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**THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE
ON CHILDREN**

A Selected Literature Review

Research and Statistics Division

October 1997

WD1998-2e

UNEDITED

**Research and Statistics Division/
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de la statistique**

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*The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily
reflect those of the Department of Justice Canada.*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to provide an overview of some of the social science findings related to the effects of marital disruption¹ on children. Divorce and life in a one-parent family are becoming increasingly common experiences in the lives of parents and children. Prior to the 1960s, divorce in Canada was rare. However, following the adoption of the new *Divorce Act* in 1968, which made divorces more accessible in all provinces/territories and allowed marriage breakdown as grounds for separation, the number of divorces increased dramatically. According to Dumas and Péron (1992), between the end of the 1960s and the mid 1980s, the divorce rate increased fivefold. In 1995, the most recent year for which data are available, there were approximately 77,000 divorces granted in Canada, a rate of 262 per 100,000 people (Statistics Canada, 1997). According to a report prepared by the Bureau of Review (1990), Statistics Canada estimates that almost one-third of all Canadian marriages will end in divorce. Moreover, it is estimated that one in two divorce cases involve dependent children, illustrating that each year a substantial number of children are affected by divorce². According to the report, in the late 1980s, approximately 74,000 children became “children of divorce”³.

Starting in the early sixties, a great deal of research has been conducted on the effects of marital disruption on children and it is perhaps not surprising that the social sciences have had more impact in this area of the law than in any other. During the 50s and 60s, the dominant discourse in the literature constructed the mother as vital to the child’s well being and this was associated with legal and policy shifts that emphasized the ‘tender years doctrine’. Beginning in the late 70s and particularly since the 80s, however, a shift has occurred. The welfare of the child has become the central and determining metaphor in family law and we are witnessing an emphasis on the importance of the role of the father as an instrument of that welfare. Moreover, rights to equality between parents have been used to bolster that role. There has been an emphasis on consensual joint parenting after divorce and on agreement rather than conflict between parents. Fatherhood has achieved a new status and policy shifts seek to maintain relationships between men and children.

Through a review of the literature, this paper attempts to examine how one might best understand the concept of ‘best interests of the child’ by examining studies which attempt to tease out the effects of marital disruption on children. Although the majority of articles are from the United States, for the most part, similar results have been found in other countries and there is little reason to suspect that the experience of Canadian children would be substantially different.

¹ The term “marital disruption” is used in this paper to denote separation and/or divorce.

² This number refers only to legal divorces and does not take into account other forms of marital disruption, such as separation. Therefore, the number of children involved in marital disruption is even higher.

³ This is based on an average of 1.8 children per couple.

The first section of this paper discusses the limitations associated with research conducted in this domain. The second section examines a range of key situational and demographic factors associated with the negative impacts of marital disruption on children. These include: child characteristics (e.g., gender, age); family characteristics (e.g., socio-economic status, childrearing techniques); and, situational characteristics (e.g., the existence of conflict before and after divorce, custody arrangements, availability of support systems). The final section of this paper highlights research aimed at reducing the negative impacts of divorce and marital disruption on children.

2.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

In order to examine the effects of marital disruption on children, three different research techniques have commonly been employed: clinical assessments; comparisons of children from divorced and intact families; and, in-depth interviews with divorced families (Amato, 1987). Clinical assessments generally involve examining children of divorce who have been referred to various counselling or clinical programs. For instance, Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) examined the effect of parental divorce by interviewing parents and children referred to divorce counselling. Although clinical assessments provide a great deal of information concerning children from maritally disrupted families, they focus on extreme cases and, therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the majority of children who experience marital disruption. In addition they present an almost invariably negative picture of children's post-divorce adjustment and it is these studies which predominated in the early years of research on the effects of divorce. Comparative studies usually compare non-clinical samples of children from families experiencing marital disruption with children from intact families. These studies usually examine objective, quantifiable outcomes, such as academic achievement, emotional adjustment and self-esteem, through the use of tests or questionnaires. However, many of these measures do not allow an understanding of how separation and divorce are subjectively experienced and interpreted by parents and children. The third technique involves conducting in-depth interviews with parents and/or children from divorced families in order to elicit the experiences from their own perspective. Problems associated with this technique include potential bias or distortion of facts by those interviewed.

In addition to various research techniques, both cross-sectional and longitudinal research has also been conducted. Cross-sectional, the most commonly used approach, involves examining individuals at one point in time - for instance examining children of divorce shortly after the divorce in order to see whether they differ from intact families. Longitudinal studies, on the other hand, track a sample of individuals from a particular point in time (usually following marital disruption), with follow-up interviews at various times following the divorce. Cross-sectional studies rarely collect retrospective data, and little information is therefore available on the socio-economic history of the family, level of family conflict, parent-child relations, etc. prior to the divorce (Demo & Acock, 1988). As a result, no examination of causal directions or developmental effects is possible. For example, cross-sectional designs are not able to determine whether some characteristics of children seen as a consequence of divorce are present prior to marital dissolution (e.g., behavioural problems). Although longitudinal studies are better able to track the causes and effects of marital disruption on children and may include retrospective data, they are quite costly and time intensive and consequently are more rarely conducted .

While the literature examining the effects of divorce on children is extensive, many of the findings are inconclusive or inconsistent. One possible reason for these disparities is that different procedures have been used among studies. For example, as mentioned previously, Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) based their results on a clinical sample of children referred for divorce counselling to a local Community Mental Health Centre. Since these children may not be representative of all children experiencing divorce, the findings with respect to the problems experienced by children of divorce may not be generalizable to the broader population of

children of divorce. Healy, Malley and Stewart (1990) also suggest that observed gender differences in adjustment to divorce may reflect the overuse of clinical samples rather than genuine gender differences. They argue that the undercontrolled behaviour of boys is more readily observed and, therefore, more likely to lead to clinical referral.

In addition to procedural variations, the definition of “family structure” may lead to differing results. Many studies examine single-parent households, which may be a due to divorce, death, a parent who has never married, etc. Since it is fairly well established that children of divorce differ from children from other single-parent households (Demo & Acock, 1988; Felner, 1977; Felner, Farber, Ginter, Boike & Cowen, 1980; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989), it is necessary to avoid grouping divorced, widowed, and never-married parents. Further, it is important to distinguish between single-parent families and those where the parent has remarried (Barber & Eccles, 1992).

Studies also vary in the extent to which they control for potentially intervening factors, such as socio-economic status of families, race/ethnicity, gender and age of children, thereby making comparisons difficult. Most studies utilize caucasian, middle-class children, from urban areas, making it difficult to generalize to other groups. Krantz (1988) suggests that caution should be used in interpreting studies which do not control for factors other than marital status. She also argues that studies which group children from divorced and intact families by socio-economic status are problematic because divorced families tend to cluster at the lower end of these groups. Furthermore, studies that match divorced and non-divorced persons are rare, as are studies which use statistical controls of extraneous factors.

Another limitation of many studies concerns the validity of the measurements used. For instance, information provided by adults (e.g., teachers) about children may reflect stereotypes about what children of divorce should be like, rather than the actual behaviour of the child. Parental reports may be biased due to the personal involvement of the parent with the child. For example, a parent opposed to the divorce may only be aware of problem behaviours associated with the child. In an examination of the adjustment of children to divorce, Kurdek (1987) found that children, mothers and teachers do not provide similar information with regard to children’s divorce adjustment. Clinically observed behaviours in subjects can also be problematic because they are highly subjective and can be difficult to replicate. Even supposedly objective reports (such as police records) may be biased because police may be more likely to charge a child from a single-parent than intact home. Finally, assessment instruments that tap some objectively defined behaviour are often biased by the prevailing cultural norms and values. These values and norms change over time and at any point in time may be disputed.

In addition to these limitations, there is a need for sensitivity to cohort effects. It has been found that the results from some of the early studies differ from more recent studies (Amato & Keith, 1991a&b). It is possible that the older studies were conducted during a period when divorce and single-parenthood was seen as anomalous or socially unacceptable. Therefore, Barber and Eccles (1992) suggest that the results of these older studies may be time-bound experiences which are no longer prevalent today. Amato and Keith in two meta-analyses, one of

children (1991b) and one of adults (1991a), conclude that the more sophisticated and recent the study, the more tenuous the connection between parental divorce and well-being of the child. This indicates that if the various interacting effects are taken into account, many of the effects vanish.

Due to these limitations, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions based on the literature. However, in recent years, an attempt has been made to control for many of these limitations. For example, most recent studies attempt to control for intervening variables such as age and gender of child, socio-economic status and conflict. Krantz (1988) argues that although there are serious limitations with some of the studies, the information need not be rejected if conclusions are made cautiously and with full recognition of their limitations. Further, she argues that biases in the available information are unlikely to distort the conclusions if the data are repeatedly replicated and biased in different directions.

3.0 FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN'S POSTDIVORCE ADJUSTMENT

Although the research suggests that children of divorce may experience a variety of problems ranging from psychological disturbances to diminished social relationships, the type, severity and persistence of these problems may be mediated (or moderated) by a number of factors. Some of the factors researchers have identified include: child characteristics, such as gender and age at the time of divorce; family characteristics, such as socio-economic status of the custodial household, race, and childrearing skills; and, situational characteristics, such as parental absence, length of time since marital dissolution, conflict, support systems, divorce proceedings, custody arrangements, remarriage, and environmental changes. These factors are discussed below.

3.1 Child Characteristics

3.1.1 Gender

The findings on gender differences in children's responses to divorce have been contradictory. Some research points to more adjustment problems for boys in divorcing families than for girls (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Hetherington *et al.*, 1979, 1985; Kaye, 1989; Kurdek, 1987); other research finds more negative effects for girls (Farber *et al.*, 1983; Frost & Pakiz, 1990; Slater, Stewart & Linn, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975); and some research has found no differences in the effects of divorce on boys and girls (Kinard & Reinherz, 1984; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Rosen, 1979; Zill *et al.*, 1993).

Immediately following divorce, Kaye (1989) found that both boys and girls showed poorer performance on achievement tests compared to children from intact families. However, by the fifth year following divorce, boys' grades and achievement tests were adversely affected, while girls' were not. Similarly, Hetherington *et al.* (1979) found that, immediately following the divorce, boys and girls experienced some disruption in play situations, however, the effects appeared to be more sustained in boys. Wallerstein (1985a), in a ten-year follow-up of children who were pre-schoolers at the time of divorce found that although there were no initial sex differences in the effects of divorce. Eighteen months following the divorce, many of the girls appeared recovered, but boys were significantly more troubled at school, in the playground and at home. Five years after the divorce, these sex differences had again disappeared. Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) found that boys in divorced households exhibited more adverse effects than girls, in terms of inappropriate behaviour, work effort, and happiness. Girls with divorced parents, on the other hand, scored higher in locus of control than their counterparts.

Other studies have found more detrimental effects for girls than boys. Slater *et al.* (1983) found that adolescent girls from disrupted homes had lower self-esteem and more behaviour problems than adolescent boys in similar homelife situations. Furthermore, while female adolescents from disrupted homes reported higher levels of family conflict than females from intact families, the opposite was true for males. Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) found that, one year following divorce, 63 percent of the girls were in worse psychological condition compared to 27 percent of the boys. Frost and Pakiz (1990) found that girls from recently disrupted households reported truancy in higher proportions than their male counterparts and than children from intact families. They were also significantly more dissatisfied with their social network than girls from intact families.

Finally, some studies have found no differences on various effects of divorce between girls and boys (Kinard & Reinherz, 1984; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Rosen, 1979). Frost and Pakiz (1990) found no gender differences for self-reported antisocial behaviour among adolescents from divorced families, although they found gender differences in other areas (such as truancy and social networks).

There have been fewer studies examining differences among adult children of divorce. In a study by Farber *et al.* (1983), clinical directors of college mental health counselling centres said that female adolescents had more difficulty than males in adapting to divorce. However, in a review of the literature, Amato (in press) found minimal sex differences, although women from divorced families appear to attain lower levels of education than those from intact families. In a meta-analysis of 37 studies which examined the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult well-being, Amato and Keith (1991a) found no support for the contention that parental divorce has more detrimental consequences for males than females. Finally, in a longitudinal study, Zill *et al.* (1993) found no evidence to support the hypothesis that young adult males were more likely than girls to be vulnerable to the effects of marital disruption.

A possible reason for the contradictory findings related to gender could be that boys and girls may be affected by divorce in different ways. For instance, Kalter (1987) suggests that disruptions in the father-son relationship are linked to a multitude of development interferences in boys. For girls, on the other hand, the emotional loss of father is seen as rejection. Similarly, Healy *et al.* (1990) argue that boys and girls show sex-role-typical patterns of distress when they see their fathers more often and more regularly - high self-esteem and more behaviour problems for boys, and low self-esteem and fewer behaviour problems for girls. Amato (in press) suggests that the negative effects on social adjustment may be stronger for boys than girls, but in other areas there are no major differences. Other research suggests that girls may be more affected psychologically (e.g., depression) (Peterson & Zill, 1986). Also, it is possible that behaviour problems commonly seen in boys are the more readily observed behaviours than the types of problems that girls have (self-esteem).

Another possible reason for the differing results among studies could be that boys and girls are affected by different aspects of the divorce process. For instance, although Hetherington

et al. (1985) found that divorce had more adverse, long-term effects on boys than girls, they found that girls had more adverse effects as a result of remarriage of the custodial mother.

Finally, the heightened divorce adjustment problems for boys found in some research may be less related to gender per se than to characteristics of the postdivorce household arrangements. For instance, Peterson and Zill (1986) found that children living with parents of the opposite sex were especially prone to problem behaviours. However, other studies (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1992; Rosen, 1979) have found no significant differences between sex of custodial parent and child's adjustment. It has also been argued that the differential impact of divorce on children may be linked to parenting styles - particularly with regard to the issue of discipline. Heath and MacKinnon (1988) found that mothers use different amounts of control for sons than daughters. The use of relaxed control by mothers on boys was a high predictor of the child's competent social behaviour. Further, custodial fathers and mothers have been found to differ in their parenting style, with fathers much less likely to become involved in coercive exchanges with boys than mothers (Grych & Fincham, 1992). The very small number of father custody families and the very selective nature of this arrangement compared to mother custody families means that these studies must be interpreted with a great deal of caution. Grych and Fincham suggest that the question of whether boys or girls are more adversely affected by divorce is quite complex, and the answer is likely to depend on a host of factors such as the sex of the custodial parent, their parenting style, whether they have remarried, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the amount of contact with the noncustodial parent.

3.1.2 Age at Divorce

Many studies point to the relevance of age at the time of separation for children's divorce adjustment. Although early findings suggested that separation from a parent at an early age had more negative effects for children than for older youth, this factor has proven to be more complex than was initially believed. In a ten-year follow-up of pre-school children from divorced families, Wallerstein found the initial response to divorce to be worse for younger children, but in later years they appeared better adjusted than their older counterparts (Wallerstein, 1984). She concluded that those who are very young at marital breakup may be less burdened in the years to come than those who are older. Similarly, Amato (1987) found that the majority of children who were very young at the time of divorce reported that they were not strongly affected by the break-up.

The current thinking appears to be that children at every age are affected by divorce, but in differing ways. For example, Krantz (1988) suggests that early separations may be associated with deficits in social and emotional functioning, but not in intellectual functioning. From an examination of numerous studies, Demo and Acock (1988) argue that young children encounter problems with personal adjustment and peer relations, while adolescents encounter problems with sexual relations and antisocial behaviour. Similarly, Zill *et al.* (1993) found that youth who experienced a family disruption prior to 6 years of age showed poorer relationships with their fathers than those who experienced disruption later in childhood. Landerkin and Clarke (1990)

describe how children's level of development affects their reactions to divorce, although they acknowledge that there may be overlap. The primary reaction among infants may be regression in developmental attainments (e.g., sleeping, eating, language, independence). For pre-schoolers, difficulties may appear in social relationships and separation anxiety. School age children may react with sadness, somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach-aches) and intense anger towards parents. Adolescents may encounter problems establishing an adult identity, demonstrate anger towards self or others, and experience somatic complaints. Finally, Kalter and Rembar (1981) found marital dissolution which occurred very early in a child's life (2½ years of age or less) was associated with separation-related difficulties; separation during the oedipal phase (2½-6) caused the greatest effects overall on children; and, for those 6 years of age or older, the results were inconsistent.

3.2 Family Characteristics

3.2.1 Socio-economic Status

Often one of the first impacts that divorce has on a child is a dramatic decline in the standard of living in the custodial household (Bean, Berg & VanHook, 1995; Duncan, 1994; Ross, 1995). Krantz (1988) suggests that children belonging to lower socio-economic groups after divorce experience greater hardships. Do these hardships, however, translate into adjustment problems? Some researchers argue that this decline in socio-economic status is directly linked to a variety of problems experienced by the child, such as psychological maladjustment and behavioural difficulties in school. For instance, Nelson (1990) found that family income, rather than marital status, was associated with mothers' life strains and children's self-esteem. In addition, Kalter, Kloner, Schreier and Okla (1989) found a negative relation between socio-economic status and children's adjustment in postdivorce households. However, they suggest that economic deprivation, along with a number of other factors (e.g., inter-parental hostilities, burden of single parenting) take their toll on custodial mothers, which results in poorer adjustment among children.

With a sample of children entering kindergarten, Guidubaldi and Perry (1984) attempted to examine the relation between single-parent status and children's development, controlling for socio-economic status. They found an association between socio-economic status of parents and intellectual, academic and personal-social development of children. However, even when socio-economic status was controlled, children from divorced families entered school with significantly less social and academic competence than those from intact families. This indicates that single-parent status may predict poor academic and social competence in addition to, and independent of, socio-economic status. They argue that socio-economic status has a generalized association with both intellectual and non-intellectual measures, while single-parent status is associated with only non-intellectual variables.

3.2.2 Ethno-cultural Background

Very little research has examined ethno-cultural⁴ differences among children of divorce. Although there appear to be vast perceptual differences towards kinship, marriage, and divorce cross-culturally, the majority of studies continue to concentrate on Caucasian, and for the most part middle-class, respondents. The results are then interpreted as an indication of the effects of divorce on all children.

However, some research has addressed how various ethno-cultural groups may respond differently to divorce. For instance, in their 1995 study Durndell, Cameron, Knox and Haag (1995) noted radical differences in attitudes towards divorce between native citizens of Rumania and Scotland. Similarly, Tien (1986) noted differences in attitudes towards divorce among Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, and Anglo-Americans.

Some studies have found Hispanic groups to be more affected by family conflict than non-Hispanic whites, while Asians were more affected by a recent divorce (Bean, 1995; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Wong 1995). As part of a national survey which examined the relation between adult depression and childhood separation from a parent (due to death, divorce, out of wedlock, etc.), Amato (1991) found that, although white and African American adults who experienced parental absence scored higher on depression than those raised in intact families, these differences, did not appear for Hispanics. He hypothesized that Hispanics may not experience the same negative effects of parental absence because they receive necessary support from their extended families.

Amato (1991) also found that a great deal of the impact of parental absence was mediated by lowered educational attainment and current marital status for whites and African American females, although not for African American males. Furthermore, in a meta-analysis of 37 studies of adults, Amato and Keith (1991a) found that white adults were affected more negatively by parental divorce than African Americans. Lawson and Thompson (1994, 1996) note that African American males are more likely to turn to family and friends, as well as church and other social activities as coping mechanisms following divorce. Each of these studies hypothesized that this was the case because divorce may only marginally lower the quality of life for African Americans, due to the disadvantages they already have.

Following a review of the research, Amato (in press) concludes that there is too little information to reach any conclusions regarding race/ethnicity for children. For adults, he concludes that African Americans appear to be affected less by parental divorce than whites.

3.2.3 Childrearing

⁴ The term "ethno-cultural" is used in reference to one's race or ethnic background, as well as their learned, socially acquired life-styles and traditions (i.e., social customs, morals, beliefs, etc.).

The issue of childrearing can encompass a number of aspects, including the effects of employment by the custodial parent on the child, childrearing skills, and adjustment to the divorce by the custodial parent.

The issue of whether employment by the custodial parent has negative effects on children has not been examined in depth. Although it has been suggested that there may be negative effects on the child due to the sole-custody parent (usually the mother) working, a study conducted by Kinard and Reinherz (1984) did not substantiate this claim. Rather, they found that any negative consequences for children of divorce stem from having unemployed rather than employed mothers. However, other researchers have argued that a change in the employment-status of the custodial parent may affect the child. For instance, Mednick, Baker, Reznick and Hocevar (1990) found that instability in maternal employment was associated with negative effects on children.

In a review of the literature, Grych and Fincham (1992) found that parenting styles and discipline practices are linked to the development of behaviour problems in children. This is often the case because, after divorce, parenting is disrupted and discipline frequently becomes inconsistent, both within and between parents. Heath and MacKinnon (1988) argue that childrearing factors are important predictors of children's social competence in single-parent households. They found that parental acceptance of children was positively related to children's social competence, while psychological control was negatively related. Further, although they found that social competence related to firm control for males, but moderate control for females, the results indicated that mothers tended to use more lax control for sons than daughters. They suggest that this may provide an explanation for findings which show boys to be worse off than girls in divorces. Heath and MacKinnon found that mother's unwillingness to exercise firm control over their sons to be a more important determinant of the child's social competence than father absence. However, Buchanan *et al.* (1992) found that children living with their fathers had poorer adjustment as a result of poorer monitoring.

The psychological adjustment of the custodial parent after divorce is emerging as a central factor in determining children's post-divorce adjustment (Cohen, 1995; Kelly, 1993), although the role of maternal adjustment after divorce has been more often examined than the impact of paternal adjustment on children and no studies have looked at the relative contribution of maternal versus paternal adjustment on children. Nor have there been any studies examining the effect and interaction between both parents' adjustment, conflict, time with both parents, and residence. Weiss (1979) notes that single parents tend to face the following problems which make effective parenting difficult: they often lack adequate support systems; they may feel overburdened by the demands and responsibilities of making all of the daily household decisions alone; they frequently face task overload; and, they may experience emotional overload because of the need to cope with both their own emotional reactions and those of the children. Therefore, it may be particularly difficult for them to discipline consistently and be responsive to their children's needs. The better the custodial parent adapts to the adversity of the divorce, the more effective he/she can be at providing care, guidance, and support for the children and the more positively adjusted they will be (Kalter *et al.*, 1989). For instance, Nelson (1990) found

children's self-esteem to be directly related to their mother's life strains. Further, Mednick *et al.* (1990) found that lower adolescent academic proficiency was related to mother's adjustment following the divorce. They suggest that the mother's adaptation to her own personal situation may have a positive influence on the long-term adaptation of her children. Kelly and Wallerstein (1977) suggest that parents should identify the aspects of their behaviour which produce stress on the child and change them to help reduce the negative effects of divorce. Whatever the initial reaction post-divorce, it is important to note that the psychological functioning of parents after separation and divorce improves significantly over time in both men and women (Kelly, 1990).

3.3 Situational Characteristics

3.3.1 Parental Absence/Remarriage

Until recently, a common assumption in the divorce literature was that both parents living in the same household as the child would be a better environment for children's development than a single-parent family. According to this view, the absence of one parent from the household is problematic for children's socialization. Although there is some support for this view, it does not appear to be the only factor involved in children's well-being following divorce.

It has been found that, following divorce, many children experience a decrease in the quantity and quality of contact with the noncustodial parent (Amato, 1987; Schlesinger, 1982). Stolba and Amato (1993), however, argue that adolescents' well-being is not solely associated with the loss of the noncustodial parent. Instead, they conclude that alternative family forms can be suitable for raising adolescents, if they provide support, control and supervision. However, they suggest that extended single-parent households may be less beneficial for younger children.

There are conflicting views as to whether or not remarriage of the custodial parent is beneficial for the children. Researchers who emphasise the importance of economics or parent absence argue that the remarriage of the custodial parent should be beneficial for the children because it normally increases the family income and provides more parental supervision and support for the children. On the other hand, it has been argued that the entrance of a new, and possibly unwelcome, adult into the family can be a source of stress and rivalry for the children (Hetherington & Camara, 1988). Simons (1980) suggests that children may become resentful of the time they lose with the custodial parent as a result of the new partner. Furthermore, dating and remarriage may destroy children's belief that their parents will remarry. Finally, remarriage is often confusing for children because they must learn to adapt and accept yet another new family structure. It is interesting to note, however, that children living with stepfathers are much more likely to say that their stepfather is a member of their family than they are to include their non-residential biological father as a family member (Furstenber & Nord, 1985 cited in Seltzer, 1994).

Although the financial advantages that step-children enjoy over those in single-parent families are evident, research to date has failed to show a beneficial effect of remarriage on children's achievement or behaviour. In a national longitudinal study of children (aged 12-16), Peterson and Zill (1986) found more behaviour problems among girls living with a remarried mother, as compared to boys. In a follow-up study with these children at ages 18-22, Zill *et al.* (1993) concluded that remarriage didn't have a protective effect on children. Hetherington and her colleagues (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington *et al.*, 1985) found remarriage to be associated with more negative effects. For instance, remarriage of the custodial mother had more adverse effects on girls than boys, while the divorce itself had more adverse, long-term effects on boys. Over time, though, children adjust to remarriage and then there is an improvement (Hetherington, 1993; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Zill *et al.*, 1993).

3.3.2 Time Since Marital Disruption

A number of researchers have argued that, although there are often negative effects on children immediately following the divorce, children adjust to divorce over time. For instance, Amato (1987) found that the length of time since marital disruption was related to children's well-being. That is, when interviewed years after the divorce, most children said that they had accepted the situation and had adjusted reasonably well to the divorce. Further, Walsh and Stolberg (1989) found that the amount of time that had passed since the separation was significantly correlated with child adjustment (i.e., beliefs about divorce, parent-reported behavioural adjustment, child-reported emotional labelling). They found that inter-spousal hostility was associated with increased child-reported anger for recent separations, but with lower anger for distant separations. In addition, they found that for recent separations, high levels of "bad" events were associated with fewer misconceptions about divorce; no relation at mid-length; but, more misconceptions for distant separations.

3.3.3 Conflict

The impact of parental conflict on children's post-divorce adjustment has received considerable attention in the literature. Most theorists agree that parental conflict, at the very least, provides some negative influences for children's adjustment to the divorce. For instance, it has been found that conflict can affect children's self-esteem, ability to adjust and cope, social competence and behaviour (see Grych & Fincham, 1992 for a review of the literature).

Johnston *et al.* (1985) conducted an in-depth examination of the nature of parental disputes with 39 families who were disputing custody or access arrangements. It should be noted that this sample is biased in that their rate of verbal and physical aggression is considerably higher than that of a normal divorcing sample. However, it provides us with an indication of the devastating effects conflict can have on children. According to these parents, children witness a great deal of verbally and physically abusive incidents, but much less of the verbal reasoning attached to such incidents. It was found that the parents involve children in conflicts as

bystanders, passive weapons, communication channels, or as active participants to collect evidence, spy, or communicate threats and insults. Only 5 percent of the parents reported that they protected their children consistently from arguments or the behaviour following an argument (i.e., depression). Children's reactions to these conflicts differed depending on age. Younger children had predominantly submissive distress responses and were more likely to try to control the fight than older children. Two-thirds of all the children tried to avoid the dispute and one-quarter showed aggressive distress responses. Again, it should be noted that these children appear more distressed and more likely to become angry than children from non-disputing families, but both groups attempt to control, ignore and avoid the dispute. According to Johnston *et al.*, children's emotional and behavioural problems can be predicted by the amount of involvement the child has in disputes, the degree of role reversal with parents, the amount of disagreement between parents, and the duration of the dispute over the child.

There are some studies that go a step further, demonstrating that conflict, rather than divorce per se, is the major determinant of children's adjustment. For instance, Bishop and Ingersoll (1989) found that marital conflict had a greater impact on adolescents' self-concept than family structure. Similarly, Mechanic and Hansell (1989) found that family conflict had more direct effects on long-term changes in well-being (i.e., depression, anxiety, physical symptoms, self-esteem) than divorce, current separation from parents, or parental death. Furthermore, they found that adolescents in intact families with high levels of conflict had poorer well-being than those experiencing divorce with low levels of conflict. A recent survey of 9,816 secondary school students in the Netherlands indicates that the level of well being of children living in single mother families is higher than that of students living in two parent families with much parental conflict, the well being of children living in single mother families with no parental conflict and with a great deal of contact with the departed father is lower than that of children living in two parent families without parental conflict and finally, the degree of parental conflict after divorce is more important for the well being of the children than the degree of contact with the departed father (Dronkers, 1996).

Using data from the United States National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, Jekielek (1996) found that both parental conflict and marital disruption were associated with decreases in the children's well being but children who remain in the high conflict environments do worse than children who experienced high conflict but whose parents had divorced at least two years previously. The results suggest that parental divorce following high conflict may actually improve the well being of children relative to a high conflict status. Using a 12 year longitudinal study, Amato, Loomis & Booth (1995) also found that the consequences of parental divorce depend on the degree of parental conflict prior to divorce. In high conflict families, children had higher levels of well being as young adults if their parents divorced than if they stayed together. In low conflict families, however, children had higher levels of well being if their parents stayed together than if they divorced. In marriages that did not end in divorce, parental conflict was negatively associated with the well being of the children.

On the other hand, some researcher have argued that while conflict is an important factor the relationship between conflict and children's post-divorce adjustment is neither universal,

simple nor straightforward. For instance, Cockett and Tripp (1994) found that, although marital conflict was associated with poor outcomes for children (in terms of health, behaviour, school, friendship, and self-esteem), family reorganisation appeared to be the main adverse factor. Further, Buehler and Trotter (1990) found co-parental competition to be related more strongly to children's social competence than conflict or co-operation. Although Hess and Camara (1979) found parental harmony to be a better predictor of child behaviour than family status, they also found that the parent-child relationship appeared to be the most powerful influence on the child's social and school adjustment, stronger than parental harmony. Kelly (1993) argues that the effects of conflict are indirect - they are either mediated through other behaviours of the parents or dependent on the strategies used to resolve conflict, or related to the extent to which parents expressed their conflicts directly with and through the children. In both married and divorced families, children were less aggressive and had less behavioural problems when parents had higher co-operation scores as opposed to when they used negative, attacking dispute resolution styles (Camara and Resnick, 19989). Furthermore, some researchers (e.g., Cohen, 1995; Heath & MacKinnon, 1988; Hoffman, 1995) have found parental co-operation to be highly correlated with the child-father relationship and predictive of child's social competence, indicating the importance of co-operative family interactions following divorce.

Kelly (1993) states that children can escape the negative consequences of parental conflict when they are not caught in it by their parents, when their parents avoid direct, aggressive expressions of their conflict in front of them or when they use compromise styles of conflict resolution. Buchanan *et al.* (1991) found that with adolescents who were living part of the time with each parent, the effects of discord between parents is stronger and they tended to feel caught in the middle. Children who were involved in their parents disagreements and who felt they had to manage their parents relationship to make things run smoothly were the most likely to feel depressed and exhibit deviant behaviour (Buchanan, 1991). Therefore, conflict per se is not necessarily the best predictor of adjustment and should perhaps not be used by itself as a sole determinant making decisions about custody and access. Another major difficulty with using conflict as a determinant in custody and access decisions is that conflict almost invariably diminishes over time (Kelly, 1990; Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 1990) and couples can move in and out of conflict both before and after separation and divorce (Neale & Smart, 1997).

In an examination of a number of common hypotheses relating to the effects of divorce on children, Kalter *et al.* (1989) found no support for the inter-parental hostility hypothesis. Instead, they suggest that when a number of stressors (i.e., economic deprivation, inter-parental hostilities, and the burden of single parenting) take their toll on custodial mothers, children fare less well. However, when parents are psychologically able to provide a loving relationship, children will be buffered from the stresses divorce can engender and will prosper developmentally (Cohen, 1995).

3.3.4 Spousal Violence⁵

Perhaps more than any other piece of work, Statistics Canada's ground-breaking Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) made it clear that in Canada violence against women in the family context is far from rare. Twenty nine percent of all women who had ever been married or had lived with a man in a common law relationship had experienced at least one episode of violence by a husband or a live-in partner (Johnson, 1996). Furthermore almost half (48 percent) of women who had been previously married or had lived in a common-law relationship in the past had been assaulted or threatened in some way by previous partners. Relationships with violence are therefore more likely to end than peaceable ones and in some cases, the woman's decision to terminate the relationship results in a violent response from her partner. As well, risk of deadly violence was substantially higher for separated couples than for married couples who were living together: between 1974 and 1992, rates of wife killings were six times higher for separated wives than for those still living with the accused at the time of the killing (Wilson & Daly, 1994). Many men increase the level of battering against their wives when the women take steps to leave (Johnson, 1996). Separating couples are therefore particularly at risk. Moreover, the VAWS showed that in 39 percent of marital relationships with violence, victims said their children had been witnesses and that when the children were exposed to assaults on their mothers, in 61 percent of cases the women suffered physical injuries and in 52 percent of cases the violence was so severe that the victim feared for her life. It is clear that any treatment of the issues surrounding divorce, custody and access is incomplete without an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. Failure to take these cases into account can only increase the emotional trauma of those involved or worse, increase their physical danger.

Research has shown that not only is violence in families pervasive but that both the children who are victims of violence and those that witness violence that occurs between their parents suffer a great deal and are themselves at risk of using violence as adults (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; O'Keefe, 1995; Pagelow, 1993; Saunders, 1994; Johnson, 1996). It would be impossible to do justice here to the numerous findings on the effects of spousal violence on children but it can be safely stated that the effects are devastating and vary according to the child's age, sex, stage of development and role in the family. For example, infants suffer from having their basic needs for attachment to their mother disrupted or from having the normal routines around sleeping and feeding disrupted, and may also be injured in violent episodes. Older children come to see violence as an appropriate way of dealing with conflict in human relationships, which in turn affects their adjustment at school and with their peers. These children can suffer from serious emotional difficulties, living in shame, their sense of self undermined and with little confidence in the future. They are anxious, living in fear and waiting for the next violent episode to occur. Adolescents can react either by running away or becoming involved in delinquent behaviour or by trying to take on the responsibility for keeping the peace and ensuring the safety of their family. The sad irony for these children is that the very people on

⁵ We will focus here on violence against women, fully recognising that women can be violent toward their husbands. However, the weight of statistical data shows that the overwhelming majority (90% in most studies) of victims are women, that the dynamics of spousal violence affect women in unique ways and can have devastating consequences for large numbers of women.

whom they depend for safety and nurturance can offer them neither (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

The impact of these findings must be acknowledged in discussions surrounding custody and access. The sheer prevalence of the problem of violence and the dynamics surrounding it make it clear any assumptions about equal partnership in these cases are out of the question. On the one hand, the majority of women never report the assaults or in fact ever tell anyone about it (Johnson, 1996) and thus may not be believed if the first time the issue is raised is at the point of separation. Victims of violence may avoid going to court out of fear of retaliation, a fear which is not unfounded given the data on the escalation of violence at separation. Women may agree to whatever the husband wants in an attempt to pacify him and in the process may give up property or other economic entitlements in what they see as an exchange for custody. If the effects of violence are not acknowledged women may appear unstable or emotional while their batterers are perceived as confident, rational and economically secure (Rosnes, 1997). Moreover, it is important to link the negative impact of wife abuse on children to the **abuser** to avoid judging the mother as unfit by virtue of being a victim of spouse assault. Indeed, virtually all the research flies in the face of what Rosnes argues is presently happening in the courts: "...judges assume that wife abuse is not necessarily damaging to a child, and that being violent does not necessarily affect a father's parenting ability.... Similarly, research showing how battered women give up legal rights, and how women and children are at risk during unsupervised access visits and transfer is also upheld." (Rosnes, 1997 at 33).

3.3.5 Support Systems

Support systems can help alleviate some of the negative effects associated with divorce. This support can be provided by parents, extended family members, peers, teachers, etc. Kelly and Wallerstein (1977) have suggested that both intra-familial and extra-familial support networks take on a special significance during times of crisis for children, especially when the crisis involves the disruption of the family structure. While older children generally have relationships with peers on whom they can rely for support, this option is often not available for younger children. Younger children are often totally dependent on their parents for support during the divorce process. Alternatively, they may come to rely on extended family members who can help them cope with divorce-induced stress and provide a needed sense of continuity and stability. Grandparents and other kin can step in to alleviate the emotional strain and disruption of divorce on children. These other adults can step in and provide social support which alleviates the residential parent's burden and can help improve the quality of the interactions with the children. A stepfather can also enhance the children's well being by reducing the stress and insecurity the mother has to live with (Seltzer, 1994). This outside support is particularly crucial, because it has been found that parental support may decrease during this period of crisis, as adults attempt to cope with their own divorce-related stresses (Jacobson, 1978; Wallerstein, 1980). Perhaps not surprisingly, though, children's contact with non-residential fathers declines when the mother remarries, which in turn may threaten the

children's well-being, as the stress of adapting to a new presence in the family is combined with the loss of ties with their father (Seltzer, 1994).

A great deal of research has concluded that parental support, particularly the parent-child relationship, is very important in the adjustment of children following divorce. In fact, Hess and Camara (1979) found it to be a more powerful influence on children's social and school adjustment than parental harmony. While some studies have found that only a very good relationship with the mother has any mitigating effect (Hetherington *et al.*, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975), others, such as Hess and Camara (1979), have found that the child's relationship with the non-custodial father is of equal importance. Further, Hess and Camara argue that a positive parent-child relationship, even with only one parent, has been found to greatly mitigate the negative effects of divorce.

Other research has indicated that support other than that provided by parents may be sufficient for children's positive adjustment. Stolba and Amato (1993) found that alternative family forms can be suitable for raising adolescents, if they provide support, control and supervision. However, they also found that, for younger children, extended single-parent households may be less beneficial. Further, Heath and MacKinnon (1988) found that mothers' use of support systems predicted daughters' perceptions of social competence, but not sons'. They concluded that, while the use of outside support systems may be desirable, for children's well-being, it is equally desirable for the mother to be self-reliant.

While sibling support has been identified as an important buffer against the stresses of divorce (Neugebauer, 1989), other research findings offer qualified support for this observation. Kelly and Wallerstein (1977), for example, found that interactions between siblings had the potential for becoming negative, serving to increase a child's feelings of alienation, injustice and anger. On the other hand, sole children who faced marital disruption, were found to exhibit higher levels of stress and alienation.

3.3.6 Divorce Proceedings

The divorce process in Canada can be a very long and drawn out process. Lawyers in divorce proceedings are litigating in the best interests of their clients - the parents. However, children like their parents, often suffer the stress associated with lengthy battles over financial and custodial issues. But, often the custody arrangements granted are what is best or more suitable for the parents, and do not take into account children's wishes or needs (Wallerstein, 1985b).

In addition to the effects of the divorce decision, the divorce process itself may have a negative impact upon the adjustment of children. For instance, Saayman and Saayman (1989) argue that the adversarial nature of the legal system has a negative impact upon the psychological adjustment of children of divorce. They found that, following the divorce proceedings, a significant proportion of those examined were identified as neurotic or antisocial. This effect

was produced regardless of the approach or demeanour of the legal professionals involved. Therefore, they argue for the establishment of divorce mediation. It has also been found that behavioural problems in children are associated with the duration and animosity of their parents' legal battles (Healy *et al.*, 1990; Saayman & Saayman, 1989). Proponents of mediation argue that it can encourage co-operation and lead to better outcomes for children who might otherwise be exposed to lengthy court battles (Dillon & Emery, 1996). Further, an increase in satisfaction with the dispute resolution process may increase subsequent compliance with the agreements (Kelly, 1991; Kelly & Duryee, 1992).

Margulies and Luchow (1992) suggest that mediation is more appropriate than lawyer-litigated and negotiated divorce for those couples who would eventually resolve their divorce through a negotiated settlement. They contend that mediation is designed to promote adaptive behaviour rather than maladaptive struggle, is generally faster, and is less expensive. Saayman and Saayman (1989) also recommend replacing the adversarial process with divorce mediation, through family courts. They claim that mediators can assist in early identification and mediation for those children who are most at risk. In addition, they contend that mediators have the necessary skills for negotiation and making assessments, which lawyers do not.

In a follow-up of clients who had had been involved in divorce mediation, Duryee (1991) found a strong preference for mediation over litigation. Furthermore, counter to the contention that mediation causes power imbalances against women, this study found that women's responses were significantly more favourable towards mediation than men's. In response to the argument that mediators impose their own values, there was no evidence that clients felt imposed upon by the mediator's values. Overall, the clients stated that they appreciated the opportunity to express their own views and to focus on important issues. However, they were more equivocal about the nature of the agreements reached and expressed distrust in their spouse to live up to the agreement. No relation was found between client satisfaction and whether the counsellor made a recommendation to court.

Thus, while there some evidence to suggest high rates of consumer satisfaction among parents using mediation, the findings comparing litigation to mediation in terms of such factors as relitigation and compliance with the post-divorce arrangements remain inconclusive owing largely to the differences that exist in the various mediation programmes and the clientele they serve (Dillon & Emery, 1996).

The development of "parenting plans" is another option to the traditional legal process. A parenting plan is a document which is prepared by both parents, setting out various criteria for decision making, residential time, access and dispute resolution. The objective of the plan is to encourage discussion and agreement between the parents, rather than having a decision imposed by the court. It is hoped, in this way, that the agreements will be adhered to better. The *Washington State Parenting Act*, passed in 1987, is an example of an Act which incorporates parenting plans. Ellis (1990) conducted interviews with attorneys and judges, examined case records, and observed court proceedings in an attempt to examine the usefulness of this Act. She found that the Act increased the amount of shared decision making and residential time and

attempted to incorporate limitations in cases of abuse. However, she also found that most parenting plans contained a limited number of formulas for decision making, residential time and dispute resolution. In addition, there was no direct evidence that parenting plans helped parents focus on the child's needs, or prevented conflict. There was no information on the long-term effects of this Act.

Although the introduction of parenting plans and/or mediation services appear to be viable alternatives to litigation in matters of custody and access, there is relatively little known about the effectiveness of these options. Therefore, a great deal more research into various alternatives is necessary. For instance, since there are many different types of mediation services, it is necessary to examine the results of various types of mediation compared to litigation. In addition, there are a number of issues surrounding mediation which need to be addressed (e.g., mediation and power imbalances between women and men).

3.3.7 Custody and Access Arrangements

The impact of custody and access arrangements on the children of separating couples has been the subject of much debate but perhaps not enough systematic study. For discussion purposes here, it might be useful to distinguish six types of custody arrangements: exclusive custody (one custodial parent and no access by non-custodial parent); sole custody (one custodial parent with access by non-custodial parent); joint legal custody (shared responsibility in decision making about aspects of child's life); joint physical custody (shared responsibility in daily care and childrearing); and, split custody (siblings are split between parents).

Major policy changes in the area of family law have promoted changes in the structure of post-divorce families in several jurisdictions, most notably the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Increasingly, we are witnessing an emphasis on agreement rather than conflict between parents and attempts to maximise or maintain relationships between fathers and their children. Mothers have traditionally been given custody of the children in the majority of cases, and fathers were allowed visitation but there is some evidence that shifts are occurring. Little (1991) found that joint legal custody was more common than sole legal custody in Los Angeles. However, sole maternal physical custody remained the most frequent award, with joint physical custody infrequently awarded (less than one family in six). Moreover, maternal custody arrangements appear to be more stable than other arrangements: children who live with their mother after divorce are more likely to remain in this arrangement during the first three to four years after separation, while over half of the children who start out by spending time in each parent's household or who start out living with their father make at least one change (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In Canada, the data show that since 1978, the percentage of cases in which mothers get custody has gone from 79 percent to 73 percent. The percentage of cases in which fathers get custody has hovered around 15 percent, while the proportion of cases in which joint custody is awarded has increased significantly from 1 percent in 1986 to 14 percent in 1990 (Statistics Canada, 1993).

Kelly (1993) reports that in California joint legal custody was not found to be significantly linked with higher levels of father involvement in decision making or time with children, nor did it result in greater compliance with child support after controlling for income. There was a slight decrease in discord of the joint legal custody group by final divorce but no corresponding increase in co-operative communication. However, Bahr *et al.* (1994) cite United States census data suggesting that fathers who had either joint custody or visitation privileges had a greater likelihood of paying child support. In terms of patterns in custody arrangements, Bahr's study found that joint legal custody was adopted in 21 percent of cases; mothers continued to receive sole custody in the majority of cases (70 percent); father's with sole custody were a small minority (6 percent); and, split custody occurred in about 5 percent of cases. Interestingly, these patterns did not change significantly from 1970 to 1993.

Whatever the custody and access arrangement, the overwhelming pattern has been for most divorced fathers to stop seeing their children, and for those who maintain contact to reduce the frequency of their visits. According to Seltzer (1991) about one in five divorced fathers has not seen his children in the past year, and less than one out of every two fathers sees his children more than several times a year. In addition, the longer divorced fathers and their children live apart, the less contact they have with each other. Non-residential mothers appear to be more likely than non-residential fathers to maintain contact with the children, but among families in which the non-residential parent has at least some contact, mothers and fathers are equally likely to see the children weekly or more frequently. Some fathers do maintain a presence in their children's lives after divorce: nearly 25 percent of non-residential fathers see their children at least weekly and more than a third who see their children also spend extended periods of time with them in visits that last longer than a weekend (Seltzer, 1993). Fathers who see their children also are more likely to maintain contact by phone or mail while non-residential fathers who do not see their children do not compensate by increased mail or phone contact.

In examining the impact of the Children Act in the United Kingdom, which promotes not just on-going contact but in fact what they call co-parenting, Neale and Smart (1997) found evidence to support the idea that fathers are re-evaluating their children and do seem to want to have their children living with them after divorce. There is no way of knowing though whether this is a new or growing trend. They also point out that the material and emotional resources for sustaining co-parenting as fostered by the Act are very scarce, and there is no real infra-structure available properly to support co-parenting during marriage, let alone after divorce.

Although the granting of sole custody to one parent with access privileges to the non-custodial parent has been the norm, it is recognised that in some cases (e.g., abuse) exclusive custody is necessary. The general view has been that not granting access privileges to the non-custodial parent is an extreme measure which can have a negative impact on the child. Research has found that diminished contact with the non-custodial parent has a negative impact on the relationship between the non-custodial parent and the child (McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1988) and that breaks in parent-child bonding can have negative effects on children's emotional and social development (Lund, 1984; Magid & Oborn, 1986), as well as on behaviour (Pesikoff & Pesikoff, 1985).

Access to the non-custodial parent, however, may be more complex than was previously believed. For instance, Johnston, Kline and Tschann (1989) found that children who have more frequent access to both parents are more emotionally troubled and behaviourally disturbed than those with less access. These results were found regardless of whether inter-parental aggression was present (although it should be noted that all families in this study were involved in custody and access disputes). Healy *et al.* (1990) found that, among younger children and boys, frequent and regular visits with the non-custodial father increased self-esteem but led to more behaviour problems. Among older children and girls, frequent and regular visits were associated with lower self-esteem but fewer behaviour problems. Although a non-custodial parent may be granted access to a child, visitation may or may not take place. Kelly (1993) claims that little research has been conducted on the determinants of father dropout after separation, although she suggests that it may be because they are not given access (by the courts or by the custodial mother). She contends that contact with the non-custodial parent isn't unidimensional nor always beneficial, but rather depends on the child's age and sex, closeness of the relationship prior to the divorce, conflict, maternal and paternal adjustment, and the mother's hostility following the separation.

Generally, studies have found that children express a strong preference for flexible and unrestricted contact with the non-custodial parent (Mitchell, 1988; Neugebauer, 1989; Wallerstein, 1980).

It has been suggested that joint custody may be more beneficial than sole custody because it conveys to children that their parents are committed to them (Glover & Steele, 1989). On the other hand, children in joint custody arrangements may have problems in coping with the different family morals, values or practices between the two households (Wilson, 1985). In addition, joint custody may inadvertently provide the opportunity for greater inter-parental conflict, particularly with regard to key issues such as the child's bed time, discipline and the amount of television time allowed to the child (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1994).

Empirical findings in support of joint custody are equivocal at best. This may be because research conducted with the two types of joint custody (legal and physical) have not been well described. According to Kurtz and Derevensky (1994), investigations of joint custody most frequently employ joint legal custody arrangements, resulting in very limited implications or erroneous conclusions about joint physical custody. Although it is generally acknowledged that children from intact families are the best adjusted, some research has found that children living in joint physical custody arrangements are better adjusted emotionally and socially than those in sole custody (Glover & Steele, 1989; Neugebauer, 1989). However, McKinnon and Wallerstein (1987) found that children in joint custody were indistinguishable in their initial distress and responses to marital rupture from those in sole custody. Similarly, Kline, Tschann, Johnston and Wallerstein (1989) found no differences between joint physical custody and mother-custody arrangements in behavioural, emotional or social adjustments of children.

Research examining when joint custody works best has found that, among those electing shared parenting, some report high and others low satisfaction. Kurtz and Derevensky (1994) suggest that the successful implementation of joint custody requires that both parents be child-focused, committed to parenting, respect each other as parents, maintain flexibility, be co-operative, provide emotional stability and have the ability to set aside inter-parental conflict and personal needs for the sake of maintaining the shared parenting agreement. As Neal and Smart (1997) state: “Developing and sustaining co-parenting involves an enormous amount of time, emotional labour and sacrifice. It is likely to involve constant negotiations over, and fine tuning of, arrangements as well as ongoing debates over child care and discipline. The needs of new partners, children and the other parent need to be juggled. There is a constant concern over the adjustment of the children to a mobile existence and two lifestyles and environments.” (at 208).

Kelly (1993) suggests that custody status alone doesn't predict post-divorce adjustment but rather that the outcomes for children are related to a complex range of socio-economic and psychological factors and depend less upon the structure of the post-divorce family than upon the quality, stability and reliability of the care received, particularly from the primary, residential parent. For example, court-ordered joint physical custody results in less satisfaction than voluntary arrangements, and when there is conflict, those in joint custody do less well. Finally, she argues that no differences have been found between maternal and paternal custody on a number of variables.

Kurtz and Derevensky (1994) point out the need for further research in this area, such as: a factorial study examining the effects of differential child care alternatives upon the family system; a longitudinal study to observe differences in family dynamics between joint physical and legal custody; an examination of which parents and children benefit from shared parenting; and, an examination of the effects of shared parenting on inter-parental relationships.

3.3.8 Environmental Changes

Geographic movement is common among divorced families. Schlesinger (1982) observed that 40 percent of the children of separation or divorce had changed neighbourhoods following the divorce of their parents. Fulton (1979) found that children had moved an average of two times, and as many as eight times, following the marital dissolution. The reality for children and single parents is that divorce often means a change in school, neighbourhood, and peer groups. Physical dislocation may ultimately have an influence on many aspects of the child's life, including academic performance, peer relations, psychological well-being and physical health. Although there is little research available in this area, what has been done suggests that such changes may affect some aspects of children's functioning (Grych & Fincham, 1992). For instance, Stolberg and Anker (1983) argue that change is the major determinant in the development of child psychopathology in some children of divorce. In their study, they found that children of divorce reacted differently to environmental changes than children of intact families. As environmental change increased, behaviour pathology among the divorced group increased, while behaviour pathology among the intact group decreased. Similarly, Hodges *et al.*

(1984) found that as the amount of significant environmental changes increased, children become increasingly depressed, and exhibited more anxiety.

3.4 Summary

The above discussion demonstrates that there are many factors besides parental divorce which have an impact on children's adjustment. However, the relation between these variables and outcome is very complex and, in many cases, not well defined or understood. What does appear to be increasingly evident is that family processes that exist during marriage have a critical impact on children's psychological adjustment and that information about the child's pre-divorce family has to be integrated with information about the divorce process and post-divorce factors to better advance our understanding. Grych and Fincham (1992) argue that comparisons between groups of children from divorced and intact families are less illuminating than investigations of variables that may mediate post-divorce adaptation. Therefore, they suggest that the focus of divorce research has shifted from examining structure (i.e., divorced versus intact families) to studying the process

4.0 REDUCING NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON CHILDREN

Reducing the negative effects of divorce on children is often a complex task for parents and social service professionals. Since, as discussed previously, divorce affects children in a variety of ways, steps to reduce the negative impacts of divorce may need to be multi-faceted and specifically tailored to the needs and life circumstances of the particular child. The more severely children are affected, the more intense the intervention which is required, with some children needing attention from trained psychologists or counsellors. Other children may receive help from family or peers, or in their local environment. Research findings suggest several key ways of reducing the negative impacts of divorce on children, such as increasing the self-sufficiency of single mothers, reducing conflict between parents, investigating alternatives to court for deciding custody and access arrangements, improving access arrangements, and making use of support groups outside the immediate family.

4.1 Self-Sufficiency of Single Mothers

It has been found that while a large proportion of custodial mothers experience a downward financial spiral following divorce, a large proportion of divorced fathers experience an improved financial situation (Arditti, 1992). Furthermore, many single mothers that are awarded support and custody payments do not actually receive these awards. High non-compliance rates contribute to an unstable and insecure financial situation for custodial parents.

Although research has demonstrated that children's adjustment does not appear to be solely based on their financial situation, enhancing the self-sufficiency of single mothers would make the custodial home more stable. In addition, a better financial situation may have indirect effects (such as better adjustment of the mother, better living environment, etc.) which has been shown to have a beneficial effects on children's adjustment to divorce. Improved enforcement of spousal and child support awards would help in this regard.

4.2 Conflict/Communication

It is evident from the research that inter-parental conflict has a major impact on children's post-divorce adjustment. Therefore, it is critical that parents attempt to reduce conflict among themselves. How to accomplish this, however, may be quite difficult, especially when there are long-standing hostilities. At the very least, as suggested by Hetherington and Camara (1988) and Devine (1996), children should not be directly exposed to the conflict. As well, some of the therapeutic programs discussed below may aid in accomplishing this objective.

If it appears that there is no way to reduce the conflict, or if one or both of the parents are unwilling to try, it may be necessary to examine the option of sole custody arrangements with little or no visitation for the non-custodial parent. In cases where spousal abuse has occurred, this may be the only viable solution. Another way of reducing conflict may involve access arrangements where a third party is involved in transferring the child between parents. In these

circumstances, a third party (such as a relative or the police) is the “go-between” when the child is going from one parent to the other, and the parents do not need to interact.

In addition to reducing conflict between parents, research has demonstrated that it is necessary to improve communication between parents and children, and between parents. Children who have gone through a divorce often feel left out of the process. Often children find out about their parents’ divorce very suddenly, which may leave them unprepared to deal with the upheaval in their lives. In fact, Schlesinger (1982) found that 55 percent of the children interviewed stated that their parents had not talked to them about the separation before it occurred. Furthermore, Mitchell (1988) determined that one-third of the children were not given a reason as to why their parents’ separated. It is important for parents to explain to children why the divorce is occurring.

It is also necessary to improve communication between the parents - this relates to the above discussion concerning conflict. It is necessary to be able to discuss the children’s behaviour and agree upon courses of action.

4.3 Support Groups/Therapeutic Programs

Once a divorce has occurred, children require support in order to minimise the negative effects they may experience. This can be informal support by family, peers or the educational system, or more formal therapeutic programs which are run by professional counsellors. In recent years, there has also been developments in Internet divorce counselling services on the World Wide Web.

Peers can play an important role in providing support, particularly those who have undergone similar experiences. Furthermore, intra-familial and extra-familial support networks can play an important role in reducing a child’s level of stress and assisting them in coping with the upheaval of marital disruption. Schreiber (1983) suggests that surroundings can be helpful in providing support. For example, it may help if the child can keep his/her own room, home, day care, school, and neighbours. In this way, some of the established support systems are in place during the divorce process.

The educational system can help mitigate the negative effects of divorce in a variety of ways, including the provision of direct and indirect services as well as preventative services to children. Direct service can be provided through individuals or by groups, using counsellors or group therapy (Parker, 1994). Indirect services can be offered by increasing the awareness of school personnel on how to identify and assist children from divorced families. Preventative service would provide children of divorce with curriculum changes and additional facilities to help them cope with divorce (Hutchisons, 1989).

Grych and Fincham (1992) conducted an extensive examination of various intervention programs, as well as a discussion of evaluations of these programs. According to this article,

most child-focused interventions attempt to help children by alleviating the negative feelings, misconceptions and practical problems they commonly experience following a divorce. The programs generally use a time-limited, small-group format (4 to 10 children); tend to be based in schools; and, share similar goals and strategies. The groups are usually both educational and therapeutic in focus and have the following types of goals: to clarify confusing and upsetting divorce issues, to provide a supportive place for children to work through difficult issues, to develop skills for coping with upsetting feelings and difficult family situations, and to improve parent-child communication. Techniques employed often include role playing, use of audio-visual materials, storytelling, social problem-solving exercises, drawing, bibliotherapy, and the creation of a group newspaper or television show which focuses on divorce.

Although child-focused groups are quite widespread, there appear to have been few formal evaluations of the various programs. Of those evaluations that have been conducted, the results seem encouraging - the intervention programs appear to have some positive effects in areas such as self-esteem, depression, social skills, and some forms of behaviour. However, Grych and Fincham caution that much of the support for the programs has been impressionistic or limited because the evaluations contain serious methodological flaws. Furthermore, Grych and Fincham question the potential of short-term interventions that target only the child, rather than the entire family.

There are two types of family-focused interventions. The first has an educational focus on parenting and parent-child relationships, and attempts to help parents improve their child management skills and their understanding of children's reactions to divorce. The second type of intervention program focuses on parents' personal adjustment to the divorce, rather than solely on their role as parents. This type of program is based on the belief that, by enabling the adults to be more effective parents, they also promote children's well-being. Both types of programs are delivered in a group format designed to help build effective coping skills and provide a supportive context, which may reduce the sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by many divorced adults. Groups have been conducted in a variety of settings, including schools, community mental health centres, and churches.

According to Grych and Fincham, there is even less empirical data on the effectiveness of parent-focused groups than on child-focused groups. Of the three evaluations examined, the programs appeared to improve some problem areas, such as the custodial parents' adjustment, mother-child relationship and discipline practices. And, although the programs attempted to improve parents' discipline practices, fewer address the quality of parent-child relations or inter-parental conflict - two other mediators emphasised by basic research. Furthermore, it is imperative to intervene with both custodial and non-custodial parents. Since the effect on children is indirect with these programs and may take considerable time to occur, it may be useful to develop groups for parents and children that operate in parallel. According to Grych and Fincham, parent-focused groups hold considerable promise for improving the quality of children's life after divorce, but information about the efficacy of parent-focused interventions is limited by three factors: research evaluating the effectiveness of this type of intervention has barely begun; there are many of the same methodological problems as for child-focused

programs; and, as in the case of child groups, the short duration of the groups may limit their efficacy.

Although it has not yet been clearly established which types of programs are the most effective for diminishing the negative effects of divorce on children, it appears that interventions which provide support for parents, as well as parallel groups for children, hold the most promise. However, it is important to include both custodial and non-custodial parents. In addition, it is important to integrate research results in developing appropriate programs. For instance, since research has shown that inter-parental conflict, discipline, and parent-child relations are important factors in children's adjustment to divorce, programs for parents should attempt to incorporate these areas into the curriculum. Finally, more widespread and powerful effects may be obtained if programs target children as soon as possible after the decision to divorce is made.

4.4 Summary

Overall, the research is fairly consistent in suggesting that reducing conflict between the parents and increasing communication (between parents and with the children) may reduce the negative impacts that divorce has on children. In addition, increasing the self-sufficiency of custodial mothers may aid in making children's homelife more stable. Research also indicates that access to both parents is important for the well-being of children, but depends on other factors (such as parental conflict). Furthermore, the issue of whether joint or sole custody is best for children has not been resolved, and most likely depends on a number of factors. Alternatives to litigation need to be more fully examined before any decision can be made on their usefulness in children's adjustment to divorce. Finally, support groups and therapeutic programs appear to be a feasible way to reduce negative effects on children. However, more research is necessary in order to determine which programs are the most effective.

Amato (1993) provides an in-depth examination of five major perspectives that have been used to account for children's adjustment to divorce. These include: absence of the non-custodial parent; adjustment of the custodial parent; inter-parental conflict; economic hardship; and, stressful life changes. Based on past research, Amato examines the amount of support the hypotheses for each of these perspectives receives. The results demonstrate that, although each model received some support, the most support was for the "inter-parental conflict model". Because no one model provided all of the answers, Amato proposes the development of a larger model which incorporates elements from all of these models - a "resources and stressors" model. This model suggests that children's development is facilitated by the possession of certain classes of resources (e.g., parental support, socio-economic resources). Also, marital dissolution can be problematic because it involves a number of stressors that challenge children's development (e.g., inter-parental conflict, disruptive life changes) and because it can interfere with children's ability to utilise parental resources (e.g., lose contact and access to income). Therefore, the total configuration of resources and stressors, rather than the presence or absence of a particular factor, needs to be considered.

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