as Listener and Confidant

In the classroom, teachers need to be able to recognize and acknowledge a child's feelings and be sympathetic listeners (Cantrell, 1986).

Acknowledgement of feelings and availability of someone with whom to share their concerns are most important to children during this crisis time. However, Diamond (1985) warned that acknowledgement and listening do not mean giving advice. She also suggested that advice and counseling are best handled by the school counselor and other professionals.

Some researchers have examined the importance of the teacher as a confidant. For example, Cantrell (1986) stated that confidentiality between the student and teacher is important to a child in a divorce situation. Diamond (1985) concurred, but noted that confidentiality should be limited in cases where the child expresses thoughts of doing things that might be dangerous to the child and/or others, such as committing suicide or committing violent acts toward others, or in cases where the child indicates he or she may be the victim of mental, physical, or sexual abuse. She stated that teacher discomfort with information the

child is sharing is a first sign that the teacher cannot handle the information being expressed by the child and that professional counseling is needed.

### Teacher and Changing Family Environments

An awareness of the growing number of nontraditional family environments will also be of great help to the classroom teacher. Teachers need to assume that some of their students will not be living with both natural parents (Diamond, 1985). Cantrell (1986) agreed, and added that today's teachers also should be prepared to deal with different family situations at parent conferences and open houses.

### Divorce and Underachievement

Perhaps the most important question to determine is the intellectual impact that divorce may have upon the gifted child as a student, and if a divorce situation can contribute to underachievement in school performance. As noted in other sections, divorce can have a strong impact on the gifted child which can carry over into the classroom. Behaviors and perceptions can be affected to varying degrees, based on a variety of factors ranging from age and gender to how well parents and teachers are able to help such a gifted child. In addition to these factors, research also suggests that divorce is a major factor affecting cognitive and affective school behaviors and often can negatively affect academic performance (Albert, 1971; Davis & Rimm, 1989; Falk, 1987; Rimm, 1986).

### Single-parent Family and Underachievement

A number of researchers have listed several factors of single-parent home life that have a strong bearing on school achievement by gifted children (Davis & Rimm, 1989; Diamond, 1985; Falk, 1987). Among these factors are: loss of self-confidence, being overburdened with adult responsibilities; and the absence of a parent, usually the father. Dowdall and Colangelo (1982), on the other hand, felt that the relationship of whether or not living in a single-parent home contributes to lower school achievement has yet to be determined.

#### Self-confidence

Research on high-achieving children suggests that they have strong parental support systems designed to encourage the development of self-confidence and self-sufficiency (Rimm, 1986). Rimm also noted that when such a parental system breaks down, the self-confidence and self-sufficiency of the gifted child may suffer. She added that this can be seen first in a change in school achievement.

#### Adult Responsibilities

Wallerstein (1985) stated that all children in single-parent homes may perform poorly in school because they are overburdened. He felt that single parents tend to treat their children more like adults and to give them too many responsibilities. Monks and Van Boxtel (1985) added that all children who must deal

with disruptions in parental relations with adult-like maturity are much less likely to expend their energy on school achievement. Rimm (19867) concurred and, in the case of gifted children, added that giving them too much responsibility or treating them too much like adults can impact negatively on school achievement. Her reasoning is that gifted children who are treated like adults can become less inclined to accept limits on their actions, thus resulting in behavior problems in school.

#### Absent Parent

Hetherington, Camara, and Featherman (1981), in a comprehensive study of children of divorce, found that boys were more likely to become underachievers if the father was absent from the home. Zilli (1971, in an earlier and more limited study of gifted children, also found this to be true of gifted boys. A limited, but more recent, survey of gifted students taking part in a University of Oregon summer program found that students from single-parent families demonstrated lower levels of school achievement than did those peers living in two-parent homes (Gelbrich & Hare, 1988). Their findings also showed that males appear to have been more negatively affected by living in a single-parent family.

A survey study by Helson (1971) revealed that most of the leading women scientists and mathematicians in America came from families where the father played a



strong role in their development. This might indicate a factor in the underachievement by females in science and mathematics, two academic areas in which gifted girls, in general, tend to underachieve (Rimm, 1986).

Honzik (1967) found that all children learn higher levels of verbal competency when they live in a friendly home where both parents are present and talking. Davis and Rimm (1989) agreed, noting that verbal abilities are associated with giftedness and that encouragement of self-expression in the gifted child needs to be provided by both parents when the child is still at an early age. Thus, the absence of a parent removes one important part of this support and encouragement effort a gifted child may need. Rimm (1986) also referred to this factor and added that verbal competency is a major factor in educational testing and placement of gifted children.

#### Underachievement in Retrospect

Most researchers agree that a divorce situation can impact negatively on school achievement and contribute to underachievement for the gifted child. With the negative impact of a divorce on children often lasting 2 years or longer after the divorce is finalized (Diamond, 1985), the potential of long-term underachievement is a real risk to gifted children.

Most research also indicates that coming from a single-parent family can contribute to underachievement by gifted children. The primary factors placing these

children at risk of underachievement include an absent parent, loss of self-confidence, and being pushed into adult responsibilities before attaining sufficient maturity.

## CHAPTER III

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

This review of literature sought answers to the questions:

1. What does the literature reveal about the impact of divorce on gifted children?
2. Is the impact of divorce on the gifted child different from the impact on the nongifted child?
3. What does the literature reveal about the impact of divorce on the gifted child relative to school achievement?
4. What does the literature reveal about the role that parents and teachers can play in understanding and helping the gifted child adjust to a divorce situation?

The review of literature revealed that, historically, it has been believed that gifted children are less likely to come from divorced family situations. Whether this view is valid today can not be conclusively proved. Statistics show that more and more children are now, and will be in the future, experiencing the emotional crisis of parental divorce. It can be assumed that many of these children will be gifted children.

In this review of literature, it was found that much of the research on children of divorce examined only children who admitted to having problems, often

serious problems, thus ignoring the vast majority of children who hide or deny having problems. Yet, Allers (1981) and Diamond (1985) found that all children are strongly affected by their parents' divorces, and that those who give no indication of any problems may, in fact, be experiencing the greatest difficulty with adjustment.

The review of literature revealed that there was very limited research specifically regarding gifted children and their perceptions of divorce. However, the limited findings tend to reveal that the gifted child is not immune to the emotional impact of divorce and may be affected even more than the nongifted child (Falk, 1987). It also has shown some predictable behaviors and reactions that can be observed in both gifted and nongifted children (Diamond, 1985; Rimm, 1986). It has been shown that a gifted child's age and gender, as well as how that child's parents and teachers respond to the child's needs during and after the divorce, can play a significant role in the child's family situation (Davis & Rimm, 1989).

The review of literature presented evidence that teachers and parents play a major role in how the gifted child deals with a divorce situation. For example, Falk (1987) found that school can assume an even more important role in helping the gifted child in a divorce situation than a nongifted student. The literature also has revealed the need for parents and

teachers to cooperate during the time of a divorce (Diamond, 1985).

### Conclusions

While it has not been conclusively proven, research would indicate a divorce situation and being raised in a single-parent family can impact negatively on the gifted child's school achievement. Rimm (1986) reported that many educators place such children clearly in the category of being "at risk."

This review of literature seemed to indicate that gifted and nongifted children tend to have similar behavior patterns and reactions to divorce. It also showed that gifted children have a better understanding of divorce in the abstract, as well as the ability to see beyond the current situation than can the nongifted child (Falk, 1987). However, many researchers believe that the impact of divorce may be more difficult for gifted children than for nongifted children (Davis & Rimm, 1989).

### Implications for Future Research

This author reviewed the literature to ascertain the impact of divorce on gifted children. From the review, a number of implications for future research have presented themselves:

1. More studies into the specific impact of divorce on gifted children of all ages is clearly warranted. While studies show that the gifted child tends to react similarly to the nongifted child, some

studies have indicated that they tend to react differently from the nongifted child, due to their greater understanding, abstract thinking abilities, and mental maturity.

2. Research studies concerning existing teacher preparation courses and programs designed to help increase teacher awareness and knowledge of how to deal with children in divorce situations would seem to be warranted. With the number of children in divorce situations predicted to increase annually, such research would be useful in encouraging this as an important component of teacher preparation programs. Such research could determine the best way to implement such training for new teachers, as well as inservice training for existing teachers.

3. This review of literature has been limited to the area of the intellectually gifted and has garnered few studies for examination. Further research into the impact of divorce and living in single-parent families on the creatively gifted child is warranted.

4. This review of literature found that gifted children in a divorce situation, as well as those living in a single-parent family home as a result of divorce, can be considered "at-risk." This would seem to warrant further research to determine the level of the problem, as well as further strategies that can be initiated by parents, teachers, and students themselves to offset this impediment to school achievement.

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