Section 2

Children of Divorce: A Brief Theoretical Overview

Clinicians using this book should be well-trained in issues specific to separation and divorce. Below is a brief theoretical overview. Suggestions for additional reading can be found in the *References and Suggested Readings* section in the Appendix.

Stages of Divorce

According to Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989), there are three stages of divorce, though some families get stuck in one stage, rather than progressing through all three stages.

The first stage is the increasing marital conflict that results in one parent initiating the marital separation. This stage is marked by chaos and disorganization in the family. Children are often exposed to anger and sometimes physical violence between their parents. They may become aware of a parent getting involved in other sexual relationships. Parents in this stage are usually preoccupied, so daily routines and consistent parenting may be disrupted. Children need more attention and stability at this time, yet they usually get less.

Stage two is a transitional one. It is during this stage that families attempt to reorganize and rebuild their lives in new ways. Adults may return to school or get new jobs, move to another home, or begin dating. Children often change schools, and make new friends. Family life is still somewhat unstable, but attempts at rebuilding are being made.

In the third stage, the family has reached a fairly stable equilibrium. Visitation and child support agreements have been settled. Living and school arrangements have been established. However, this family is still more vulnerable to stressors than before the marital separation. This is because there are more financial pressures, less support during emergencies, and more stresses placed on the single-parent household. If either parent remarries, then a new period of instability occurs.

Impact of Divorce on Children at Different Developmental Stages

Regardless of their age, all children are affected by parental breakup. The chart on the next page summarizes children's responses to separation and divorce at different developmental stages. Effective practice with children of divorce is best achieved by understanding this developmental context. Development is an individual process that proceeds generally as outlined in the chart, but variations may occur. Moreover, the chart is a general summary and cannot include all possible reactions.

Impact of Divorce on Children at Different Developmental Stages

(Adapted from Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Solomon, 2005)

Age	Characteristics	Separation issues	Signs of distress	Suggestions
0-8 months	-Dependent on parents for meeting their needs -Develop trust through consistent care-giving	-Continue to meet basic needs after separation. As long as needs are met, sleep environment not critical	-Sleep disturbance -Clinginess -Crying	-Opportunities to bond with both parents -Physical comfort -Consistent routine
8 months-2 years	-Form attachments to caregivers between 8-18 months	-Will feel loss of primary caregivers. Keep stasis as much as possible	-Same as above	-Do not make major changes to routine, sleep situation, caregiver -Physical comfort
2-4	-Developing more independence -Verbal skills develop to express feelings and needs -Can keep absent parent in mind to comfort self	-May experience loss of contact with parent as abandonment -May have sense of responsibility for separation -Anxious about needs being met (food, shelter, visitation)	-Regression (lapses in toilet training, returning to security blanket or old toys) -Anxiety at bedtime -Fear abandonment -Seek physical contact -Irritable, tantrums	-Physical comfort -Consistent routine -Allow some regression -Will adapt to longer separations from one parent through frequent visits with the other parent
5-8	-Developing peer relationships -Moral development progresses	-May feel responsible for the separation -Fantasies of parental reunification -Fear abandonment, long for absent parent	-Overt signs of grief such as sadness, anger -Feelings of abandonment and rejection -Changes in eating and sleeping -Behavioral problems -Loyalty conflicts -May try to take on role of departing parent	-Opportunities to express feelings, learn coping strategies -Reassurance that they are not responsible for the separation -Permission to love both parents -Participation in extracurricular activities to detach from parental problems -Benefit from spending as much time as possible with each parent
9-12	-Increased awareness of self -Trying to fit in with peers	-Angry about the separation -May feel responsible for the separation -Likely to take sides, blame parent they think caused the separation -May make one parent all good and the other all bad	-Intense anger -Physical complaints -Overactive to avoid thinking about separation -Feel ashamed about separation, feel different from other children -More likely to ally with a parent or be alienated	-Opportunities to express feelings -Learn skills to cope -Reassurance they are not responsible for separation -Permission to love both parents -Participation in extracurricular activities to detach from parental problems -Benefit from spending as much time as possible with each parent
13-18	-Solidifying identity and establishing self in relation to rules and regulations of society	-May feel embarrassed by family break-up and react by de-idealizing one or both parents -Place peer needs ahead of family and may not want to visit non-resident parent	-Withdrawal from family -Difficulty concentrating -Engaging in high-risk behaviors (sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol use) -Worry about own future relationships	-Consistent limits balanced with more freedom and choices -Have input about visitation but not burdened by having to decide custody & access schedule

Intervention that is timely and effective can have an important positive impact on a child's subsequent development. The child's relationship with his or her family, experiences in school and with peers, and ongoing life events will have much more cumulative influence on a child's development than will professional intervention. However, timely intervention can help a child shift away from an unhealthy pathway and onto a more adaptive one that has long-term implications for development.

Children's Adjustment to Separation and Divorce

Most children experience considerable distress in the early stages of divorce. Common reactions include sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, confusion, loyalty conflicts, and yearning for the absent parent. Research has shown that children of divorce are at greater risk of depression, behavioral problems, and school difficulties (Clulow, 1990; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Oppawsky, 1991; Pedro-Carroll, 2001). Studies have also shown that self-blame and misconceptions about the divorce can lead to more difficulties for children (Kurdek & Berg, 1983, 1987). Interventions that clarify misconceptions and provide accurate attributions for parental problems can help school-aged children adjust better (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999; Stolberg & Mahler, 1994). Enhancing coping abilities, particularly problem-solving and positive thinking, contributes to resilience among children (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000). This research speaks to the need for intervention to focus on strengthening the child's coping strategies.

Some children may become psychologically scarred from the divorce, whereas others may come out of it relatively unscathed. Much depends on how well the parents handle the situation. Kelly and Emery (2003) note the following factors that facilitate children's healthy adjustment to divorce:

- Good adjustment of residential parent
- Competent parenting
- Regular access with adequate non-residential parent
- Reduced and encapsulated conflict between parents
- Parallel or cooperative co-parenting arrangements
- Limited family transitions

There are a number of important clinical implications that derive from the above summary of children's adjustment to separation and divorce. As Kelly states, "Whatever its specific nature or focus, interventions are more likely to benefit children from divorced families if they seek to contain parental conflict, promote authoritative and close relationships between children and both of their parents, enhance economic stability in the post-divorce family, and, when appropriate, involve children in effective interventions that help them have a voice in shaping more individualized and helpful access arrangements" (2002).

Intervention should not merely be provided for the child, but should also involve the parents. Intervention for parents should focus on divorce education, reducing parental conflict, enhancing parenting, and facilitating an appropriate parenting plan. The child therapist should encourage parents to make use of available resources that can provide these interventions, such as parent education programs, divorce mediation, parenting coordinators, collaborative lawyering, judicial settlement conferences, and family and group therapy for children and parents (Kelly 2002).

Psychological Tasks

According to Wallerstein (1983), children of divorce must master six interrelated, hierarchical psychological tasks. The first three are acknowledging the reality of the marital rupture, disengaging from parental conflict, and pursuing customary activities within one year of the initial separation. It is only after these three tasks have been successfully accomplished that children can proceed with the other tasks, which are mastered over a period of many years. These involve resolving feelings related to the partial or total loss of a parent from the family unit, working through feelings of anger and guilt, and accepting the permanence of the divorce. During adolescence or young adulthood, the final task must be mastered, that of achieving realistic hope about their own intimate relationships.

The activities in this book have been developed with the above tasks in mind, in order to facilitate the therapeutic process for children dealing with separation and divorce.

Continuum of Child-Parent Relationships after Divorce

According to Kelly and Johnston (2001), children's relationships to each parent following separation and divorce can be conceptualized along a continuum from positive to negative (with the most negative being the alienated child) as described below:

Positive relationship with both parents: At the most healthy end of the continuum are children who have a positive relationship with both parents and wish to spend significant amounts of time with each parent.

Affinity with one parent: Also at the healthy end of the continuum are children who are closer emotionally to one parent. Due to gender, age, temperament, shared interests, and parenting practices, these children feel much closer to one parent, but still want substantial contact with and love from both parents.

Allied children: Further along the continuum are children who are aligned with one parent. They have an exaggerated connection with that parent and express ambivalent feelings toward the non-preferred parent. They typically want limited contact with the non-preferred parent after the marital separation. This alliance may stem from intense marital conflict in which the child was encouraged to take sides. Or the child is unable to tolerate the tension surrounding the highly conflicted divorce and opts out of the unbearable conflict by choosing to be aligned with one parent while avoiding the other parent. The child is most likely to align with the parent who s/he perceives to have the most power, or the one s/he believes is more hurt or vulnerable.

Estranged children: These are children who are realistically estranged from one parent due to that parent's history of family violence, abuse, neglect, or severe parental deficiencies, such as substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, or an angry and rigid parenting style. It is a healthy response when the child distances himself from a parent who is consistently inadequate or abusive. The anger and fear the child has toward this parent is appropriate and should be processed in therapy. If the child was abused or witnessed domestic violence, this trauma should be assessed and treated. Deficient or abusive parents clearly need therapeutic intervention but, unfortunately, they often deny their parenting deficiencies and accuse the other parent of making false allegations against them.

Alienated children: At the far end of the continuum are children who are alienated from a parent after separation or divorce, who express their rejection of that parent without ambivalence, and who strongly resist or refuse contact with that rejected parent. These rejected parents have no *severe* parenting deficiencies and have not been abusive so the child's negative views toward them are significantly distorted and unrealistic. Johnston (2003) concludes that alienation is caused by multiple systemic factors, including the aligned parent's denigration of the rejected parent, the rejected parent's lack of empathy and support for the aligned child, and harsh/rigid parenting style. Alienated children are generally more troubled, dependent, less socially competent, have low self-esteem, poor reality testing, lack the capacity for ambivalence, and are prone to enmeshment or splitting in relations with others (Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Warshak, 2001, 2003). In order to intervene appropriately, one must understand the roots of the alienation. According to Warshak, "Relief from alienation requires an understanding of all the contributing factors. The child may have [his or her] own motives, the rejected parent may be responding in a rigid manner that reinforces the negative attitudes, and the favored parent may be actively or passively supporting the rupture of the parent-child relationship." (2002, p. 49).

Therapeutic intervention for families with alienation should focus on transforming the child's distorted "good/bad" views of his or her parents into more realistic ones, and restoring appropriate parent-child relationships and co-parental roles in the family. Intervention should include the child, siblings, and the aligned and rejected parent, and other family members (Johnston, Walters, and Friedlander, 2001).

The child therapist must not become involved in the unhealthy dynamics of child alienation cases. He or she should not support the child's distorted views of the rejected parent or become aligned with either parent. It is not the role of the child therapist to make decisions about parenting schedules or co-parenting issues. Rather, the therapist's role is to help the child adjust to the divorce and to treat the dynamics of the child's alienation (Sullivan and Kelly, 2001). Because understanding and intervening with the alienated child is particularly complicated, practitioners are strongly urged to obtain specialized training and familiarize themselves with current literature on the topic before intervening with this client population.

Cases are often mismanaged when children are inappropriately labeled alienated when, in fact, their resistance toward contact with a parent is due to normal, expectable reasons, including estrangement. When a child strongly and consistently resists contact with a parent, a comprehensive assessment is required to determine if s/he is aligned, estranged, or alienated (Kelly and Johnson, 2001). This assessment should be court-ordered and conducted by a neutral evaluator who has knowledge and skill in this area. The results of the assessment should be shared with all legal and mental health professionals who will be involved with the family, and interventions should be provided by a collaborative team who have expertise in working with divorced families.

Helping Your Children through Separation and Divorce

Divorce is stressful for children, but there are things you can do to help your child during this time of change and loss.

1) Give your child a simple but honest explanation about the separation or divorce so s/he understands it was not his or her fault. If possible, no matter how painful, try to tell them when the whole family is together (including both spouses and all children).

2) Be available to listen. Accept the child's feelings (most typically sadness, anger, guilt) and remind him or her that his or her feelings and reactions are normal. Use words that invite more, such as, "Tell me more about that," or "What was that like?" Help your child be open with you by saying: "You can tell me anything and I won't be mad at you no matter what."

3) Reassure your child early and often that your divorce is not his or her fault.

4) Tell your child you love him or her. Children may believe that, because their parents stop loving each other, they may also someday stop loving their children.

5) Don't punish or reprimand immature behavior. Children of all ages who feel stressed may act babyish for awhile, i.e. baby-talking, bed-wetting, or thumb-sucking. They need extra comfort and affection during this time.

6) Set up a regular visitation schedule. Children feel most secure when they know when and for how long the visitation will occur.

7) Even if you live far away from your child, regular contact by phone, email, or via video computer is important to let your child know you care about him or her.

8) Divorce is a time of change for both you and your child. Try to minimize these changes. For example, try to keep your child in the same school and home if possible, as well as the same afternoon and evening activities.

9) Use consistent rules and routines. For example, try to agree with the other parent what TV programs are permitted, what bedtime is appropriate, how misbehavior is handled, etc. Write down and exchange this agreed-upon list of rules and routines.

10) Don't feel you need to provide special toys, treats, or outings at each visit. Children need normal family time in both parents' homes.

11) Don't argue or fight with your ex-spouse while the child is listening. Experts say the amount of conflict children witness during and after divorce is a crucial factor in their adjustment. If you are having difficulty keeping the conflict to a minimum, please get help!

12) Don't criticize your ex-spouse in front of your child. Remember that your ex-spouse is still your child's parent; when you criticize your ex-spouse, you harm your child.

13) Don't use the child as a messenger to deliver information to the other parent.

14) Don't use your child to get revenge on the other parent by denying child support or visitation.

15) Don't use your child as a spy to find out what the other parent is doing.

16) Don't make your child take sides in any dispute with the other parent. Children generally want to make both their parents happy. Don't make them choose.

17) When you and your child do talk about the other parent, be neutral and supportive of that relationship.

18) Praise your child often. Parents in the midst of divorce are often distracted and miss opportunities to acknowledge their child's positive behavior.

19) Spend special time with your child. Your child needs you more now than ever. Try to spend at least fifteen minutes a day of uninterrupted one-on-one time with your child.

20) Do not introduce your children to potential partners until you are in a serious committed relationship. It has been shown that children exposed to numerous partners of a parent have difficulty establishing lasting committed relationships as adults, as attachment issues are disturbed.

21) Take responsibility for your own behavior. You cannot change or control your ex-spouse's behavior, but you can change and control yourself.

22) Take care of yourself. The better you take care of yourself, the better you can care for your child. Reach out for all the support that is around you: relatives, friends, support groups, etc.