CLINICAL REVIEW

# Children of Divorce

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***Background:*** **The rapidly changing nature and demographics of divorce in United States within the past 30 years has spawned an epidemic that affects more than one half of the families in the United States.**

***Methods:*** **I performed a MEDLINE-assisted review of the medical literature searching with the key words "divorce" and "children." In addition, a Web search was conducted using Webferret with the same key words.**

***Results and Conclusions:*** **The past view of divorce as a short-term family crisis must mature into a longitudinal view of the effects of divorce. Divorce affects children according to their coping mechanisms in their own stages of development. Many problems and concerns previously attributed to divorce have their roots in the period of family interaction before the divorce and in the ongoing conflicts in many families after the divorce itself. Because family physicians are objective observers with whom the family comes into regular contact, they must be able to assist families through the transitions of divorce and to intervene on behalf of the children to help them through this stressful life event with the fewest detrimental effects possible. Counseling, group therapy, and divorce mediation have been assessed as effective tools for intervention.(J Am Board Fam Pract 2001;14:201–10.)**

In 1972 Margaret Mead stated, "There is no society in the world where people have stayed married without enormous community pressure to do so." We know little about the effects of the great many changes that have occurred in the past 30 years. Marriage may be freely terminated in the United States for the first time in recent history. Family systems theories and views of child development are based on a society of intact families. What differences are there in divorced, separated, blended, or reconstituted families, and how can family physicians help their patients and themselves?

In the 1960s, 90% of children in the United States grew up in homes with two biological parents compared with only about 40% today.[1] The change is due to the increase in the divorce rate, society's acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing, and the growing acceptance of cohabitation as opposed to marriage. In 1996, 45% of marriages in the United States ended in divorce. In that year there were 1,150,000 divorces, which affected slightly more than 1,000,000 children.[1] Sixty-five percent of women and 75% of men remarry within 5 years of their divorces, and the rate of cohabitation is high for those who choose not to remarry. The divorce rate of second marriages is still higher than in first marriages.[1]

The nature of divorce itself has changed dramatically within the past 30 years. The modern quest for the quick fix has extended to many aspects of society, even to interpersonal relationships. The age of microwave ovens, Jiffy Lube, and instantaneous Internet communication has also spawned the no-fault divorce. Many states no longer require lengthy separations or a legal justification for divorce. A side effect of this change is that families no longer have the luxury of a slow transition to develop new rules under which the family will operate. Such a quick transition can result in higher levels of stress near the time of divorce than experienced in previous generations. The high rates of divorce and single parenthood have raised concerns of enduring deleterious effects on the development of children and society at large.

Twenty years ago nearly everyone subscribed to the comfortable illusion that divorce represented a short-term crisis which families would weather and from which families would recover within a couple of years.[2] Wallerstein and Blakeslee[2] studied divorced families longitudinally for more than 10

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years. They followed a cohort of 116 of the original 131 study children for a full 10 years. What they found was quite different from what they expected. Divorce is not an isolated act. The divorce itself is just one step in a series of family transitions that affect the family and children. Life in the family before divorce, life in a suddenly single-parent family, and possible future marital changes, all have an impact on a child's adjustment.

The human newborn is among the most helpless in the animal kingdom. Human children need parents longer than any other species and are totally dependent on parents for food, shelter, and protection for the first several years of life. This dependency spawns a fear of abandonment. In divorce, one of the parents leaves. When one parent leaves, the children feel rejected. The loss children feel at divorce is similar to that experienced when a parent dies. Divorce might actually be harder on children because it lacks the concrete cause and finality of death.

The immediate reaction of children to divorce does not predict their long-term outcome. Some who seem crushed by the divorce will do well in life, whereas some who seem to take the divorce in stride are severely affected 5 and 10 years later. The focus for research and intervention needs to change from the time immediately surrounding divorce to a much longer view. The divorced family is not a minor variation of the intact family and deserves to be studied and researched in depth.

## Methods

Using MEDLINE, I searched the medical literature applying the key words "children" and "divorce." Bibliographies of those articles retrieved from this search were reviewed for further useful citations. An Internet search using the Webferret program was conducted using the same key words. Recent texts were sought through searches on the Web sites of Amazon, Books-a-Million, and Barnes & Noble.

## Stages of Divorce

Divorce comprises a series of transitions or stages for both adults and children. These stages are similar to the stages Elisabeth Kubler-Ross described for patients with terminal illnesses: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.[3] During a divorce children experience these stages quite differently from adults.

In the denial stage, the children simply fail to believe that their parents, the adults who provide them with safe home, shelter, and food, could ever part. During this time, the children reassure themselves that their parents will stay together, or if already separated, will soon reunite. This reunion fantasy often persists for years.

Denial is followed by anger, the second stage. Children can be furious at their parents for not trying harder to stay together, for permitting the divorce to happen, for ruining their lives, and for dashing their dreams of the future as they had it planned. Acting-out behavior often accompanies the anger.

Children enter the bargaining stage by trying to undo the damage by changing their own actions. If they get better grades, perform their daily chores without complaining, or quit fighting with their sibling, surely the absent parent will return home to stay. At certain ages, children might actually believe some real or imagined misbehavior on their own part drove away a parent.

In the depression stage, there is a pervasive sadness that permeates every aspect of the child's life. They are sad and tired every day at school and at home. Children who reach this stage and who appear to be driven to succeed in some way must be watched closely, as they might be suffering the most and overcompensating to control the emotions they feel.

Finally, acceptance occurs when the children have gained the emotional experience and distance to see that perhaps the divorce was for the best and that their parents are happier living apart than they would have been living together. This stage usually occurs only in older children or even young adults.

Parents pass through these same stages. At times, one or both of the parents might have passed through some of the stages before the children are ever told of the impending divorce. Parents can inadvertently put the emotional needs of their children on hold as they deal with their own feelings and reactions to the immediate crisis. Children who do not get the support they need can become temporarily stuck in the denial stage. The parent moves on and is ready to get on with life. If this stage includes dating or one parent moving away, the children will be confused. Because they still do not

see the divorce with any finality, they might view these acts as betrayal of the marriage.

Wallerstein's study has shown that most family functioning is worse 12 to 18 months after the divorce than at the time immediately surrounding the divorce. Five years later, one third of the children were still functioning more poorly than they did at the time of the divorce. One of three children found themselves still embroiled in the ongoing bitterness of their two battling parents.[4]

Ten years after the divorce, one half of the women and one third of the men studied were still intensely angry at their former spouses.[2] The continuing animosity and conflict between the parents were frequently transmitted to, or even worse, through their children, who become caught in the crossfire. The promise that time heals all wounds has forgotten these families.

Children displayed some common themes 10 years after their parents' divorce. They say that they will delay having children until they are sure their own marriages are solid so they will not put their own children through the same events they experienced.[3,5] They were able to recall detailed, often painful memories of the time when their parents separated. They seek what their parents failed to find: a lasting marital relationship, romantic love that does not fade with time, and faithfulness to the marriage and family. They want to avoid repeating the past.

## Consequences of Divorce

Consequences of divorce are difficult to distinguish from effects of situations closely associated with divorce. Marital conflict, separation, loss or partial loss of one parent, changes in social and financial status, single-parent households, and ongoing legal battles about child support and visitation can ensue. Blending families, which can include a stepparent or two, step-siblings, and children of the new union who are half-siblings, is also part of the extended process of which the divorce is only one isolated event.

The suddenly single parent must shoulder the full burden of parenting while dealing with his or her own feelings of loss and disappointment. Divorce represents a great loss for at least one spouse and frequently leads to personal dysfunction expressed in depression, aggression, somatic complaints, and sexual acting-out behaviors.[6] The dysfunction can affect parenting responsibilities, which can be overwhelming. Some parents become overly close, inappropriately elevating the children to the role of companion to replace the lost spouse. Other parents become harsh, distant, and authoritarian as they direct the hostility they feel toward the children, doling out more negative and punitive discipline. Children might be unsupervised for long periods as parents work extended hours or re-enter the realm of dating. Some children are overburdened with household chores and rearing younger siblings. The parents can be so exhausted or so invested in their own situations that they have little left to devote to their children, which can lead to disruptions in affection, discipline, and even the daily household routines, such as meals and bedtimes. A hallmark of parenting after a divorce is that it is erratic and inconsistent.[7]

Financial consequences become clear as separated parents must maintain two households with two sets of expenses on the same income as before the divorce. Despite progress during the past decades, only 50% of single-parent households headed by the mother have child support agreements from the father, and only 50% of those receive the full amounts due. Twenty-five percent of the households with support agreements receive no money whatsoever from the noncustodial parent.[7] Custodial parents might immerse themselves in work or a second job to compensate for the financial shortfall. Children often view this behavior as abandonment.

Economic stress extends outside the home. Children are aware of their economic standing compared with those around them. Those who suddenly have less money for brand-name clothing or the unessential "needs" of the average adolescent feel as though they stick out like beacons. A move from a nicer to a more modest house or neighborhood shows everyone that their financial worth has changed.

Parental contact is also a casualty of divorce. Wallerstein and Blakeslee[2] found that an employed mother in a two-parent home is in contact with the children 25 hours a week. After the divorce, this number decreases to 5.5 hours a week. A housewife has her 45 hours a week before the divorce decrease to 11 hours a week after the divorce. The employed father's hours decrease from 20 hours a week in the two-parent home to 2 hours a week after the divorce.

## Father's Absence

Although it might be correct to be gender-neutral and discuss parental absence, the fact remains that in approximately 90% of divorced families, the children remain with the mother. This outcome stems from a legal precedence, often cited as the "doctrine of tender years," which states that children up to 6 years of age rely most heavily on the mother to best provide for the children's physical and developmental needs. This precedence has been replaced by the "best interest standard," which is still heavily weighted in favor of the parent who has spent the most time with the children in the past, rather than in favor of the parent better able to provide for the child in the present or future. This standard overwhelmingly favors the mother.[7]

American society extols equality of the sexes in the workplace, but the grocery aisles and playground paths still consider fathers to be second-choice parents. Men are considered amateurs at nurturing, whereas women are the professionals. There is no maternal instinct. New mothers know how to care for a baby only if they have watched another mother doing it. A study of monkeys raised without a mother showed that the new monkey mothers were neglectful of their offspring and were poor parents.[3]

The cultural image of fathers is changing. On one hand, fathers are commonly considered workaholics, absentee parents, and uninvolved in much of the daily parenting of the children. In recent times, however, popular media have romanticized the nurturing father figure in Cliff Huxtable, Mr. Mom, and Mrs. Doubtfire; but they appear nearly always in comedies.

The cultural stereotypes of mothers as the primary parents even when they work outside the home and fathers as the primary wage earners are societal realities. Fathers spend less time with their children while fulfilling their role as wage earners. From early in the baby's life, men defer to women on child-rearing issues and participate less actively in the child-rearing tasks.[8] In all intact or divorced families, child development is associated with the quality of the parenting environment. Good parenting is a learned skill, not inherited or sex based. In general, men are less practiced in the skills of parenting and are therefore frequently less competent to serve as the custodial parent in a divorcing family.

Continued contact with a competent noncustodial parent, however, has been shown to enhance the adjustment of children, especially for children the same sex as the noncustodial parent. Unfortunately, studies have repeatedly shown that as the length of time from the divorce increases, contact with the noncustodial parent decreases. One recent study estimated that one fifth of children living with their mothers after a divorce or separation had not seen their fathers at all in the previous year.[7] Wallerstein and Blakeslee [2] found that three of four children felt rejected by the noncustodial parent 10 years after the divorce.

Many factors contribute to the absence of the noncustodial parent. The separation might be geographic. Parents who remarry have the competing responsibilities of a second family. Many others simply tire of the trouble. Without the day-to-day contact, the parent-child connection weakens. The schedules of both parents and children make visits increasingly a burden to arrange. Adolescents become too busy with school, extracurricular activities, and jobs and view the visits as disruptions in their lives, just as they minimize interaction with the custodial parent. The conflicts with the spouse that preceded the divorce might continue and are often easier to escape by distancing. The noncustodial parents slowly fade away, and the children suffer.

Wallerstein and Corbin found that a poor father-daughter relationship was associated with poor social adjustment in girls 10 years following divorce. As adolescents, these girls often exhibited precocious sexual activity and promiscuity.[6]

The degree of paternal involvement is directly correlated with academic performance in boys. Fathers frequently set and enforce limits, helping their sons control their own behavior and develop an appropriate conscience. Men are taught to be the head of the household and to have the last word, as in "Wait until your father gets home." When the mother is awarded custody, the father is often relegated to the role of secondary authority and withdraws to another setting where he can again be top dog. An absent father can result in more aggressive behavior by the boys.

## Children's Responses to Divorce

Many studies have shown that children of divorce have more behavioral and conduct problems when

compared with the children in intact two-parent families.[1] They have more aggressive, impulsive, and antisocial behaviors and more problems in their relationships with their mothers and fathers. They exhibit lower academic achievement, with three of four children showing a deterioration from their previous school performance. Children who experience the divorce at younger ages are more likely to have problems. Divorced boys living with their fathers and divorced daughters living with their mothers showed fewer effects than children living with the opposite-sex parent.[9]

Not all responses to marital disruption are deleterious. Research has consistently shown that children from divorced families exhibit less stereotyped sex behavior, greater maturity, and greater independence.[7]

The more recent and more sophisticated the study, the less difference the study showed between children of intact families and children of divorce. Perhaps this finding is the result of divorce being widespread today. Divorced families are more common, less different, and less stigmatized. They are more recognized and accepted by society and have generated a more open support system.

While the differences between children of divorce and children of intact families in the studies are statistically significant, they are extremely small. Most differences fall within the range of normal behaviors and variations.[8] There is great overlap between the behaviors of children of divorce and their counterparts from intact families. As a group, children of divorce are not disturbed or abnormal. They are normal children passing through the trauma of family dissolution, and they respond according to their age and maturity at the time of the divorce.

Infants and toddlers have little comprehension that a divorce has occurred and so have no direct reaction. For this age-group the risks are decreased interaction with the custodial parent and loss of contact with the noncustodial parent, who can fade entirely from their lives. The child benefits from frequent, short visits with the noncustodial parent that are designed not to disrupt the stable daily routine and secure attachment to the custodial parent.[6] When the noncustodial father does stay involved, the mother is often concerned that, lacking daily experience, the father does not know how to care for the baby. Mothers must trust the noncustodial father at least as much as they trust the teenage neighbor they hire to baby-sit. The important issue is to keep the father involved.

Preschoolers understand in concrete terms that their mother and father no longer live together. They fear abandonment. If one parent left, what would stop the other from leaving as well? To prevent the parent from leaving, they are eager and at times almost desperate to maintain close ties. Children of this age respond to divorce much as they respond to other situations they perceive to be abandonment, such as when a parent first becomes employed outside the home or when a new person competes for the attention of the parent. They act up, cling, regress to temper tantrums, require their security objects, and even resort to bedwetting. They cause a scene when dropped off at day care.

Preschoolers are prone to self-blame. Their magical egocentric thinking at this age leads them to believe that their behavior directly caused the divorce, much as they perceive that the world revolves around them in all other matters. They often display heightened sexual and erotic play, which can cause concern of sexual molestation by one of the parents. Although a possibility in disrupted families, investigations have not revealed any increased incidence of sexual abuse.[10]

Young school-aged children have the double problem of loving both parents and needing to be loved by both parents. The conflicting loyalties are especially difficult when the parents continue to feud.[11] They want to be reassured constantly of the parents' love and crave attention. They want gifts as concrete proof of the love, and they can prey on the guilt of the noncustodial parent, who often supplies a stream of gifts.

They fantasize about reuniting their parents, as popularized in such movies as "The Parent Trap," in which identical twins plot the successful reconciliation of their parents, or "House Arrest," in which children imprison their warring parents in their basement until they magically rediscover their love for each other. This fantasy rarely comes true, but it is crucial to understand that these children have the fantasy.[12] They force their parents to interact any way they can. They create crises to draw the parents into contact, they drag their feet at drop-off or pick-up times, or they "forget" something they need so they can return to the other parent's house. They want to undo what has happened and often blame themselves, thinking that

they did some specific thing that sparked the divorce.

Older school-aged children, 9 to 12 years old, are more embarrassed and angrier, even hostile. They see the world in black and white, right and wrong. They take sides with one parent against the other. They are prone to somatize their anxiety and complain of headaches, stomachaches, chest pains, and sleeping disturbances. If they have a chronic illness, such as diabetes or asthma, it will worsen. Children in this age-group manifest delinquent behaviors, such as petty stealing, lying, and manipulation.[2] School performance often drops suddenly. Others display contradictory behavior, such as being difficult with one parent and perfectly behaved with the other. One study of girls at an eating disorder clinic in Boston found that all the young women under treatment had experienced the divorce of their parents as preteen girls.[3]

The paradox of adolescence is that teenagers are not truly independent, but they like to feel that they are. They want to live their own lives on their own terms while having a safe haven for food, shelter, and sleep. They need to have a stable home base even if they hate it and the parents in it. They do not have time for this level of disruption in their lives. They are struggling with sex and drugs and alcohol and acne and classes they hate. They do not want to be bothered by their parents' lives, which are in chaos from the divorce. Teenagers test the limits in the best of homes, but when the structure of the home is shaky and the parents are distracted, teenagers are at risk of impulsive behavior. If impulsive risk-taking occurs, either they are forced to grow up too fast or they get into trouble.

Teenagers possess a more adult understanding of divorce in cognitive terms but still are emotionally immature. Teenaged children of divorce might be sad, angry, protective, or mask their reactions entirely. Often they switch their reactions between the two parents or even switch minute to minute with one parent. They can be depressed or become anxious if they believe they are caught between their parents. They might fail to become involved with their peer group or school activities. They have increased rates of school absence and illness. They are more likely to abuse substances, break the law, and appear in juvenile court than are children from intact homes.[6]

Parents must avoid confusing teenagers with adults. A boy must not be expected to be the man of the house if his father has left. Young girls should not be forced into spending their free time cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. Children do not like to think of their parents' sexuality and are uncomfortable anytime they must confront the issue. Parents should avoid modeling premarital or casual sex at the very time their teenagers are beginning to think about it, constantly.

Teenagers do not need as much visitation time. They are busy with their own lives, jobs, afterschool activities, and friends. They do not care to spend time with their parents. It can be difficult for a parent to hear that the teenager does not want to visit because of the disruption in his or her schedule. One common phenomenon is that teenagers might want to switch homes and then want to switch back, perhaps more than once during this period.[11] This switching back and forth can make a mess of custody and support arrangements. Flexibility is the key for parents.

In late adolescence, two thirds of the teenagers are cut off financially when they reach 18 years, the day the legal requirement for child support ends. For the noncustodial parent, this age signals the end of contracted monthly payments to the previous spouse. For the parent, it is a financial matter; for the teens, it is personal.

Reactions to divorce in children persist into adulthood. Adult children of divorce are less likely to attend or complete college, are more likely to be unemployed or on welfare, are more likely to have problematic relationships with parents and siblings, and have more trouble forming their own marital relationships.[1,5]

## Remarriage

One half of divorced persons remarry within 5 years.[7] Whether one calls them stepfamilies, blended families, or reconstituted families, remarriage is not a recreation of the two-parent family; it is another major life transition for the family. There are ex-spouses, grandparents, kids that did not grow up together who are now expected to behave as brothers and sisters, rearranged birth orders, and perhaps babies of the new union. There are children with multiple parents under the same roof trying to form a single unit. Visitation with the noncustodial parent means that children will be coming and going, making it tough to keep track of who will be where for dinner on the weekends.

There are the inevitable problems, such as how to refer to grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles from the family of the ex-spouse and the family of the new spouse. The boundaries of what we traditionally consider family blur, if not dissolve completely. No one has developed a template for adapting to all these sudden changes.

A collection of studies analyzed in Furstenberg's *Remarriage and Step-parenting* showed that stepfathers are well accepted by younger children when the mother is the custodial parent, but stepfathers might have problems with older children. Boys' difficulties frequently decrease when a male adult is added to the household, but girls react poorly.[7] Stepmothers in the noncustodial father's household integrate easily by becoming a friend to the children, but when a custodial father remarries, the problems for the stepmother can be considerable.[13] The children, especially older children, might not accept her or recognize her authority. They resent her, and if she dares to bear children with their father, they resent the babies, too. This phenomenon is not new. Centuries-old fables describe the evil stepmother and the resentment shown to her in the father's household.

## How Much Is Divorce To Blame?

For generations the prevailing thought was that it was essential to maintain an intact family and intact home for the sake of the children. Many parents endured the sacrifices of a loveless marriage to avoid the financial and social consequences of divorce. It was the expectation that parents would sublimate their own needs for those of the children. Few questioned the intuitive logic of this premise. As research matured, the model of divorce switched from that of an acute crisis to a more longitudinal view of the changes within a family. Newer findings indicate that many problems precede the divorce itself, and that the effects on the family are often closely related to the level of conflict between the two parents.

Approximately one half of the behavioral, academic, and achievement problems of school-age boys were clearly detectable in the 4 years before the parents actually separated.[9] The changes were shown in decreasing scores on standardized math and reading tests, as well as parent and teacher reports on school performance and behavior. For girls, the problems were similar, but to a lesser degree. Witnessing marital conflict between the two parents can have deleterious effects on children. The stronger the degree of conflict, the greater the effect. Conflicts involving the child directly, conflicts in which the child feels trapped between the two parents, and conflicts involving witnessed physical violence have been shown to be more harmful.[1]

Parental conflict models aggressive behavior rather than civil interaction to resolve disagreements. Children can become so involved in supporting one parent against the other that they lose their role as children and retain grudges that were never theirs in the first place. Parents involved in a high-conflict relationship are often distracted from their roles as parents by the amount of energy and time they expend warring with each other. They are less emotionally available to the children and less effective as parents.[7] Fathers in particular often withdraw from their children as they retreat from the conflict.

Parents who are openly hostile to each other are more prone to direct part of their anger and dissatisfaction at their children. They are more likely to use negative disciplinary techniques that rely on anxiety and guilt and to apply discipline erratically.[9] These misdirected emotions can be exacerbated when one or more of the children physically or behaviorally (words, expressions, gestures) resemble the hated spouse and serve as substitute targets.[10] The scope and severity of adjustment problems of the children of high-conflict marriages are strikingly similar to those reported for children of divorce.

Research is bearing out the hypothesis that the long-term consequences of divorce depend on the level of marital conflict before the divorce and the level of ongoing conflict after the divorce. Children in high-conflict marriages had the most psychological disturbances and children in low-conflict marriages, the least. Children of divorce had disturbances midway between these other two groups.[9]

When the conflict level was high in a marriage, divorce was associated with a positive outcome. The children were better off 8 to 12 years later than children whose parents continued their high-conflict marriages. Children of high-conflict marriages had serious adjustment problems and poor parent-child relationships at the time of the divorce. Divorce can result in better long-term adjustment when the divorce and separation reduce the conflict

and take the children out of the middle. With time the reduced stress apparently outweighs the other consequences.

Conversely, divorce in a high-conflict marriage might generate more stress on the children when the divorce fails to resolve the conflict between the parents. In these cases, parents are often involved in ongoing litigation concerning child support and visitation as well as frequent arguments about minor issues. Too frequently these parents leverage the children against the other parent or choose to express their anger through or to the children on a regular basis. The children remain stuck in the middle with no ability to escape the battle.

An unexpected finding from the study of divorcing families involved low-conflict marriages that ended in divorce. Children of these marriages had more adjustment problems than their counterparts whose parents did not divorce or those in high-conflict marriages that did divorce.[9] It could be that when conflict is low in a marriage, the divorce is unexpected by the children. These children suffer the loss of resources, decreased parental attention, parental absence, and the financial hardships without a compensatory gain to offset the negative consequences.

### *The Failed Divorce*

When two married adults find that they are unable to meet each other's needs to such a degree that they choose to divorce, it should come as no surprise that they would continue to fail to meet each other's needs after the separation. When the unmet needs are so severe that they generate hostility and conflict between the spouses, these unmet needs will often continue to generate the same responses after divorce. A useful label to describe this situation is a failed divorce. A divorce has failed when the conflicts of the marriage are never resolved. The divorced parents continue to fight, argue, and battle. Bitterness and distrust persist. Often these parents are so absorbed in their own emotions that they fail to have any insight into how their behavior affects their children. When separation occurs, parents feel good about themselves by projecting unresolved feelings of disappointment and failure onto the former spouse. Even misbehavior by the child might be attributed to some deficit in the former spouse's parenting. Under the circumstances of ongoing strife and parental pathology, frequent visitations might not be in the best interests of the children, as each contact between the parents only escalates the conflict to which the children are exposed.[4]

It is extremely important for these parents to learn that their relationship as parents must continue regardless of whether they are divorced. Their relationship must evolve into some sort of mature interaction if the children are to develop appropriately. The parents of children of divorce continue to be their parents for life. They must refuse to depreciate the other parent to their children. They must refuse to use the children as pawns, and they must absolutely avoid placing the children in the crossfire of two adults spoiling for a fight. The parents must see the value in attending to the needs of their children, even when their own adult lives are in turmoil. They must continue to set limits, enforce bedtimes, assign chores. If both parents are to be involved in rearing the children, they must learn to co-parent with some consistency. If they do not, they could add failed parent to the list of failed marriage and failed divorce.

## Treatment and Interventions

Most agree that parenting should be the first focus for children of divorcing families. When parents are at odds, it is important that there be a neutral third party to mediate disputes, defuse conflicts, and encourage cooperation. Divorce mediation has been shown to decrease interpersonal conflicts between the parents. Mediation focuses on the family as a system that is reorganizing and forming a new structure. Couples who used a neutral third party to resolve conflicts about financial and custodial arrangements were more likely to be communicating on a weekly basis after divorce.[6]

Counseling both parents and children before the divorce was believed to help in the transition at the time of separation. Other therapists have counseled each parent with the children, because this combination more accurately modeled the post-divorce relationships and family structure. Individual therapy for a parent with specific concerns or problems can also be useful in some cases. Counseling children individually is considered a last resort, appropriate only when the parents cannot or will not participate. All these interventions, however, have shown little, if any, effectiveness.

Group therapy for children in the form of peer-support groups focused on divorce has been con-

sistently effective in studies to date. The most clearly and uniformly effective intervention has been divorce mediation. Resolving conflict between the two parents is the greatest stress reducer in divorce for both the parents and the children.

Parents often refuse counseling and mediation because of financial concerns. Physicians must intervene for the sake of the entire family, but especially for the children. Parents embroiled in a bitter and difficult divorce must be helped to see that the initial costs of counseling and mediation will be recouped. Parents should be encouraged to view their relationship as a neutral business-like partnership with the children as their joint investment. Divorced parents can benefit from clear rules on visitation, discipline, holidays, finances, and other issues. Clear regulations avoid conflict and decrease contact.[7,14] When contact is necessary, it can be civil, polite, and time-limited, much as in a business relationship.

## Support

Among the most universal and devastating effects of divorce on children is the accompanying loss of support. Unlike other family crises, such as illness or death, support systems tend to withdraw. Family friends and even family members tend to pull back to avoid contact that can become increasingly uncomfortable as the divorce progresses. Some will side with one parent or the other, while many keep a polite distance in a show of neutrality that might or might not be genuine.

Children are very lonely. They cannot rely on parents who are caught up in their own tumult of divorce. Few children of divorce have found any other adults to help or guide them, and less than 10% had any adult even speak to them sympathetically as the divorce unfolded.[3] Friends were the most frequent source of support, then parents, other relatives, and siblings. A simple query or kind encouragement might seem superficial, but it often represents more than what these children receive from others.

## Summary

Certain recurring themes emerge clearly from the literature on divorce. The main point is that reducing the level of conflict between the two parents is most strongly associated with the eventual adjustment of the children of all families, including the families of divorce. Mediation of conflicts and civil interaction between parents must be encouraged. Understanding children's reactions to the separation of their family and understanding what role the stage of child development plays in the reactions of children can help physicians guide patients through the divorce and decrease the havoc experienced by these families. This assistance, in turn, will help the children, who often are caught in the crossfire of a conflicted marriage or a failed divorce.

Simple rules can give parents a guideline at a time when their own objectivity and emotional stability can be sadly lacking. Table 1 lists the 10 most important points the parents must understand. These points should be reinforced whenever possible and perhaps distributed in a written format for later reference. These simple 10 rules can help all families reduce the confrontations and tensions during this series of major family transitions.

Some children who are products of divorce are emotional wrecks whose lives are seriously dam-

**Table 1. Ten Commandments for Divorcing Parents.**

1. Inform the children of the divorce, and explain the reason for the divorce in terms that are appropriate for the ages of the children and are neutral. Both parents should be present, and all children should be told at the same time unless it is impossible.
2. Reassure the children (especially the younger children) that the divorce is not their fault. Repeat this explanation over and over and over.
3. Except for cases of abusive relationships or concerns of immediate safety, inform the children well in advance of anyone moving out of the house.
4. Clearly inform the children of the expected family structure after the divorce, and who will live where. Discuss visitation clearly.
5. Do not make children be adults.
6. Do not discuss money. Children do not comprehend money or the true costs of maintaining a home. If they ask, do not lie, but be aware that $200 seems like a small fortune to a school-aged child.
7. Children need rules. Be consistent in this area even if it is the only area in your entire life that is consistent.
8. Children must never be forced into taking sides. Both parents love them and they can love both parents.
9. Belittling your ex-spouse should be avoided within earshot of the children. They believe everything you say, even when it is out of anger or frustration. But do not lie to cover up irresponsible behavior by the other parent. Children will see through it quickly, and your credibility will suffer in other areas.
10. Never, ever put your children in the middle between you and your spouse. They are not buffers or pawns or messengers or prizes to divide like property. They are your children. They are the most precious things in the world to any parent. They are the one best thing that came out of the marriage.

aged by their parents' separation and the conflicts that preceded, accompanied, and followed the divorce. More often, the children of divorce develop into normal, healthy adults who go on to reach the levels of success and mental well-being that every parent wishes for their children. Divorce can scar, but it does not have to.

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