

## **A Historical Review of Research Findings Regarding the Adjustment of U.S. Children to Divorce**

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### **Abstract**

From the 1940s to the late 1960s, approximately 86% of U. S. children were born to married parents and lived with these parents throughout childhood and adolescence. From 1970 to 2000, however, the percentage of children living in two parent families decreased from 86.5% in 1970 to 69.1 % in 2000 (Hernandez 1993; U. S. Bureau of the Census 2006). One of the trends related to the decreased number of children living in two parent families occurred because of changes in the divorce rate.

In 1960, less than 500,000 U. S. children were affected by divorce while in 1980 close to 1.2 million children had experienced the divorce of their parents. From 1980 to 1990, the number of U. S. children living in a divorced family decreased from slightly less than 1.2 million to 1 million. Predications regarding the percentage of American children who will live in a single parent family before reaching the age of eighteen suggested that more than 50% of those born after 1992 would, at some time between their birth and reaching the age of 18, live in a single parent family (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). Clearly, divorce is an event affecting a large number of U.S. children.

Research reported that divorce is perceived as a highly stressful life event for most adults and children. Divorce has been identified as a risk factor for children because of the myriad changes that children may experience (Moxnes, 2003). Divorce involves the loss of social and economic capital as a result of the loss of household income, residential mobility and contact with the non-custodial parent (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Changes in the life of the child stemming from divorce produce social stress for the child. Moreover, the family structure is altered or changed as a result of the divorce. These losses and changes affect parent-child relationships and interactions. Moreover, behavioral changes have been identified that have been attributed to the child's adjustment to divorce. These behaviors have been measured via the child's academic achievement, social competence, and emotional behavior.

This main focus of this article is to report research findings pertaining to children's adjustment to divorce using a developmental perspective. Information that is reported will incorporate evidence regarding the personal resources of gender and age and their relationship to the child's adjustment to divorce. The variable of age will be divided into five stages, infants and toddlers, preschool-aged children, early as well as late elementary aged children, adolescents, and young adults. Within each of the five stages, information on the adjustment process is presented with reference to the duration since the parents' separation. Duration is divided into the immediate crisis which involves the time period immediately following the separation, the short-term aftermath which can last up to two years post-divorce, and the long-range aftermath which extends from two years post-divorce on (Kalter 1990).

## **A Historical Review of Research Findings Regarding the Adjustment of U.S. Children to Divorce**

Since the end of World War II, the ecological environment of the family has undergone significant changes especially in the United States (Amato 1997; West 1996). Changes resulting from technology have exerted indirect effects on the world of the child while changes in the structure of the family have produced direct effects. Among the changes related to the structure of the family are an increased number of children living in homes where both parents are employed or where there is only one parent.

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From the 1940s to the late 1960s, the majority of children were born to married parents and lived with these parents throughout childhood and adolescence. In the 1990's, a larger number of children were expected to live apart from at least one parent or be born into a single parent home (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). Children living in single parent families may live with a parent who has never been married, who is separated from a spouse, or who has lost a spouse as a result of death or divorce.

In 1940, 86.7 % of the families in the U. S. were two parent families, whereas in 1970, 86.5 % of U. S. children lived in two parent families (Hernandez 1993). Due to an increase in the number of divorces in 1946, the number of two parent families showed a slight decline and then remained fairly stable until the late 1960's (West 1996). From 1970 to 2000, the percentage of children living in two parent families decreased from 86.5% in 1970 to 69.1 % in 2000 (Hernandez 1993; U. S. Bureau of the Census 2006). More recent statistics indicated that in 2004 the rate of two parent families was 67.8%. These figures reflect an upsurge in children born into single parent families, children whose parent may have died of natural causes or through war-related efforts, and the increased number of children living in divorced families. For purposes of this article, the term single parent families will refer to either mother- or father-headed families who have experienced divorce.

A comparison of world-wide divorce statistics indicated that the rate of divorce in the United States of 7.9 (per 1000 population) is almost twice that of any of the European countries, Japan or Canada (U. S. Bureau of the Census 2006). The United Kingdom whose divorce rate earned that country a rank of second ranged from 4.4 (per 1000 population) in 1980 to 4.1 in 2002, respectively, a rate that is almost 50% less than the rate estimated for the U. S. In contrast, Italy is a country with one of the lowest divorce rates, ranging from 0.3 per 1000 population in

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1980 to 1.1 in 2002. These figures suggest that divorce affects U.S. children more frequently than children in other industrialized nations.

From 1950 to 1990, the rate of divorce in the United States showed a threefold increase whereas from 1990 to 2002, the rate declined slightly (The 1993 Information Please Almanac 1993; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990 & 1991). Statistics indicated that 7.9 out of every 1000 marriages ended in divorce in 1980 whereas in 1990 the rate was 7.2 per 1000 and in 2002, 6.0 (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). These statistics indicate that the rate of divorce in the United States was fairly stable from 1940 to the late 1960s, peaked during the 1980s, and then fell somewhat.

In 1960, less than 500,000 U. S. children were affected by divorce while in 1980 close to 1.2 million children had experienced the divorce of their parents. From 1980 to 1990, the number of children living in a divorced family decreased from slightly less than 1.2 million to 1 million. Predications regarding the percentage of American children who will live in a single parent family before reaching the age of eighteen suggested that more than 50% of those born after 1992 would, at some time between their birth and reaching the age of 18, live in a single parent family (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). These estimates ranged from 40 to 60% for all children to as high as 94% for African-American children (Cherlin 1992; Furstenberg 1994; Hofferth 1985; Norton & Glick 1986).

The rapid escalation of the divorce rate in the later decades of the 1900s has had a profound impact on the family which included disrupted relationships between parent and child (Emery 1999; Hernandez 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994), affected childrearing practices (Hetherington 2006), forced parents to assume multiple roles such as both caregiver and breadwinner and children to assume more adult-like responsibilities (Wallerstein 1991). For children living in mother-headed households, generally speaking, father involvement was

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reported to be infrequent and diminished over time (Emery 1999). Economic hardships were reported for female-headed households, in particular, who experienced a 40 to 75 percent loss of income following a divorce (Hetherington 1993).

Research reported that divorce is perceived as a highly stressful life event for most adults and children (Chandler 1981; Coddington 1972; Hess & Camara 1979, Holmes & Rahe 1967;) and that divorce may negatively impact the child's development (Guidubaldi 1989; Guidubaldi, Perry & Cleminshaw 1984; Guidubaldi, Perry & Nastasi 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox 1982 & 1985; Kalter 1990; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Santrock & Warshock 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly 1980; Wallerstein & Blakeslee 1989). Although the life events research focused on the unitary nature of each event, the current assumption is that "divorce is a multistage process of changing family relationships, which begins in the failing marriage, continues throughout the chaotic period of the marital rupture and its immediate aftermath, and continues often over several years of disequilibrium within the family" (Wallerstein 1991, p. 350). Another assumption that has changed is that the period of adjustment to divorce takes place over a longer time period than was previously recognized (Kalter 1990; King & Goldman 1988).

Changes in adjustment may begin with the separation of the parents, which is called the immediate crisis, continue through the short-term aftermath which lasts for up to two years after the separation and progress well into the long range period which may extend beyond the remarriage of one or both parents (Kalter 1990).

Divorce has been identified as a risk factor for children because of the myriad changes that children may experience (Moxnes, 2003). Moxnes cites three theories that have evolved from studies of divorce that together may explain why divorce places the well-being of a child at

risk. The first results in loss of social and economic capital as a result of the loss of household income, residential mobility and contact with the non-custodial parent (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). The second explanation focuses on the changes that produce social stress for the child. According to Pryor and Rogers (2001), the quantity and severity of these changes will determine how negative the effect of the divorce will be for the child. Capaldi and Patterson's study (1991) indicated that the greater the number of transitions or changes that the elementary aged child experienced the less likely the child was to show adequate adjustment. The third explanation focuses on the altered or changed family structure which results from the divorce (Moxnes 2003). The child must cope with the change in relationship with both the residential and non-residential parents as well as changed relationships with extended family members. The addition of a step-parent and step-siblings also changes the family structure. These change in family structure lead to changes in parenting practices and parent-child relationships as a result of divorce.

Several types of measures such as cognitive ability, achievement in school, and social-emotional variables that comprise the construct of social competence, have been used to reflect the individual's adjustment to the stress of divorce. Three types of resources, personal, interpersonal and ecological, have been identified that affect the individual's vulnerability and form the construct of economic and social capital (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Temperament, intellectual ability, gender and age are personal resources that influence the individual's vulnerability. Interpersonal resources that affect adjustment include ties of affection within the family and social relationships outside the family (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Among the ecological variables that have been found to enhance or inhibit vulnerability are socioeconomic status, income, level of maternal education and family climate.

### **Research Findings regarding Children's Adjustment to Divorce**

Having presented evidence regarding the increased number of U.S. children who are affected by divorce as well as some of the interpersonal and ecological factors associated with living in a divorced family, the remainder of this article will focus on providing a developmental perspective of research findings pertaining to children's adjustment to divorce. It will incorporate evidence regarding the personal resources of gender and age and their relationship to the child's adjustment to divorce.

The adjustment process is divided into three stages, the immediate crisis, the short-term aftermath, and the long-range aftermath (Kalter 1990). Moreover, this section will focus on personal factors that pertain to the adjustment of children from infancy to young adulthood. It will focus on gender and age-related effects as well as other factors that may serve a protective role such as cognitive ability and temperament.

Information included in this section summarizes findings from both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies as well as from studies that collected data from clinical populations as well as non-clinical groups of divorced and intact families. Based on the author's experiences with school-aged children experiencing divorce, information from clinical populations was included so that the full range of adjustment possibilities would be included. Some data was collected via survey methods while other findings were derived from multi-method studies. The methodological strengths and limitations of the various types of data collection have been discussed by Amato (2006); Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen (1999); McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) and will not be discussed in order to constrain the length of this article..

### **Infants and Toddlers**

Kalter (1990) describes several behaviors that may alert parents that their infant and toddler is experiencing distress. These include (a) regressive changes in motor activity, language, toilet training, and emotional independence, (b) sleeping and eating issues and (c) emotional lability. The emotional lability may be manifested in more intense reactions to environmental events, difficulty managing frustration, anger due to disruptions in routines that typically fulfilled one or more of the child's needs, or fearful behaviors. Some infants/toddlers withdraw from active engagement with caregivers or from activities that they formerly enjoyed. According to Kalter, these latter two behaviors should produce immediate concern on the part of the parent(s). In addition when the other signs of stress such as changes in eating/sleeping behaviors or regression of developmental milestones occur over a prolonged period of time parents should be concerned.

**The Immediate Crisis Stage.** Regardless of the age of the child, the immediate crisis period initiates major changes in the life of the family as well as the structure of the family that begins when the parents separate and one parent, usually the father, leaves the residence (King and Goldman 1988). Typically this stage involves disruption of daily routines, conflict between parents, and decreased availability of parents who are experiencing emotional upheaval. Parents may experience a range of intense emotions that can oscillate between wounded pride, anger, depression as well as guilt on the part of the parent who initiated or provoked the separation. There may be on-going conflict between the parents (Emery 1999). In addition, previous day care arrangements may be altered and care giving relationships disrupted.

The impact of these changes in relationships and routines leads to disorientation and confusion for infants and toddlers (Kalter 1990). They are unable to anticipate the changes and understand what is happening or why their lives are changing. Kalter (1990) suggested that the

intense emotions that parents may exhibit may be overwhelming to the young child and impact his immature ability to regulate his own emotions.

The Short-term Aftermath Stage. During the immediate aftermath stage, the young child may begin to experience a more predictable schedule. Those whose daily lives do not assume a more predictable nature may experience a shattered sense of security.

**Long Range Aftermath.** The Long Range Aftermath stage is usually not reached until the infant and/or toddler has become a preschool-aged child. Typically they experience a sense of loss as the involvement of the father wanes over time.

### **Preschool children**

By three to five years of age, many children irrespective of their parents' marital status, have transitioned to day care or preschool settings because the mother has returned to the workforce (Kalter 1990). The preschool stage is also the time when the child typically begins to exhibit emotional separation and greater independence from the primary caregiver.

Recognizing signs of distress in preschoolers may be somewhat easier than with infants and toddlers as preschoolers are more verbal and are more likely to be able to express thoughts and feelings in words. Reactions to distress may manifest themselves in loss of developmental milestones, failure to achieve developmental accomplishments, and emotional lability as well as a range of diverse emotions including anger, fear, sadness, and withdrawal (Kalter 1990). These reactions to distress may be expressed behaviorally through changes in sleeping and/or eating habits as well as regression of skills in the motor, language, and social-emotional areas. Some children lose their independence with respect to toilet training while others exhibit fears in situations where they were formerly comfortable. In ascertaining whether some of the fears exhibited are part of the normal maturation process, the observer needs to focus on the intensity

and duration of these feelings as well as the degree to which they interfere with the normal development of the child. Some parents who are experiencing emotional upheaval resulting from the divorce may discourage the child from developing emotional independence or turn to the child as a source of emotional comfort which will alter the course of the parent-child relationship.

**The Immediate Crisis Stage.** If the care giving setting remains constant, it can provide a sense of consistency for the preschool-aged child as the child adjusts to changes created by the divorce (Kalter 1990).

**The Short-term Aftermath Stage.** In the short-term aftermath stage, a preschool child may use his idiosyncratic logic to explain the changes resulting from parental separation/divorce. Much of this logic may involve transductive reasoning, reasoning from event to event, (Ginsberg & Opper 1969). Some children construct their own version of social reality that includes thoughts about what might happen next. The reasons provided by the child's understanding of the social and economic changes in the family following separation/divorce may contribute to the development of diverse emotions including anger, feelings of loss (grief), loneliness, rejection, damaged self-esteem, guilt, and anxiety (Kalter 1990). Some of the angry feelings which the child exhibits may result from the vicarious experience of witnessing parental conflict and hostility. Some preschoolers displace anger toward their parents on to teachers, peers or toys. Intense emotions felt by the child may produce sleeping issues such as difficulty falling asleep, toilet accidents at night, or nightmares. It may be difficult for a preschool-aged child to articulate these diverse feelings. As a means of coping, some preschool children will distance themselves from parental conflict by going outside to play or playing in their room.

Information from the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage documented that the play of preschool-aged boys from divorced families was less socially and cognitively mature for at least two years after the divorce (Hetherington, et. al. 1982). In contrast the play of girls from divorced families was less mature only in the period immediately following the divorce. Moreover ratings for preschool-aged boys living in divorced families indicated that the boys were less happy and more anxious over a longer time period than the girls. Moreover, ratings for preschool-aged boys living in divorced homes indicated that they were less happy than the girls. Quite possibly for the boys loss of the same gender parent may affect their happiness.

**Long Range Aftermath.** By the long range period, preschool aged children's construction of reality may be more realistic and they have recovered their sense of trust in the custodial parent (Kalter 1990)t. At this stage, the initial disengagement of the father from the parent-child relationship may affect a male child's gender identity especially if he has little contact with other males as role models. The lack of attachment to the estranged father may cause the child to be anxious during visits and disrupt the tenuous father-child relationship. Moreover, the child may perceive the visits with the father as the mother's attempt to send him/her away.

### **Early Elementary School**

The early elementary school years typically encompass grades 1 through 3 and children range in age from six to eight years. Children in early elementary school have gained cognitive skills that enable them to think about alternatives and future experiences as well as fantasize about what could happen (Kalter 1990). These cognitive gains make joint custody arrangements more viable than for younger children. Early elementary-aged children can anticipate more

readily a schedule of moving back and forth between two households. Separation from one parent becomes more tolerable due to more advanced time and spatial concepts. In spite of the gains in cognitive skills, early elementary-aged children are still prone to egocentric causal relationships, thus they may believe that they caused the divorce-related events.

The early elementary school child is still emotionally dependent upon parents for feelings of safety, security, and positive self-esteem but they are able to exhibit more emotional independence as they venture into the school and neighborhood environments. Gender role identity continues to develop through relationships with each parent.

According to Kalter (1990), sadness and increased fear are common stress reactions displayed by early elementary-aged children who are experiencing divorce. For some children, sadness may be expressed overtly through crying, looking sad, talking about feeling sad or through withdrawal from previously pleasurable activities while for other children the sadness is masked through denying that the divorce is occurring or believing that the parents will reunite. Some early elementary children who experience divorce may exhibit depressive reactions as well as anger and general anxiety. Other behavioral reactions include displaying atypical fears and loss of or failure to achieve developmental accomplishments.

Block, Block and Gjerde (1986) used a prospective design that focused on pre-divorce and post-divorce levels of behavior. They concluded that for many children from divorced families the behavioral difficulties predated the separation and/or divorce of their parents.

**The Immediate Crisis Stage.** In the immediate crisis stage, early elementary children may feel overwhelmed by sadness at losing their “family” and the conflict which they witness between their parents (Kalter 1990; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980). Irrespective of the amount of contact that the child has with the father, the quality of the relationship changes which creates a

sense of loss for the child. Some children are overcome by sadness which may be exhibited as excessive crying and preoccupation with grief while others become obstinate, angry or aggressive. In either case, the child's emotions may interfere with his ability to concentrate at school which disrupts the learning process. Children in this stage may worry about having to care for themselves. The inability to manage emotions causes them to withdraw from pleasurable activities with friends and classmates. The combination of worry and lack of pleasure in formerly pleasurable activities may be symptomatic of a depressive reaction which can escalate into full-blown depression (Kalter, 1990).

**The Short-term Aftermath Stage.** As the child enters the short-term aftermath stage, he may continue to grieve over the losses in his life including changes in the family constellation, changes in residence, and quite possibly leaving his former school for a new school. If not constantly reminded of their parents' divorce, the child may be able to focus on school and engage in play with friends and family members. If the parent is still exhibiting signs of distress, the early elementary aged child may take on the role of helper and assumes responsibility for making decisions that are more adult-like, thus disrupting the boundaries between the parent-child relationship and creating an enmeshment between the custodial parent and child (Wallerstein 1991).

Kinard and Reinherz (1984) reported that third grade children living in recently disrupted families had significantly more problems with attention in school than children in never-disrupted families or families that were disrupted during the child's preschool years. These results suggested that although the immediate impact of divorce may interfere with the child's ability to attend to school-related tasks, the frequency of off-task behavior diminishes with time.

Girls are more likely at this age to display internalizing behaviors which are sometimes mistaken as shyness or lack of assertiveness but which do not interfere with other aspects of development.

**Long Range Aftermath.** At the long range stage, the length of time that has elapsed since the parental divorce is related to children's adjustment. Those children who were infants or toddlers or even preschool-aged at the time of the parental divorce do not usually become enmeshed with the custodial parent who is usually the mother (Kalter 1990). In contrast to those children who have more recently experienced parental divorce, those who experienced divorce as young children may not remember family life prior to the divorce nor yearn to regain it. Boys, in particular, are more prone to exhibit angry aggressive behaviors both at school and at home (Hetherington et al. 1985). Some boys may adopt the anti-social behaviors of the non-custodial parent. The angry, aggressive and anti-social behaviors directed at the mother may contribute to difficulties in the mother-child relationship. For girls whose mothers remarry at this time, the remarriage causes a major disruption in their close relationship to their mother.

### **Later Elementary-Aged Children**

Children in this stage are typically in mid third grade to the end of sixth grade or nine to twelve years of age. Although they have matured cognitively and are capable of a fairly realistic understanding of divorce, they may experience intense feelings of divided loyalty as one or both parents attempt to engage them in an alliance. Because of the social and emotional growth that they have acquired, children in this age group are gaining an increasing sense of independence. Children in later elementary school also engage in more elaborate psychological defenses against emotional distress (Kalter 1990). Painful feelings of helplessness and sadness are converted into anger which protects them from feeling vulnerable.

**The Immediate Crisis Stage.** In the immediate crisis stage, children may have been aware of discord between the parents but accepted it as part of their daily life. The older elementary school child may appear emotionally detached rather than show signs of depressive reactions or acknowledge the feelings of loss with respect to changes in the father-child relationship. Boys are more likely to display academic and aggressive behavioral problems at school whereas girls may be overly solicitous of one or both parents and be extremely helpful as well as congenial at home and school (Hetherington et al., 1985). Girls in this age group appear to weather the stresses of divorce by coping in a very different manner than boys (Hetherington et al. 1985; Kalter 1990). Girls tended to exhibit more internalizing behaviors such as crying, self-criticism, expressing fears or worries and seeking reassurance.

**The Short-term Aftermath Stage.** During the short-term aftermath stage, custodial mothers may begin to feel burdened by the social, emotional, and economic consequences of divorce (Emery 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly 1980). As a result the parent may turn to the child, typically a girl, who is able to assume and carry out household tasks such as meal preparation or caring for younger siblings, empathize and understand the parent's feelings, and engage in adult-like discussions. In providing support to their parent, this child feels burdened and is distracted from the developmental tasks of developing greater independence from their family and developing relationships with friends and adults outside the family. When children are drawn into the conflicts of their parents because they can assume adult-like roles, the short-term aftermath stage may be prolonged for years (Kalter 1990).

**Long Range Aftermath.** During the long-range period, older elementary children may be exposed to the stress created by dating and remarriage of their parents which creates several conflicts that the child must cope with (Kalter 1990). These children must cope with a shift in the

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mother's investment from solely on the child and his/her needs to the mother's need for adult companionship and intimacy. Less time and attention which is bestowed on the child may provoke the belief that the mother loves them less. This belief calls forth attributions that the mother would care about them more deeply if they were prettier, smarter, etc. In turn, they develop angry feelings that are directed at the parent or expressed through being sullen or uncooperative. When the parent begins to date, children at this age are confronted with the need to recognize their parent's sexuality. The third conflict focuses on whether it is acceptable for the child to like and enjoy their mother's new partner or whether by doing so, the child is disloyal to the other parent. Boys are faced with the internal conflict of needing to rely on their mother for parenting support and love but are concerned that acquiescing to the demands of the parent will label them as a "momma's boy" (Kalter 1990).

Evidence regarding the adjustment of elementary-aged children focused on measures of social competence, interpersonal relationships, and academic achievement to determine the effects of living in a divorced home for boys and girls. Kurdek (1989) reported that children who lived in intact families had higher levels of adjustment than did children who lived in other family types (Kurdek, Fine & Sinclair 1994). In contrast, fourth grade children who had experienced a number of parenting transitions which were defined as experiences involving the divorce of a parent and/or the remarriage of the parent were less well adjustment than children with no or relatively few transitions (Capaldi and Patterson 1991).

Based on information from the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage, Hetherington and her associates (1985) reported that gender differences were stable over time with respect to externalizing/internalizing behaviors and early deficits in prosocial behavior. Externalizing behaviors that consisted of aversive opposition, destruction of property, verbal

aggression, and physical aggression were greater for boys living in divorced homes while internalizing behaviors, i.e., crying self-criticism, staring into space, wandering, expressing fear or worry, passive watching of other's activities, seeking reassurance, and being alone/inactive, were greater for girls from divorced homes. When young girls engaged in aggressive behavior, these behaviors were predictive of lower social competence while young boys who demonstrated early prosocial behaviors were more likely to be rated as socially competent.

Information from the National Association of School Psychologist-Kent State University Divorce Project suggested that children from intact homes were more competent than those from divorced families on 21 of 27 social-emotional measures and 8 of 9 academic measures used to measure children's adjustment to divorce (Guidubaldi 1989; Guidubaldi et al. 1984; Guidubaldi and Perry 1984). In contrast, children from divorced homes did not fare as well academically as children from two parent families (Guttman, Amir & Katz 1987; Hess & Camara 1979; Hetherington et al. 1982 and 1985; Wallerstein 1983). Children living in single parent homes had lower scores on standardized IQ tests and tests of achievement. Ratings by parents and teachers that focused on the academic skills of reading, math, and spelling were lower for children from divorced families than those from intact families (Gelbrich & Hare 1989; Guidubaldi 1989). When class standings as well as grade point averages were compared, children from divorced homes had lower class standings and grade point averages than children from intact homes (Shreeve et al. 1986). Moreover, children from divorced homes were more likely than children from intact families to have repeated a grade, to have been referred to a school psychologist for services, and/or to receive special education services (Guidubaldi, Perry & Nastasi 1986; Kinard & Reinherz 1984).

## **Adolescence**

Adolescence is a time when developmental tasks involve physiological as well as social and emotional tasks. When parents divorce, the adolescent must adapt to a second set of changes in addition to the changes that adolescents encounter as part of the maturation process. According to Kalter (1990), “the stakes are higher because teens are capable of expressing their feelings of distress and internal conflicts in ways that are dangerous to themselves and to others. They may engage in chemical abuse of drugs and/or alcohol as well as precociously and, at times, promiscuously engage in sexual activities” (p. 310). They may also be prone to run away. With respect to others, teens may hurt someone else or get into trouble with the law as a result of risk taking behaviors.

**The Immediate Crisis Stage.** At the immediate crisis stage, adolescents must cope with a number of stressors directly related to the divorce of parents. These stressors include (a) dealing with the loss of stability, support and protection that one derives from living in a cohesive family environment, (b) coping with derogatory feelings toward divorcing parents in a stage where there is a normative shift in perceptions of and feelings regarding parents which range from idealizing to denouncing parents, and (c) dealing with repercussions of egocentric thinking where they assume responsibility for the marital discord/separation. Kalter (1990) concluded that parental divorce at the adolescent stage may cause great emotional pain, damage feelings of self-esteem, and evoke fear and anger.

**The Short-term Aftermath Stage.** In the short-term aftermath stage, adolescents must move from the initial shock engendered by the parents’ separation to some form of acceptance of the divorce (Kalter 1990). Some adolescents have fantasies about their parents’ reuniting which are dashed when one or both parents enter into a meaningful relationship with another adult.

**Long Range Aftermath.** The literature provides inconsistent information regarding the long range outcome of parental divorce. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) concluded that adolescents whose parents had divorced when they were very young children appeared to cope fairly well during adolescence. In contrast, other results suggested that the well-being of adolescents and young adults is compromised by living in a divorced home. Adolescents whose parents divorced when they were in preschool or elementary school spent fewer years in school than those living in two parent families (Emery, 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Wallerstein 1991). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), citing evidence from five studies, indicated that children who have lived in single parent families are twice as likely to drop out of high school prior to graduation. In high school, comparisons of test score given in quartiles suggested that scores of children from divorced families were ranked lower than those from two parent families. The lower test score performance combined with lower grade point averages and poorer attendance suggested a pattern of underachievement was present (McClanahan and Sandefur 1994; Wallerstein 1991). In addition, when questioned about their expectations concerning college, there was a five percentage point difference between those living in divorced families versus those from intact families, 32 percent of the former group had ambitions to attend college while 37% of the latter group planned to attend college. Lower academic achievement and fewer years of education are predictive of vulnerability in later years with respect to income potential and its effect on the individual's lifestyle.

Another area of potential vulnerability for adolescents who have lived in divorced homes concerns a greater likelihood that they will become teen parents. Wallerstein (1991) reported that a number of her subjects engaged in a series of short-lived sexual relationships which would suggest they were more prone to the risk of an unplanned or untimely pregnancy. Based on

information from five studies, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) reported that 19 to 34 percent of the subjects from one parent families became mothers as compared to 11 to 22 percent for teens from intact families. Although for some males, being raised in a single parent family increased the likelihood that they would become a father in their teens (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), others tended to avoid relationships with the opposite sex (Wallerstein, 1991).

Information about the long-term psychological well-being of adolescents who had experienced the divorce of their parents while they were in preschool or elementary school (10 years later), suggested that as females moved into late adolescence, they became frightened of failure and expressed concerns about intimate interpersonal relationships (Wallerstein 1991). These concerns centered on issues of betrayal, abandonment, and not being loved. At the fifteen year follow-up, almost 50 percent of the young women reported that they were worried and angry, engaged in self-deprecating behaviors and continued to demonstrate evidence of underachievement.

### **Young Adulthood**

For today's youth the transition to young adulthood, which encompasses the years from high school graduation to approximately 26 years of age, has become more complex (Amato, 2006). In today's society, young adults are more reliant on their parents for economic support, practical assistance and advice. During young adulthood, they are establishing career trajectories as well as intimate relationships.

**Long Range Aftermath.** Information about the well-being of young adults who had lived in a single parent home created by divorce focused on measures of educational achievement, employment, and social relationships to provide information about long-term effects of living in a single parent family. With respect to educational attainment, several studies

have documented that young adults who lived in divorced families tend to have fewer years of education (Amato, 2006; Hetherington, 2006; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Information summarized by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) from five longitudinal studies suggested that approximately 48 to 54 percent of young adults who have lived in a one parent family enrolled in college while 15 to 20 percent graduate from college. In contrast, 51 to 61 percent of young adults who have consistently lived in a two parent family enroll in college. Of that group 21 to 37% graduate from college.

Entrance into the workforce and economic independence has also been used to measure the well-being of young adults who are not preparing for careers by attending college. According to McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), young adults from one parent families are 1.5 times more likely to be idle, i.e., they are not consistently employed nor engaged in a job that helps them build vocational skills. Because young adults from single parent families are less likely to enroll and complete college or be gainfully employed, they have fewer financial resources at their disposal (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

A third measure of well-being focused on social relationships. The number of teens who become mothers as adolescents or young adults is higher for those raised in single parent families than those raised in two parent families, suggesting the premature formation of a family and the concomitant stress engendered by this event (Amato, 2006; Hetherington, 2006; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). By the age of 20, 30 percent of the females raised in single parent families had formed their own families whereas only 10 percent of males raised in similar circumstances had formed their own family. These figures do not take into account the number of young adults who co-habit rather than marry. Wallerstein (1991) reported that as girls entered young adulthood, they were involved in multiple

short-lived sexual relationships and impulsive marriages that ended in divorce. Based on self-reported information, Amato (2006) concluded that young adults who had experienced the divorce of their parents were more likely to report more conflicts in their own marriages and a greater likelihood that the marriage would end in divorce. They were also more likely to have weaker ties with their own parents. This has implications for the availability of support systems in times of stress.

Information about the psychological well-being of these young adults suggested that in comparison with young adults raised in an intact family, young adults from divorced families do not fare as well. Data from retrospective self-report studies showed that young adults from single parent families had more symptoms of psychological distress and reported less happiness with life (Amato, 2006). Although conduct disorders declined in adulthood, other problematic behaviors such as substance abuse and difficulty with the law remained higher in youth from conflicted, divorced and remarried families (Hetherington 2006). When the long-term effects of divorce were the focus of comparison, young adult males, who had initially as well as longitudinally demonstrated more negative effects than girls with respect to school difficulties, peer relationships and control of aggression, no longer exhibited these problems (Wallerstein 1991).

In summary, this survey of the literature suggested that divorce may have both immediate and long-term negative effects on children that were dependent upon their gender and age (Amato, 2006; Emery, 1999; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & McLoughlin, 1983; Hetherington, 2006; Hetherington et al., 1982, 1985; McClanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Warshak, 1992). For example, evidence of specific interruptions of development included disrupted play patterns in preschool

children (Hetherington, et al 1982) and early entrance into motherhood (Wallerstein 1991), depressed academic achievement in elementary aged children, adolescents, and young adults (Guidubaldi 1989; Guidubaldi and Perry 1984; Hess and Camara 1979; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Wallerstein 1991), problems with interpersonal relationships (Amato 2006; Hetherington et al. 1985; Wallerstein 1991), as well as emotional and behavior problems (Hetherington 2006; Hetherington et al. 1985; Guidubaldi 1989; Wallerstein 1991).

There is considerable variation in children's and adults' emotional adjustment to divorce but most children and young adults adapt and function within the normal range of adjustment when one views the process of adjustment over a long time (McHenry & Price, 2005). When children experience long-term effects from the divorce, these effects are usually associated with pre-divorce factors including poor adjustment prior to the divorce (Block, Block and Gjerde 1986) and high levels of stress, conflict or hostility (Emery 1999; Hetherington 2006). Emery (1999) cautions that those children who may appear to rebound successfully from the divorce may not be invulnerable. Children and college students report on-going distress as well as painful feelings even in the long term aftermath stage.

It is imperative that children have a source of support who will listen to their feelings and provide unconditional regard. Parents need to recognize that a consistent routine will provide a sense of safety for the child. Parents also need to be willing to set aside their personal differences and cooperate with each other to promote the well-being of children living in divorced situations.

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