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**Divorce transitions: An exploration of the risk and protective factors associated with children's psychological adjustment ;  
Divorce transitions: Identifying risk and understanding resilience in children's adjustment to parental separation**

Esther Kint  
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Running Head: CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT TO DIVORCE

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Divorce Transitions: An Exploration of the Risk and Protective Factors Associated with  
Children's Psychological Adjustment

Divorce Transitions: Identifying Risk and Understanding Resilience in Children's  
Adjustment to Parental Separation

Esther Kint

A report submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor  
of Science Honours (Psychology), Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,

Edith Cowan University.

November 2007

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Esther Kint

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Date: 10.12.07

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Associated with Children's Psychological Adjustment

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Esther Kint

### Abstract

This review provides a critical analysis of the risk and protective factors associated with children's adjustment to divorce. By drawing together some of the key findings and assumptions to emerge from the literature, it attempts to show that although divorce presents elevated stressors for children, their adjustment is influenced by multiple operating factors that combine to either protect them or make them more vulnerable to adversity. Since the majority of children are able to cope successfully with the divorce transition, a resiliency approach is adopted to establish how positive aspects of children's lives combine with stressful events or risk to reduce the likelihood that they will be affected in a negative manner. Limitations of the research are discussed, together with suggestions for future research.

Esther Kint

Associate Professor Lynne Cohen

Dr. Alan Campbell

August 2007

## Divorce Transitions: An Exploration of the Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Children's Psychological Adjustment

There is considerable agreement in the research literature that children in divorced families are at increased risk for the development of psychological, behavioural, social and academic problems in comparison to those in traditional, nuclear families (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 2003; Pedro-Carroll, 2001). Many researchers assert that parental divorce is an inherently negative event that predisposes children to dysfunction and developmental delay, unless moderated by protective factors that buffer against its detrimental effects (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In Australia alone, nearly 50% of all divorces involve children and of these divorcing households an average of two children per family are affected (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). In recent figures, this means that for the total 26,087 divorces involving children granted in 2005, a staggering 49,358 children from newly divorced families were at risk (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

Several explanations have been offered as to why divorce is such a risk for a child's well-being, but most can be understood as events causing significant stress for the child. According to the theory of social stress, the transitions that accompany divorce result in numerous stressors for the child and the more stressors the child has to endure, the more negative the effects (Moxnes, 2003). These stressors may include, but are not limited to; loss of the non-residential parent, parental conflict, diminished parenting, loyalty conflicts, economic hardship, relocation, and parental re-partnering (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Pedro-Carroll, 2001).

In the period immediately following parental divorce, many children experience emotional distress harboring anger, resentment and even guilt in response to the confusion and apprehension over their changing life circumstances (Hetherington, 2003). In addition, complicating children's attempts to cope with the major changes initiated by separation,

parents are often preoccupied with their own emotional responses to divorce and may be unable to provide their child with the support they need through this most difficult time (Kelly & Emery, 2003). As a result, some children are vulnerable to the cumulative stressors and suffer prolonged developmental delays (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Other children appear to adjust to their new family situation with no apparent difficulty, only to show delayed effects at a later stage in their life, such as adolescence (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Most children however, adapt to their new family structure within a two to three year period and cope successfully with their parents divorce, despite its many adaptive challenges (Hetherington et al., 1989).

#### A Focus on Resilience

Historically, research on children and divorce has primarily focused on risk factors for negative outcomes rather than on protective factors that influence positive outcomes (Emery & Forehand, 1994). Many researchers share the common belief that the optimal child-rearing environment occurs in intact families with two married parents who are biologically related to their children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). As such, the general consensus is that divorce deviates from this favourable family structure, placing children at increased risk of developing adjustment problems. A large body of empirical research supports this notion, with the majority of adjustment problems relating to conduct disorders, antisocial behaviour, academic difficulties, depression, anxiety and lowered self-esteem (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1989; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

It is only recently that researchers have become interested in approaching the issue of how positive aspects of children's lives combine with stressful events or risk to reduce the likelihood that they will be affected in a negative manner. From this 'resiliency' perspective, researchers have attempted to isolate the factors that buffer or protect children from the stressors of divorce. Although research on divorce that utilises a resiliency

perspective is scarce, theorists have suggested that children at risk (due to parental divorce and its inherent stressors) may become resilient if they possess (a) positive personality dispositions, (b) a positive family environment that provides nurturance and support, and (c), a social environment (legal, educational and community) that reinforces coping efforts and is conducive to healthy development (Garmezy, 1981; Pedro-Carroll, 2001). In essence, this resiliency perspective asserts that children's potential for healthy development varies according to the nature of the stressors they encounter as well as the child's active coping style and level of social support networks they have available.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature in relation to children's adjustment to parental divorce. The paper aims to demonstrate the way in which divorce can negatively influence children's adjustment and wellbeing, by identifying risk factors or stressors that children are commonly faced with during and following parental divorce. In addition, protective factors that contribute to children's successful adjustment post-divorce will be discussed, identifying pathways to resilience. The review will primarily focus on three aspects associated with children's adjustment to their parents' divorce: individual characteristics, including age, gender and personality; family process, including parent-child relationships, parental conflict, sibling relations, socioeconomic status; and support networks, including grandparent, peer and school-based support. A risk and resiliency perspective is used to understand some of the individual child characteristics that increase children's vulnerability or protect them from the stressors associated with their parents' divorce, how family functioning and economics can positively and negatively affect children's adjustment, and finally, how the presence or lack of supportive networks influences a child's ability to cope successfully with the divorce process. The research will be explored and critically reviewed, with suggestions for future research and implications for policy and practice.

### Individual Characteristics

The vulnerability of some children and the resiliency displayed by others during and after parental divorce has led researchers to examine the influence of children's individual characteristics on their adjustment to divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Empirical studies have identified a number of individual factors related to children's post-divorce adjustment. The most frequently cited characteristics are the child's gender, age, personality, and coping style.

#### *Gender*

Although earlier studies frequently cited gender differences in children's post-divorce adjustment, with the general consensus that divorce has more negative consequences for boys than for girls (Hetherington, 1989), more recent studies have found that gender differences in response to divorce are less pronounced and consistent than was previously believed (Amato, 2001; Howell, Portes & Brown, 1997). Amato's (2001) meta-analysis of 67 studies comparing children from divorced and married families, found no gender differences in most domains of adjustment, except that boys had more conduct problems than girls. He concluded therefore that divorce is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children, irrespective of gender (Amato, 2001). Similar findings have been reported by Peterson and Zill (1986) who found that both boys and girls of divorce had more behavioural problems when they lived with the opposite-sex parent. Since children primarily reside with their mother, the authors postulated that the higher incidences of adjustment problems among boys within the literature may be a direct reflection of standard post-divorce living arrangements. Indeed, this notion is supported by other researchers who claim that children do better in the custody of the same-sex parent because of the presence of a role model for sex-identity development (Zaslow, 1989).

In addition to family structure, it is also important to differentiate between the type of behaviour being measured (i.e., externalising vs. internalising) if gender differences are to be correctly documented. Several researchers have suggested that boys and girls may be equally disturbed by their parents divorce, but the way in which they manifest such disturbances may differ (Howell et al., 1997; Zaslow, 1989). According to Zaslow (1989), boys may primarily exhibit their disturbance through externalising behaviour (e.g., aggression, delinquency, impulsivity, substance abuse), whereas girls are more prone to exhibit symptoms through internalising behaviour (e.g., anxiety, depression, somatic complaints). As a result, boys' higher incidence of problematic behaviours in response to divorce may be over-represented, as these more overt behaviours are easily detectable and more likely to come to the attention of parents and health professionals than the internalising behaviours characteristic of girls. Hence, research findings suggest that previously detected gender differences may be due to an interaction between child gender and gender of the residential parent (family structure), or due to the type of behaviour being measured. It seems that gender differences appear to diminish when controlling for these effects. Future studies utilising qualitative research methods are needed to assess the nature of problem behaviours in a variety of custodial settings, and to examine in depth the different ways in which boys and girls handle divorce-related stress.

### *Age*

The role of age or developmental status of a child in relation to adjustment to divorce has been extensively researched (Allison & Furstenburg, 1989; Howell et al., 1997; Kalter & Rembar, 1981; Wallerstein, 1987), however, these studies have produced inconsistent results. It appears that a child's age at the time of parental divorce influences their symptom configuration, but the extent to which this occurs is unclear (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). In an attempt to clarify and better understand the significance of age for

children's post-divorce adjustment, Allison and Furstenburg (1989) conducted a longitudinal study controlling for variations in children's age at the time of separation and the number of years since separation. The sample consisted of 1,197 children between that age range of 7 to 11 years, with differing family compilations (divorced or separated families, high-conflict non-divorced families, and non-divorced stable families). Separate interviews were conducted with children and their closest parent on dimensions of family background, parent-child relations, and the child's social and psychological adjustment.

Consistent with previous research, the results of the study indicated that children who experienced divorce within their immediate families were significantly worse off than those who did not, with respect to several measures of problem behaviour, academic achievement and psychological distress. In terms of age effects, the study revealed a decline in negative effect with increasing age, suggesting that young children were more vulnerable to adjustment problems compared to their older peers. This is consistent with several research findings that suggest that divorce has its most harmful effects when children are very young at the time of separation because they do not yet possess the cognitive capabilities to cope sufficiently (Hetherngton & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kalter & Rembar, 1981). Additionally, an increase in negative effect with time since separation was evident, suggesting that divorce may be a destructive event that results in pervasive adjustment problems for children over an extended period of time (Allison & Furstenburg, 1989).

Interestingly, this greater vulnerability of young children to divorce has not been reported by other researchers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Wallerstein, 1987). Wallerstein (1987) believed that young children are less burdened by divorce because they retain fewer memories of the painful process following divorce and their opportunity in later years to work through their relationship with the non-residential parent. In a ten-year follow-up

study of 38 children (16 to 18 years old) who were less than six years of age when their parents divorced, Wallerstein (1987) found that children who were youngest at the time of divorce had coped better than their older siblings. Similarly, Amato and Keith (1991) in a meta-analysis involving 92 studies found that school aged children fared worse than preschoolers. This was true across all domains of adjustment measured, including academic achievement, conduct, psychological and social adjustment, self-concept and parent-child relations.

The contradictory findings within the literature stress the importance of age specificity when considering the significance of a child's age at the time of divorce. While a clear distinction is often made between children and adolescents within existing research, a more accurate classification system is needed for the 'young children' subgroup. Furthermore, both short-term and long-term adjustment must be considered. The age of the child at the time of separation and divorce, the time since the separation or divorce, and the child's current age are all important variables to consider when determining the significance of age to children's post-divorce adjustment. Future studies need to engage in further longitudinal analysis controlling for these variables so that the effects of age on children's divorce adjustment can be more accurately interpreted.

#### *Personality Disposition, Temperament and Emotional Regulation*

Temperament is generally defined as the psychobiological component of personality that is responsible for an individual's emotional arousal, expression, and self-regulation (Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994). Researchers have found that individual differences in temperament can either increase vulnerability or facilitate resilience among children of divorce, as a result of the different coping strategies used by children with different temperaments (Wachs, 2006). Children who have easy temperaments, who are intelligent, competent, independent, and who have an internal locus of control, are more likely to elicit

positive responses and support from others, facilitating their ability to adjust under stressful circumstances (Hetherington et al., 1998). In contrast, children with difficult temperaments such as those who are highly impulsive, are more likely to elicit negative responses from parents and other support networks around them, and may be less able to adapt to this negativity when it occurs (Lengua, Wolchik, Sandler & West, 2000).

A study conducted by Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik and Curran (1999) was undertaken to assess the direct and indirect effects of temperament on the threat appraisals, coping behaviour (active and avoidant) and psychological symptoms (depression and conduct problems) of 9 to 12 year old children of divorce. The sample consisted of 223 mothers and children who had experienced divorce within the last two years. Participants were interviewed by trained professionals on two separate occasions, firstly at their homes using computer assisted interview technology, and a second time at a research center. During the interview process, mothers' were given a questionnaire to assess ratings of their children's temperament and children reported on their own temperament.

The results of the study indicated that temperament is an important predictor of children's threat appraisal and coping behaviour, and additionally, that temperament and threat appraisals are important predictors of children's post-divorce adjustment. Specifically, children who were higher in negative emotionality perceived events as more threatening than children lower in negative emotionality. In contrast, children displaying positive emotionality viewed the divorce process as less threatening regardless of the effects of negative emotionality. A possible explanation could be that children high in positive emotionality are more responsive to rewarding cues in the environment, and thus may be more likely to view stressful events such as the divorce process as a challenge to be conquered rather than one to be burdened with (Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994).

In relation to the effects of temperament and threat appraisals on psychological symptoms, the results indicated that negative emotionality and impulsivity was associated with higher incidences of depression and conduct problems, whereas, positive emotionality and attention focusing was associated with lower incidences of depression and misconduct (Lengua et al., 1999). As the effects of each temperament variable were unique, the results provide evidence that temperament variables have independent as well as potentially additive effects on children's risk or resilience in response to divorce and other stressors. For at-risk children, a temperament pattern characterised as high in positive emotionality is linked to resilience, as these children elicit higher levels of positive feedback in social interactions and resultantly have more positive social relationships (Lengua et al., 2000). Conversely, a temperament pattern characterised by negative emotionality is linked to reduced resilience, as these children are more likely to experience negative emotional arousal in response to divorce-related stress, in turn making the child more vulnerable to developing adjustment problems (Lengua et al., 2000).

Further evidence to support the notion that children adjust better to divorce if they engage in more affective coping has been found by several other researchers. Katz and Gottman (1997) found that children's intelligence together with their emotional regulation abilities were strong predictors of resiliency in the face of divorce-related stress.

Specifically, the authors found that children who were able to calm themselves down from emotional arousal or not get aroused at all did not exhibit any forms of psychological distress or maladjustment. In addition, children's intelligence helped protect them from academic difficulties and conflictual relations with peers (Kate & Gottman, 1997).

Similarly, Mazur, Wolchik, Virdin, Sandler and West (1999) found that active coping strategies such as thinking positively about divorce-related events, having an optimistic outlook, and believing that one can cope with stressful demands protected children from

depression. Thus, in maximising resilience among children of divorce, it appears that interventions need to look at teaching children how to regulate their emotions more effectively and how to re-appraise the divorce situation in a more positive light.

### Family Process

Divorce is a challenging ordeal that involves many disruptions in family functioning and severe emotional distress for the lives of all family members concerned. Independent of the long-term consequences of divorce, the initial period of separation is particularly stressful for both parents and children, who must learn to adjust to their altered family environment (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children are often ill-prepared for the abrupt departure of one parent from the household (usually the father) and this immediate and total absence of contact with their loved one is considerably distressing. Intensifying children's stress is the frequent transitioning between two households. They must integrate and adapt to unfamiliar schedules, often without consultation, as well as compete with conflicting rules and attitudes that differ according to each parent's will. Whilst most children will eventually adjust to their altered family situation within a two to three year period (Kelly & Emery, 2003), the child's ability to cope successfully with the stressors of the initial separation is highly dependent upon the family processes which follow.

Successful adaptation is mediated by a number of factors, including parental conflict, parent-child relations, contact with the non-residential parent, sibling relations, and family economics.

### *Parental Conflict*

Many researchers agree that parental conflict poses a greater risk to children's adjustment than divorce itself, as evidenced by the wide range of deleterious outcomes exhibited by children from divorced, intact, and re-married families (El-Sheikh, Harger & Whitson, 2001; Forehand, Neighbors, Devine & Armisted, 1994; Morrison & Coiro, 1999;

Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Poor behavioural outcomes, including aggression, conduct disorders and delinquency are among the most frequently cited within the literature.

However, emotional difficulties in adaptation have also been reported, with many studies revealing that disputing parents are more likely to have depressed and withdrawn children (Kline, Johnston & Tschann, 1991; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007).

The type of parental conflict seems to play an especially important role in the adjustment of children. Conflict that directly involves the child, that is threatening or abusive, or in which the child feels responsible or caught in the middle has the most negative effects on children's adjustment (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982). Children report that seeing their parents fight is one of the most upsetting aspects of divorce (Wolchik, Sandler, Braver & Fogas, 1989).

Although many couples reduce their conflict once separated, some continue to remain entrenched in conflict patterns, engaging in messy child custody battles or spiteful bickering with their former spouse. As a result, children may experience loyalty conflicts and turmoil when they feel torn between two parents and may be used as pawns to express parents' anger (Buchanan et al., 1991). Furthermore, because many disputes are likely to involve issues such as living arrangements and visitation, children may blame themselves or may feel responsible for resolving the issue, placing them under immense pressure.

A longitudinal study examining the direct and indirect effects of parental conflict on children's post-divorce behavioural and emotional adjustment was conducted by Kline, Johnston and Tschann (1991). The sample consisted of 154 children and their parents, who had filed for divorce within the previous 12 months. Families were recruited through court records and by community institutions that serve divorcing families, and were mostly Caucasian. At commencement, 24 children were preschoolers (ages 2 to 5), 65 were young children (ages 6 to 11) and 65 were adolescents (ages 12 to 16). Several measures of

assessment were used, including self-report questionnaires, direct observation of parent-child interactions, clinical interviews, and projective tests such as the Divorce Apperception Test (Huntington, 1985). Clinical ratings were conducted on three variables: parental conflict, parent-child relationships, and child functioning.

The results showed that post-divorce parental conflict contributes directly and indirectly to children's poorer emotional and behavioural adjustment, largely through its impact on the parent-child relationship. The indirect effect of parental conflict demonstrated that mothers who were involved in greater post-divorce conflict were less warm and empathic with children. This relationship continued one and two years post-divorce, suggesting the perpetuating effect of parental conflict on children's adjustment, through the damaging influence it has on the parent-child relationship. Hence, divorce education programs for parents that can help to manage and reduce post-divorce parental conflict might be the most beneficial, particularly if they are aimed at resolving conflict more constructively and foster good parent-child relations (Grych, 2005).

Further evidence to substantiate the detrimental effects of parental conflict on children's adjustment was obtained by Shaw and Emery (1987), who compared parental conflict and other indices of family adversity among children whose parents were separated. Using a sample of 40 separated mothers and their school-aged children (ages 5 to 12 years), separate interviews were conducted for mother and child involving five measures to assess different areas of functioning. These included: a background information questionnaire, the Acrimony Scale (Emery, 1982), the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock & Erbaugh, 1961), the Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), and the Perceived Competence Scales (Harter, 1982).

Results of the study revealed that parental conflict, maternal well-being and low family income were significant predictors of children's adjustment. Additionally, parental conflict significantly affected children's adjustment when it occurred simultaneously with maternal depression, which accounted for an increase in internalising and externalising behaviour problems among children. However, minimal relations were found between mothers' self-reports of depression and children's perceived competence ratings, suggesting mothers' ratings of their children's internalising behaviour could very well be attributed to their own depression. Future studies need to consider more reliable measures for assessment that reduce observer bias such as in-depth interviews, which in addition to standardised tests may be advantageous for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of child adjustment. Nevertheless, despite the limitation, the present results support the notion that parental conflict exerts both independent and additive effects on children's adjustment.

#### *Parent-child Relations*

The post-divorce relationships between parents and children are especially important mediators of children's adjustment. Many researchers have identified that a quality relationship with at least one parent (preferably both) is required to help protect children from the many post-divorce adjustment difficulties they may encounter (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Pedro-Carroll, 2001). Since most children live with their mothers following divorce, considerable attention has been given to the quality of parent-child relations involving residential mothers. Specifically, close, supportive relationships with authoritative mothers who are warm but firm are generally associated with positive adjustment outcomes in children following divorce (Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington, 1999; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin & Dornbusch, 1993). Conversely, mothers who have conflictive relationships

with their children, or who display parenting behaviour characterised by irritability, coercion, neglect and weak affection, put their children at high risk for adjustment difficulties. Such children may become disengaged from their families, becoming withdrawn and depressed, others may become involved with anti-social peers - one of the most potent pathways to delinquent and destructive behaviour (Hetherington et al., 1998).

A longitudinal study by Wood et al. (2004) attempted to extract the elements of the parent-child relationship that contribute to poorer adjustment outcomes for children, with a particular focus on the mediating effects of depressed parenting. The study assessed the developmental trajectory of depressive and withdrawn parenting, comparing divorced single mother families and non-divorced two-parent families. Data were collected from 209 school-age children (mean age of 9) and their parents and teachers over three years, and involved a series of interviews and questionnaires. The results of the study indicated that withdrawn/depressive parenting among divorced single mothers was linked to increased problem behaviours for children. A possible explanation could be that children are reacting to the effects that divorce has had on the mother's mood by making a bid for 'negative' attention in order to re-engage the mother in their lives (Wood et al., 2004). For example, a child engaging in disruptive behaviour is more likely to attract the attention of an otherwise busy or distracted single mother, or receive a reaction from other prominent carers in the child's life (e.g., teachers). Alternatively, another plausible explanation could be that children are susceptible to altered mood states that match the mood states experienced by their divorced mothers, a process known as emotional transmission (Larson & Gillman, 1999). Thus, when divorced single parents are sad, irritable or depressed, children may also experience these negative states and may have more difficulty coping emotionally.

Interestingly, while much is known about the influence of mother-child relations on children's adjustment, information about children who live with their fathers is limited. What is known is that following the initial crisis period, these fathers report less child-rearing stress, fewer behaviour problems and better parent-child relations than do mothers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996). In a study investigating the relationship between parent-child relations and psychological outcomes of children from divorced families, Clarke-Stewart and Hayward (1996) compared father and mother living arrangements to assess which environment is more favourable for children's adjustment. Children ranged in age from five to thirteen years, with roughly equal numbers of children from same-sex and opposite-sex parent living arrangements. Families were predominantly Caucasian (80%), with an average of four years since separation.

Results indicated that children living with their father were doing better than children living with their mother in terms of overall psychological well-being and problem behaviours. These results held constant even when controlling for other variables, such as family income, children's contact with the non-residential parent, and the parent's psychological adjustment. The finding was most consistent for boys, suggesting a possible advantage of same-sex living arrangements for children's well-being as reported by other researchers (i.e., Peterson & Zill, 1986; Zaslow, 1989).

While the present study offers some prominent support for the advantage of living with the father, there are some caveats that must be explored. First, these fathers are a select group who may be more child-oriented than others, and are more likely to receive primary care when children are psychologically healthy (Hetherington et al., 1998). Thus, the results may be biased in their representation of the benefits of living with the father over the mother, as children who reside with their fathers may be less prone to adjustment difficulties. Second, in terms of psychological well-being for children, a close relationship

with the father (for children living with their mothers) fully compensated for the advantages of living with the father. Thus, on the basis of the present results, it would appear that children's adjustment is strongly influenced by the quality of the parent-child relationship with the father, regardless of their living arrangements.

### *Father Involvement*

Parental divorce may threaten relations between divorced fathers and their children because of various intervening processes. Post-divorce father role confusion, legal issues, child support, and the relationship between the divorced father and the former spouse have all been identified as contributing factors that influence the quality of the father-child relationship, and consequently, are important predictors of child adjustment (Bokker, 2006; Stone, 2006). Additionally, the reduced contact following divorce may interfere substantially with the quality of the parent-child relationship. Children may experience an erosion of closeness and meaning in the parent-child relationship, and become deeply disturbed by the loss of contact with their fathers (Stone, 2006). For fathers, the transition from being a father who had the opportunity for daily involvement to one who only has visitation rights with his children is awkward and painful (Stone, 2006).

In an analysis of 63 studies concerning non-resident fathers' influences on children's adjustment, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) compared four dimensions of father involvement: payment of child support, frequency of contact, feelings of closeness, and authoritative parenting. Overall, the results of the analysis showed that frequent contact with non-resident fathers was significantly associated with children's academic success and with lower levels of internalising problems, however, this relationship was extremely weak. Furthermore, significant outcomes revealed that children tended to do better academically, and display fewer internalising and externalising problems if they felt close to their fathers and if their fathers engaged in authoritative parenting practices. Thus, it

appears that the quality rather than quantity of time children spend with their non-resident fathers is a more salient predictor of children's adjustment. Although many non-resident fathers take their children out to movies and restaurants, many tend to be permissive and overly lenient with their children when it comes to setting rules or disciplinary action (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996). Unless fathers' engage in authoritative parenting practices with their children, such as helping them with homework or talking about personal problems, they are contributing little to their children's development (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Hetherington et al., 1998). This may indeed be a direct result of the time constraints placed on non-residential fathers who want to ensure that their children enjoy themselves in the limited time they get to spend together. Hence, there seems a great need for future research to move beyond simple measures of frequency of contact and move towards isolating the elements of relationship quality.

In response to the lack of existential research concerning relationship quality, Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor and Bridges (2004) attempted to examine how the nature of the children's relations with their non-resident fathers were associated with their adjustment outcome. Participants included 162 children who lived with their mother but had contact with their non-resident fathers. The majority of children (72%) had non-resident fathers who lived within the same town or city. Children were aged seven years or older (mean age ten years) and of British descent. All children were interviewed about their relationships with their non-resident fathers, their mothers and their stepfathers (if applicable). Mothers were also interviewed and asked to complete questionnaires, to assess their level of contact with their former spouse and their ratings on children's adjustment. Additionally, their self reports were employed to minimise single reporter bias on both relationship and adjustment measures.

The results of the study revealed a number of significant correlations. First, frequent contact was associated with closer, more intense relationships with non-resident fathers, and fewer adjustment problems in children. Second, children's reports of affection, companionship and support with their non-resident fathers' were closely linked to positive relations with the residential mother. Thus, when custodial mothers encourage their children to maintain frequent contact with their non-residential fathers, and when there is a supportive and cooperative parenting environment that is focused on the best interests of the child, children's adjustment to divorce is significantly enhanced. On the contrary, when there is increasing conflict, frequent undermining of the other parent, and when the mother restricts the fathers access to his children in spitefulness to punish him, children's adjustment problems may exacerbate. Hence, perhaps policy makers need to consider the plight of fathers when deciding upon living arrangements for children, with a focus on how fathers can become more involved in their children's lives. Teaching effective co-parenting strategies may be one intervention to develop a cooperative parental relationship for the best interests of the child.

### *Sibling Relationships*

Given that most children grow up with at least one sibling, few studies have explored the protective quality of positive sibling relationships among children of divorce. Evidence suggests that siblings are more likely to depend on one another and become closer when they are going through difficult times (Gass, Jenkins & Dunn, 2006; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller & Feeney, 2004), especially when they are lacking this emotional support from their parents (Sheehan et al., 2004). However, parental divorce may be an event in children's lives that can also lead to more conflicted sibling relationships. Exposure to marital and parent-child conflict may ultimately lead to elevated levels of

hostility in the sibling relationship – a finding that has received empirical support (Brody, Stoneman & McCoy, 1994; Sheehan et al., 2004).

In order to better understand the influence of sibling relations upon children's adjustment to parental divorce, Sheehan et al. (2004) conducted a mixed methodology (quantitative and qualitative) study to assess whether children's sibling relationships were characterised by higher degrees of warmth or hostility. Questionnaires comprised demographic questions together with measures of the sibling relationship and conflict resolution style between siblings. Interview data focused on dimensions of the sibling relationship before and after separation and divorce. The sample for the quantitative analysis consisted of 137 children from divorced families, and a comparison sample of 165 children from intact families. As 43 children did not wish to participate in the qualitative interviews, the remaining 94 children from the divorced families were the focus of the qualitative analysis. Participants were primarily Caucasian, well-educated, and from middle-class families. Parents had been separated for an average of 2.6 years. The data on the sibling relationship was primarily based on information gathered from the target child, who was between 10 and 16 years of age. Half of the sibling pairs were same-sex and the other half mixed-sex sibling pairs.

The results of the study revealed two important sibling relationship differences between children from intact families and children from divorced families. First, children from divorced families reported higher incidences of sibling hostility. This finding supports past research that has confirmed a direct link between children's interactions with a depressed and hostile parent and conflicted sibling relations (Brody et al., 1994). Second, sibling relations between children from divorced families were characterised by high levels of hostility and high levels of warmth. Specifically, high degrees of nurturing behaviour were reported by siblings, who turned to each other for mutual support and

consolation. However, younger children reported that the dominant nurturing role played by their older siblings could at times generate feelings of hostility and attacking behaviour towards their older sibling. Nevertheless, a strong nurturing and caring relationship between siblings can protect children against the adverse consequences of parental divorce. Thus, interventions that support the development and strengthening of sibling relationships and that facilitate sibling contact are important considerations.

### *Family Economics*

Many researchers have postulated that divorce is disruptive for children largely because the single parent faces a significant degree of economic stress in the period immediately following the divorce (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998; Hilton & Desrochers, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Economic loss may trigger multiple transitions for the child such as moving house, changing schools, and disruptions to child care arrangements, resulting in significant stress and increased adjustment difficulties for many children. Booth and Amato (2001) found that 46 percent of single mothers relocated within the first year of separation, and 25 percent reported having to send their children to a different school. Additionally, economic decline may mean children will have to do without previously acquired resources or sports and leisure activities they took for granted in the past. As a result, children's psychological well-being could be greatly affected, with evidence that economic strain may be associated with higher incidences of depression and anxiety for children (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Furthermore, a lack of resources may deprive children of important educational and social opportunities, thus limiting their opportunities for development (Funder & Kinsella, 1991).

To examine the effects of economic hardship on children's adjustment, Funder and Kinsella (1991) interviewed 105 children and their resident parents on their perceptions of

household income and family change for the period of five to eight years post-separation. Parents were asked to provide detailed information about the economic conditions in the home prior to parental separation and in the years that followed. Household income from all sources including child support was recorded, as were changes in family composition to assess the effect of any step-parent contribution. Children were interviewed on measures of psychological wellbeing and coping behaviour and were also asked to discuss the living environment within both parents' households and any changes in social activities.

Surprisingly, the results indicated that post-divorce income did not appear to have any significant effect on children's well-being after controlling for the influence of pre-divorce income. Despite economic hardship and family change, early economic circumstances continued to operate in children's lives post-separation, so that children's access to acquired resources remained relatively unchanged. A possible explanation may be that custodial parents adjust their earnings to make sure that their children are happy and do not miss out. Consequently, there is a possibility that economic strain could lead to negative effect for children through its influence on the single parent. For example, Hilton and Desrochers (2000) found that economic strain among single-mothers led to impaired coping strategies and loss of parental control, which indirectly interfered with the quality of parenting. Additionally, money problems interfere substantially with the quality of the parent-child relationship and lead to greater life stress when struggling single-mothers have to work longer hours in order to make ends meet (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Hence, interventions aimed at improving parenting skills and teaching parents better ways of coping with multiple roles would be valuable.

#### Extrafamilial Support Networks

In addition to understanding how post-divorce relationships and processes within the family protect or make children more vulnerable to adversity, resources that extend

beyond the child's immediate family can also provide the support needed to buffer the impact of tough times. Consider, for example, the important role of grandparents, friends and teachers who offer a safe, supportive and reassuring environment for vulnerable children going through their parents divorce. Surprisingly though, these relationships have received little attention in the literature, with only a handful of studies reporting on the benefits of social support from adults outside the family and from healthy peer relationships (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn & Davies, 2002; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Teja & Stölberg, 1993). Furthermore, existing research concerning social support has mainly focused on adult accounts of child adjustment, neglecting the opinions of children themselves.

#### *Grandparent Support*

Although grandparents are frequently called on to provide emotional and financial support to their adult children following divorce, the supportive relationships between grandparents and grandchildren have been rarely examined. Recent evidence shows that children identify grandparents as crucial sources of support in the period immediately following the separation and as important confidants about family problems in the weeks that follow (Lussier et al., 2002). In addition, there is some evidence to support the view that grandparent involvement can serve as a protective factor for at risk children of divorce, through compensating for the lack of support from parents who are under stress (Lussier et al., 2002). However, some studies have found that grandparent involvement may actually contribute to increased stress and resultantly increased levels of risk for children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). For example, when conflict arises between grandmothers and their adult daughters over issues related to childcare and discipline, mothers report feeling infantilised and children feel caught in the middle (Hetherington, 2003).

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the supportive nature of grandparent-grandchild relations, Lussier et al. (2002) conducted one of the few studies examining both parents and children's accounts of their relationships with grandparents. Participants included 155 children who were categorised into one of four family types based on their household composition. Fifty-five children lived in intact families with both biological parents, 46 children lived with their biological mother and a stepfather, 16 children lived with their biological father and a stepmother and 38 children lived in single-mother households. Children ranged in age from 7 to 17 years (mean age 9 years), and included an equal number of boys and girls. Questionnaires and in-depth interviews were conducted separately with children and parents, to assess whether contact and closeness to grandparents was associated with children's adjustment.

The results showed that contact and closeness varied as a function of family type. First, lower rates of contact were only found for grandparents related to the child's non-resident parent. Second, children living with single-mothers or both biological parents reported higher rates of contact than those living with step-parents. Since parents are the mediating forces behind relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, these results are not surprising as relationships with nonresident-parent grandparents may be especially vulnerable because of the diminished contact and deterioration in the quality of the relationship between the divorced couple (Drew & Smith, 1999). In addition, the very nature of the divorce may have engendered hostile relations between grandparents and their former son or daughter-in-law, resulting in lessened contact - a view expressed by several parents in the current study.

In terms of children's reports of closeness to their grandparents and its relation to their overall adjustment, a mixed pattern of results was evident. A direct association was found between closeness to maternal grandparents and lower levels of emotional and

behavioural problems, but only among children who resided with both biological parents or their biological mother. In contrast, among children who lived with their biological father and a stepmother, closeness to paternal grandparents was associated with fewer adjustment problems, whereas closeness to maternal and step-maternal grandparents was associated with greater adjustment difficulties. Thus, in formulating a conclusion about the protective effects of a close grandparent-grandchild relationship for children, it appears that the maternal grandparent-grandchild relationship is the most influential for children's adjustment. Although speculative, perhaps the stronger association arises because divorced daughters may have more contact with their parents than divorced sons (Lussier et al., 2002). Furthermore, since the majority of children live with their mothers, maternal grandparents may be more likely to be involved and have a greater influence in their grandchildren's lives.

Although the results indicated that supportive relations with grandparents are generally beneficial for children's adjustment, a certain limitation must be acknowledged. The study's correlational design prevented the establishment of cause and effect relations. While close relations with grandparents following divorce may protect children from developing adjustment problems, it is also possible that well-adjusted children may elicit or facilitate these positive relations, as suggested by other researchers (Hetherington et al., 1998; Wachs, 2006). Future studies utilising self-reports from all three generations (grandparents, adult children, grandchildren) might be useful for understanding the mediating forces within these cross-generational relationships.

### *Peer Support*

While there is an abundance of research describing the significance of supportive peer relations for parents who are going through divorce, surprisingly, only a handful of studies have demonstrated the benefits of supportive peer relations for children.

Furthermore, in light of evidence that peer relations become increasingly salient with age (Hetherington, 2003; Lustig, Wolchik & Braver, 1992), some researchers have claimed that friendship intimacy is more important in adolescence and adulthood, and have neglected the important role supportive peer relations may play in the adjustment of preadolescents and younger children (Wolchik, Ruchman, Braver & Sandler, 1989). Such researchers support the view that during preadolescence adults play a considerably greater role than peers in meeting children's social needs and shaping their adjustment, because young children may be unable to provide effective support for each other (Wolchik et al., 1989). However, other research studies contradict such findings, demonstrating that close, supportive relations with at least one friend can help to protect preadolescent children from the damaging effects of divorce (Hetherington, 1989; Teja & Stolberg, 1993).

The buffering effects of peer support for children going through parental divorce were examined in a study by Lustig et al. (1992), who interviewed 117 children between the ages of 8 and 15 years, who had experienced parental divorce. Interviews and written questionnaires were completed in order to collect information on children's perceptions of intimacy, security, and stability of their same-sex peer relationships. The social support provided by family and non-family members was also assessed. To measure children's adjustment, ratings of children's divorce-related stress, depression, anxiety and aggressiveness were obtained. Finally, parents' reports of children's adjustment were also included in the analysis to eliminate any issues of self-report bias.

The results of the study indicated that peer support had a significant impact on children's adjustment. Children whose friendships were rated by both self and parental reports as high-quality and supportive, experienced fewer adjustment problems than peer relations characterised by elevated levels of hostility, anxiety and depression. However, quantitative analysis revealed that this effect was only significant for the adjustment of

older children. To account for these results, Lustig et al (1992) suggested that differences in maturational development across age may affect the impact of support. For example, older children may be more proficient in seeking the right type of support from their friends and may be more likely to offer the right type of support to their friends when the situation demands. Similarly, adolescence is a period of adjustment where children are moving towards independence from the family, thus, forming secure peer relationships becomes more important (Teja & Stolberg, 1993).

Several limitations may warrant justification of the results. First, although increased support was found to be correlated with enhanced adjustment, the cross-sectional design of the study indicates that alternative explanations are clearly possible. Similar to the aforementioned research findings, children who are better adjusted may attract more friends and therefore have more support. Second, since the study was largely dependent on quantitative analysis, it limits a detailed interpretation of children's utilisation of peer support. Thus, more qualitative studies examining the nature of children's friendship disclosures may be useful. Third, no measure of peer rejection or unsupportive peer relations was incorporated into the study. Evidence from previous research (Hetherington, 2003) suggests that peer rejection and unsupportive peer relations may increase children's risk for adjustment problems. These caveats aside, the findings highlight the increasing value of peer support with age and signify the importance of maintaining a stable peer friendship network during and after the divorce process for children's adjustment.

### *School Support*

Considering the vast amount of time children spend in the school environment, it seems reasonable to assume that schools can play an important role in helping children make a positive adjustment to their parents' divorce. Once again, research investigating the protective effects of a supportive school environment is very limited, but a small number

of researchers have demonstrated some promising results. Hetherington (1989) found that children adjusted better to divorce and demonstrated lower levels of misbehaviour when they attended a school with firm and consistent rules and emotionally warm teachers. It was hypothesised that such school environments may enhance social and academic outcomes among children because they provide consistency and predictability to children whose home life may be stressful and out of control as a result of divorce (Hetherington, 1989). Similarly, other studies on resilient children of divorce have found that having a positive affiliation with school may buffer children from the stressors of divorce and reduce the likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviour (Rodgers & Rose, 2002).

Other research has focused on the efficacy of school-based support programs for children of divorce. Pedro-Carroll and Cowen (1985) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based group program (the Children of Divorce Intervention Program) on the adjustment of 9 to 12 year olds. The children were Caucasian, from middle-class society, and consisted of 42 boys and 33 girls. Ten weekly group sessions were administered by trained professionals, focusing on divorce-related anxieties, cognitive skill building, and dealing with divorce-related feelings of anger expression and control. Specifically, the sessions provided children with the opportunity to build a support network with others who share common experiences, and facilitated a sense of mutual understanding about how divorce can affect their feelings and behaviours as well as those of their parents. In addition, issues such as attributions of blame and reasons why parents separate were also addressed.

Adjustment changes were assessed from the perspectives of teachers, parents, professionals and the children themselves, using a variety of ratings scales. Overall findings revealed that children's competencies were markedly improved post-intervention. Teachers reported great reductions in problem behaviours as well as substantial

improvements in children's frustration tolerance, rule compliance and adaptive assertiveness. Parents and professionals reported significant improvements in children's self-efficacy as well as noticeable reductions in children's feelings of self-blame about the divorce. In terms of children's own accounts of the intervention process, children reported lower anxiety, more positive feelings about the divorce, and looked more brightly towards the future. However, children's reports of perceived competence as measured by Harter's (1982) perceived competency scale did not reflect any positive change.

The findings suggest that in a supportive group environment, children are able to clarify misconceptions about divorce, reduce their feelings of guilt, and on the whole adjust more positively to the changes in family life which result from the experience of divorce (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985). However, the findings also imply that a ten week school-based intervention focusing specifically on divorce-related issues is not sufficient to improve children's feelings of competency or self-esteem. Future studies assessing the efficacy of additional program components for children's adjustment is warranted. Furthermore, the primary use of ratings scales for measurement purposes may have limited participants' evaluation. Thus, the inclusion of more qualitative assessment methods may provide more detailed data for analysis and would enhance credibility. Finally, since the study only provided evidence for the efficacy of a school-based intervention in the short-term, more longitudinal data are needed to establish the consistency of children's competence over time.

### Limitations

Although research in relation to children's adjustment to divorce appears to provide a comprehensive account of the risk and protective factors affecting children's well-being, this review identified several limitations. First, although there is an abundance of literature focusing on the consequences of divorce for children, the majority of research studies have

employed quantitative research methodology relying primarily on parental and adult reports of children's behaviour. While such studies have indeed provided valuable information about the impact of divorce on children in general, these studies are biased towards an adult perspective and lack the voice and perspectives of the children themselves. Furthermore, quantitative studies are limited to ratings scales and questionnaires, and lack the more rich and descriptive data inherent within qualitative research methods. Thus, understanding of the experiences and feelings of divorced parents and children would be enhanced through the use of qualitative methods such as in-depth clinical interviews and assessments, combined with more objective quantitative methods that utilise the observational skills of psychologists. In addition, future studies involving qualitative analysis from the child's perspective are necessary to assess whether common adult perceptions about the major risk factors in divorce, are also seen as such from the children themselves. This information is important for successful intervention that reduces the stress of parental breakup on children, and ultimately, enhances resilience and positive outcomes for children of divorce.

Second, the majority of studies investigating the impact of divorce on children rely heavily on cross-sectional data comparing children from divorced families with children from nuclear families. Cross sectional studies only represent a small fragment of the lives and behaviour of divorced parents and their children, yet adjustment to changes in family structure is a developmental process so studies must reflect the dynamic interaction of risk and protective factors that influence the adjustment of children over time (Demo & Acock, 1988). Thus, more longitudinal research is needed to facilitate more robust estimates of the duration of any negative effects. In addition, lack of retrospective data within the research suggests that any adjustment problems among children from divorced families may be attributable to events prior to divorce, rather than having occurred as a direct consequence

of the divorce itself. Hence, gathering retrospective information on numerous theoretically relevant dimensions of family life prior to divorce is also warranted, to improve the reliability and validity of results.

Third, the majority of the literature focused on samples of children who were primarily Caucasian, representative of middle-class society, and who came from well-educated backgrounds. In addition, most studies were concerned with either adolescent children or children who were very young at the time of divorce. Consequently, difficulties may be encountered in generalising the findings to other populations. There appears to be limited knowledge in relation to the adjustment of children from ethnic minorities, non-western religious cultures, or from lower-socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, little is known about preadolescent children's adjustment to divorce and this is a period of particular interest because adjustment problems may emerge and intensify during this time (Hetherington, 1993). Thus, future research using age-specific samples and involving participants from different cultural groups and backgrounds would enhance generalisability.

Fourth, when evaluating the effects of extrafamilial factors such as grandparents, peers and schools on the adjustment of children in divorced families, this aspect of children's lives has been clearly understudied. While relations and circumstances within the immediate family are crucial indicators of children's adjustment, the important contribution of resources that extend beyond the immediate family have also been acknowledged. More research examining the influence of supportive peer relations, grandparental support, and the efficacy of school-based interventions on children's post-divorce adjustment is necessary.

Finally, the primary focus within the divorce literature has been on establishing the extent to which divorce is a risk factor for children and on identifying the factors

associated with greater or lesser risk. As a result, research on resilience and children of divorce is scarce, and identifying how the majority of children cope successfully with divorce has been largely neglected. Future studies focusing on how children's environments can protect them from severe stress should be a priority for future research and practice, with a focus on providing children with the necessary competence-building resources over the course of their development.

### Conclusion

Despite the inherent limitations within the literature, research continues to support the notion that children of divorce are at greater risk for adjustment difficulties, compared to children from nuclear families. Theoretically, it has been assumed that the nuclear family is the norm and that any departure from it is bound to result in deleterious outcomes for the children involved. However, this simplistic and inaccurate perception suggests that divorce has uniform consequences for all children and does not explain why the majority of children are resilient. Consequently, the vulnerability of some children and the resiliency of others when facing the challenges and disruptions following divorce have led researchers to formulate alternative explanations.

From a nature versus nurture perspective, researchers have identified that it is the combination of children's own characteristics together with the characteristics of their families and social environment that determines children's adjustment to divorce. The literature has indicated that children with difficult temperaments who reside in a hostile family environment may be at greatest risk for adjustment problems following divorce. Specifically, highly impulsive children may engender more negative reactions with parents, teachers, peers, and their environment, which can lead to lowered self-esteem, withdrawal and depression (Lengua et al., 2000). More importantly, high levels of parental conflict may interfere with children's functioning by creating a tense and stressful

environment that contributes to poorer parent-child relationships or children's feelings of being caught in the middle (Buchanan et al., 1991). Although the results are mixed, younger children may be particularly vulnerable to emotional distress as they may have difficulty understanding the reality of the situation and may blame themselves for the divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989).

In terms of children's successful adjustment to divorce, the literature has shown that positive temperament dimensions such as intelligence, competence, high self-esteem and an internal locus of control are more likely to evoke positive responses and support from others, and that such children are better able to adapt to the stressful transitions ensuing from divorce. (Hetherington et al., 1998). In addition, the presence of strong support networks has been shown to facilitate more positive adjustment as it can help buffer children from the stressors of divorce. In particular, a close relationship with an authoritative parent plays a critical role in promoting children's well-being (Pedro-Carroll, 2001). However, positive relations with significant others beyond the immediate family have also been shown to enhance children's post-divorce adjustment.

Despite the overrepresentation of risk factors within the literature that would appear to suggest otherwise, the majority of children are resilient and adapt well to their parents' divorce (Hetherington et al., 1989). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that resilient children's development may actually be enhanced by dealing with the responsibilities and challenges associated with divorce, as children may become more mature, confident and empathic individuals as a result of the divorce experience (Gatley, 1993). Although risk identification provides some insight into why divorce is a threat to children's well-being, it does not provide any definitive information about the actual process through which children are harmed. Moreover, resilience is not merely the opposite of risk, multiple factors operate in combination to produce risk or resilience. Thus, children who already

have psychological and behavioural problems may find them exacerbated by divorce, but the experience of divorce itself does not lead to psychological difficulties for all children.

In order to enhance existing knowledge in relation to children's adjustment to divorce and to address the deficiencies of previous research, future studies should be conducted with children that utilise qualitative methods of assessment to understand the nature of the divorce experience from children themselves. With a clearer understanding of the mediational processes that lead to resilience for children of divorce, more effective preventive intervention and support programs may result that promote successful adjustment for children over time.

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# Child Development

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Running Head: CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT TO DIVORCE

Divorce Transitions: Identifying Risk and Understanding Resilience in Children's  
Adjustment to Parental Separation

Esther Kint

A report submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of  
Science Honours (Psychology), Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,  
Edith Cowan University.

November 2007

I declare that this written assignment is my own work and does not include:

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Esther Kint

## Abstract

The elevated risks that divorce presents for children and the associated negative consequences have been well documented. However, significantly less attention has been devoted towards identifying factors that promote resilience among children of divorce. The current study attempted to rectify this imbalance in the literature by exploring children's own perspectives of their adjustment to parental divorce. Specifically, the study examined how children determine what it means for parents to separate and how they understand the ways in which they survive the divorce experience. Eight children from separated families were interviewed using a qualitative research design within a phenomenological framework. Six themes emerged from the research and included: 'the significance of age at time of parental separation'; 'continuity and flexibility in seeing dad'; 'co-residence and closeness: mothers as important sources of support'; 'the positive impact of the step-father'; 'increasing responsibility and positive child attributes' and; 'It was all for the best'. The study has implications for future policy and practice and emphasises the importance of understanding pathways towards risk *and* resilience in children in the aftermath of divorce.

Esther Kint

Associate Professor Lynne Cohen

Dr. Alan Campbell

November 2007

## Divorce Transitions: Identifying Risk and Understanding Resilience in Children's Adjustment to Parental Separation

Parental divorce has long been viewed as the cause of a range of psychological and behavioural problems in children, with conduct disorders, antisocial behaviour, academic difficulties, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem among the most frequently cited (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). As a result of the divorce transition, many children are exposed to numerous stressors that may threaten their adjustment, and the more stressors the child has to endure, the higher the risk for negative affect (Moxnes, 2003). In Australia alone, approximately 32% of marriages end in divorce, and nearly 50% of these involve children, leading to an average of two children affected per divorcing household (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). In recent figures, this means that for the total 26,087 divorces involving children granted in 2005, a staggering 49,358 children from newly divorced families were at risk for psychological maladjustment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

While it is true that divorce places children at higher risk for developing adjustment problems, not every child will be negatively affected. For the vast majority of children who experience their parents' divorce, an initial period of adjustment difficulty is common but following this most children adapt well to their new life circumstances and are resilient (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). In fact, research evidence has shown that some children's development may actually be enhanced as a result of the divorce experience. Researchers have cited several positive effects in relation to children's post-divorce adjustment, including children having become more mature, independent, competent and tolerant individuals (Arditti, 1999; Gately, 1993). However, for a minority of children, significant and enduring stressors in combination with individual vulnerabilities may complicate children's attempts to cope with the major changes initiated

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\* In Australia, parents may separate without entering into a formal divorce, which is a separate process. However, throughout this paper the use of the terms *divorce* and *separation* are synonymous in that they both refer to the occurrence of parental separation.

by divorce and result in severe adjustment problems (Hetherington et al., 1989). Thus, children's overall adjustment to divorce depends on a number of moderating variables that serve to either protect them from the stressors of divorce or exacerbate their negative consequences. From a risk and resiliency perspective, children's adjustment to divorce can be understood in the context of three mutually interacting variables: the child's individual characteristics, family process and extra-familial support.

### Individual Characteristics

In order to understand the diversity in children's adjustment to divorce, research has indicated that it is necessary to examine children's individual characteristics as underlying contributory variables. Indeed, of great significance is that children within the same family show marked differences in adjustment outcome following parental divorce, indicating that children's adjustment is moderated by more than family influences alone (O'Connor, Dunn, Jenkins, Pickering, & Rasbash, 2001). Researchers have discovered that certain characteristics and strengths that children possess may help them to adjust more successfully when divorce occurs, whereas specific vulnerabilities may impede their adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Early influential studies suggested that boys experienced more adjustment problems than girls; however, more recent studies have found that gender differences in response to divorce are less pronounced and consistent than was previously believed (Amato, 2001; Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1994; Sun & Li, 2002). Specifically, research findings suggest that previously detected gender differences may be due to an interaction between child gender and gender of the residential parent (family structure), or due to the type of behaviour being measured. For example, Peterson and Zill (1986) reported that both boys and girls from divorced families exhibited added behavioural problems when they lived with the opposite-gender parent. Thus, it was concluded that the

gender of the residential parent was a stronger indicator of children's adjustment than the child's gender. In addition, research has shown that boys and girls are both affected by divorce but the manner in which they express such disturbances may differ (Howell et al., 1997; Simons et al., 1999; Zaslow, 1989). According to these researchers, boys may be more likely to externalise their distress, whereas girls have a tendency to internalise these behaviours. As a result, the higher incidence of problematic behaviours among boys in response to divorce may be over-represented, as these more overt behaviours are easily detectable and more likely to come to the attention of parents and health professionals as compared to the internalising behaviours characteristic of girls. However, although there is considerable support for this interpretation, there is also a great deal of overlap, as boys also experience depression and girls may externalise behaviours (Amato, 2001; Simons et al., 1999). Hence, the overall finding that boys from divorced families are significantly worse off than girls means that researchers should continue to examine gender differences in children's post-divorce adjustment, and develop gender appropriate intervention strategies that target specific problem behaviours.

Research on the significance of a child's age at the time of divorce has produced inconsistent results, however, this discrepancy within the literature is largely attributable to methodological limitations that do not separate the age of the child at the time of divorce from the time elapsed since the divorce (Amato, 2000). Some studies have found that younger children have greater problems adjusting to divorce than older children because they have less well developed coping skills and are more likely to blame themselves (Allison & Furstenburg, 1989; Hetherington, 1989; Kurdek, Blisk, & Seisky, 1981). Additionally, younger children have limited cognitive capacities that prevent them from fully understanding the repercussions of divorce and they may harbour fears of abandonment by parents or fantasies of reconciliation (Emery, 1998). Contrary to such

findings, results from other studies are inconsistent with the notion that younger children are more vulnerable to divorce. In a large meta-analysis involving 92 studies, Amato and Keith (1991) found that school aged children experienced greater adjustment difficulties than younger preschoolers across all measured domains. Similarly, Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin and Kiernan (1995) found that adolescent children had more problems coping with divorce because adolescence is a time of transition where children are already breaking away from the family and the divorce process presents further complications and exacerbates adjustment difficulties. Other researchers have postulated that young children are less burdened by divorce because they retain fewer memories of the painful process following divorce and their opportunity in later years to work through their relationship with the non-custodial parent (Wallerstein, 1987). Such contradictory findings within the literature has led to widespread debate among researchers on the issue of whether or not it is best for parents to stay together for the sake of their children (Hetherington, 1999; Furstenburg & Kiernan, 2001). However, it seems that no valid conclusion can be drawn until research exploring the association between age and children's adjustment to divorce utilises a multifaceted approach that considers the age of the child at the time of separation and divorce, the child's current age, and the length of time that has passed since the separation or divorce.

Finally, researchers have found that individual differences in temperament can either increase vulnerability or facilitate resilience among children of divorce, as a result of the different coping strategies used by children with different temperaments (Wachs, 2006). Children who have easy dispositions, who are intelligent, competent, independent, and who have an internal locus of control, are more likely to elicit positive responses and support from others, facilitating their ability to adjust under stressful circumstances (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). In contrast, children with difficult

temperaments such as those who are highly impulsive, are more likely to elicit negative responses from parents and other support networks around them, and may be less able to adapt to negative circumstances (Lengua, Wolchik, Sandler & West, 2000). Studies have revealed that children adjust better to divorce if they are able to control their emotions and think more positively about events surrounding the divorce experience (Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik & Curran, 1999; Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik & Ayers, 2000).

### Family Process

Children's ability to cope successfully with the stressors of the initial separation is highly dependent upon the family processes which follow. Parental conflict assumes a significant role in the adjustment of children; conflict that directly involves the child, conflict that is threatening or abusive, and conflict in which the child feels responsible or caught in the middle has been found to impact more negatively on children's adjustment (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). In addition, many researchers have identified that the quality of parent-child relations are important indicators of children's post-divorce well-being. Specifically, close relationships with supportive, authoritative parents who are warm but assertive, and who exert consistent control and supervision are generally associated with positive adjustment outcomes in children following divorce (Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody, & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington, 1999; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993). Conversely, parents who have conflictive relationships with their children, who display parenting behaviour characterised by irritability, coercion, neglect and diminished communication and affection, place their children at high risk for adjustment difficulties. Close, supportive relations with the non-residential parent (usually the father) have been found to be particularly important, with evidence suggesting that frequent contact and more meaningful and close relationships with fathers is associated with fewer adjustment

problems in children (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004; Hetherington et al., 1998).

Although limited, research exploring the protective quality of positive sibling relationships among children of divorce has also been undertaken. These studies indicate that siblings can be important sources of support and comfort for each other, particularly when they are lacking this emotional support from their parents who are having difficulty meeting their children's needs following the divorce transition (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004). A strong, nurturing and caring relationship between siblings can serve to protect them against the adverse consequences of parental divorce, and can provide them with a safe and predictable environment in which to allay their concerns. However, parental divorce may be an event in children's lives that can also lead to more conflicted sibling relationships. For example, competition and rivalry, a common occurrence between siblings, can intensify in the context of parental divorce as parental resources become more limited (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994). Additionally, dominant nurturing roles played by older siblings have been found to generate feelings of hostility on the part of the younger sibling (Sheehan et al., 2004). Thus, facilitating and maintaining positive sibling relations should be a focal point for intervention and additional research is required to further understanding of sibling influences on children's adjustment.

Many researchers have postulated that divorce is disruptive for children largely because the custodial parent faces significant economic stress in the period immediately following the divorce (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998; Hilton & Desrochers, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Economic loss may trigger multiple transitions for the child such as moving house, changing schools, and disruptions to child care arrangements, resulting in significant stress and increased adjustment difficulties for

many children. Additionally, economic decline may mean children will have to do without previously acquired resources or be deprived of important educational and social opportunities, which may limit opportunities for development (Funder & Kinsella, 1991). However, research indicates that most children's access to previously acquired resources remains relatively unchanged post-divorce, as parents seem to adjust their earnings or increase their workload to accommodate their children's needs. Consequently, economic strain has been found to have a negative effect on children's adjustment through its impact on the single-parent. For example, Hilton and Desrochers (2000) found that economic strain among single-mothers led to impaired coping strategies and loss of parental control, which indirectly interfered with the quality of parenting. Furthermore, financial problems interfere substantially with the quality of the parent-child relationship when struggling single-mothers have to work longer hours in order to make ends meet (Duncan, 1994). Thus, interventions aimed at improving parenting skills and developing parents' coping mechanisms would be valuable.

#### Extrafamilial Support Networks

The important supportive role played by resources beyond the child's immediate family has received little attention in the divorce literature. For children experiencing the divorce of their parents, grandparents, friends and teachers can provide much needed comfort and stability, particularly when children do not receive this emotional support at home. Beyond financial support, recent evidence has shown that children identify grandparents as crucial sources of support in the period immediately following parental separation and subsequently as important confidants about family problems (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). Similarly, children who have close supportive relations with peers have been found to exhibit less difficulty adjusting to divorce, with evidence suggesting that a close supportive relationship with a single friend may help

buffer children against the damaging effects of divorce (Hetherington, 1989). However, unsupportive peer relations where children become disengaged from the family or involved with an undesirable peer group place children at greater risk of developing antisocial behaviour and academic difficulties in response to the stressors of divorce (Hetherington, 2003). Furthermore, peer rejection may exacerbate the negative consequences of divorce when the child feels ridiculed and ashamed.

Another important source of support for children after divorce is the school environment. Although research is limited, studies have shown that children who have a positive affiliation with their school, and who attend a school with consistent rules and understanding teachers, have less difficulty adjusting to divorce (Hetherington, 1989). Additionally, school-based support programs have also been shown to facilitate children's adjustment by helping to lessen children's feelings of isolation and guilt, and by providing them with the opportunity to express divorce-related anxieties in a supportive environment (Pedro-Carrol, 2005). One such program, the Children of Divorce Intervention Program, involving ten weekly group therapy sessions with 9 to 12 year old children, revealed that children's competencies were markedly improved post-intervention (Pedro-Carroll & Cowan, 1985). Thus, it appears that the combination of peer support and group therapy can be especially beneficial for children's post-divorce adjustment, through alleviating children's distress and increasing their adaptive skills to cope with the pressures of divorce.

### The Current Study

The aim of the current research was to explore children's experiences of their parents' divorce and their perceptions of the difficulties they encountered and how they overcame these difficulties. It is anticipated that this research will further understanding in the field of divorce, and provide valuable information for preventive intervention and

support programs that promote children's successful adjustment. The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do children perceive their life-worlds following their parents' separation?
2. How do children build a new life-world that accommodates a parental separation?
3. What do children perceive as important in helping them to build a new life-world after separation?
4. How skilled do children perceive themselves in achieving this re-building?

## Method

### *Research Design*

The study employed a qualitative research design in order to explore the feelings and perceptions of children who have experienced parental separation. In addition, qualitative methodology has the advantage of producing rich and descriptive data that facilitates understanding of the meanings and interpretations that individuals give their behaviour (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

In response to the limited knowledge in the area, a phenomenological approach was utilised in order to understand the personal experiences from the perspective of the individual child (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). This voice-centered approach, grounded in the interpretative tradition, is a rigorous and reliable means of exploring the experiences of children (Chambon, Sherman, & Reid, 1994). Furthermore, the technique is known to facilitate rapport between the researcher and the participant, leading to profuse and accurate information (Irwin, Waugh, & Bonner, 2006).

### *Participants*

Eight children between the ages of 10 and 12 years participated in the study, consisting of six girls and two boys. All children were Caucasian, attending primary school and living in the Perth metropolitan area. Additionally, all children came from middle-

class families and had experienced their parents' separation no earlier than two years prior to the interview. The majority of participants lived with their mother, with only one child living in a shared-care parenting situation. Furthermore, all children were living in stepfamilies, in which the residential parent had a new partner or was remarried. The length of time since separation or divorce varied between five and seven years, with four years being the average age of the children at the time of separation.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

Participants were recruited through the distribution of information letters (Appendixes A and B) to teachers and staff at a primary school and associated out-of-school care centre in the Perth metropolitan area. In addition, the researcher contacted a number of personal acquaintances to determine whether they knew anyone who might be willing to participate in the research. Certain criteria were required for inclusion in the research; namely, children had to be between 10 and 12 years of age and needed to have experienced parental divorce or separation no earlier than the previous two years. These criteria were chosen for the following reasons. First, these age limits were applied to reduce confounding variables such as the limited vocabulary of younger children and the maturational difficulties often associated with the period of adolescence. In this way, adjustment difficulties can be better understood as a consequence of parental separation, rather than a product of teenage developmental issues. Second, since the focus of the research project was on resilience, the research evidence suggests that the emotional upheaval resulting from divorce stabilises after a period of about two years. Thus, two years post-divorce children's resilience and adjustment can be more accurately interpreted.

To ensure confidentiality, only interested parents and participants were invited to respond directly to the researcher by completing a form and providing their contact details (Appendix C) if they wished to participate in the research. A reply-paid envelope was

provided for this purpose. Upon receiving the completed form, the researcher contacted the willing participants via telephone. During the telephone conversation, the researcher clarified any concerns and answered any questions regarding the study. Following this, a mutually convenient date and time for the interview was scheduled.

All interviews were conducted at the participants' homes to ensure a comfortable and non-threatening environment. Prior to the interview, the researcher introduced herself to the participant and their parent, and thanked them for agreeing to participate in the study. After the purpose of the research was explained, written consent was obtained from the parent (Appendix D) before interview proceedings took place. Prior to the interview, the researcher spent some time talking to the child to establish rapport and alleviate any concerns. During this time, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and clarified any issues or concerns of the participant. The voluntary nature of participation was also clarified, to ensure the participant was aware that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and not answer any question if they didn't feel comfortable. As soon as the researcher was confident of the child's capacity to willingly participate in the research, written consent to participate in the study as well as to audio record the interview was obtained (Appendix E).

An in-depth interview schedule (Appendix F) consisting of ten semi-structured questions was utilised in order to gain a detailed account of participants' experiences. The interview commenced with a general question – "Tell me about yourself" in order to encourage the participant to talk freely about topics of interest and increase the rapport between the researcher and participant. Subsequent questions were concerned with participants' life experiences following their parents' separation, and focused on issues such as lifestyle change, coping, relationships and support. Probes for each question were

used in order to encourage participants to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings concerning a particular issue.

The interview proceeded in a conversational manner using open-ended questions to facilitate discussion of issues the participant felt were important. Prior to the interviews, all interview questions were piloted with an associate of the researcher who met the same selection criteria as the participants. This enabled assessment of face validity and ensured suitability of questions prior to commencement of the interviews. Furthermore, interview questions were cross-checked by several academic staff members at Edith Cowan University to further establish appropriateness of questions.

All interviews were approximately 30 minutes in duration. On completion of the interview, both parents and participants were thanked for their participation and support of the study and were reminded that they could obtain the results of the study upon its completion. Audio-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and analysed by the researcher.

### *Rigour*

According to Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005), qualitative research has scientific merit if it can demonstrate the application of theoretical, methodological and interpretative rigour. Rigour refers to the issues that are raised by the terms validity and reliability and is an important variable to consider when determining the value of a particular study to increasing scientific knowledge. Theoretical rigour is achieved when the research strategy employed is consistent with the research problem, and through logical reasoning and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the present study, the research problem related to the experience of divorce from the perspective of the child, and was thus consistent with a phenomenological research approach. Utilising this approach, the meanings of personal experiences were analysed from the child's perspective and research findings were

discussed and compared with evidence from previous literature. Methodological rigour refers to a clear account of the procedures used to arrive at the research findings, from the method of data collection to data coding and analysis (Silverman, 2001). Methodological rigour was achieved in the study by providing sufficient information to enable other researchers to assess the study's credibility. In particular, an audit trail was used to document the various steps of analysis as well as any of the researcher's thoughts or memos. Interpretative rigour refers to the accurate representation of any information obtained (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Interpretative rigour was achieved in the study through the use of direct quotes that provide the reader with supporting evidence for any conclusions attained. In addition, continual immersion in the analysis, verification with participants and analysis discussion with research supervisors enhanced inter-rater reliability.

### *Ethics*

The study was granted ethical approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University. Due to the possibility that participants may have experienced the interview process as potentially distressing, ethical clearance was granted subject to the condition that the interviews were conducted in the presence of an appropriately trained person, who would be equipped and qualified to act given some adverse event. As such, a postgraduate student from the School of Psychology was approved by the Ethics Committee to attend all interview proceedings. In addition, participants were provided with information about existing support services, should they require such assistance. These services are available free of charge, and included counseling and support services, as well as 24-hour help lines. In the event that the participant became distressed, the researcher was ethically obliged to inform the parent and refer the child to appropriate support services.

To ensure confidentiality of participant information, all data records were stored in a locked cabinet at Edith Cowan University. Furthermore, throughout the research paper all participants' names and those mentioned in the interview were allocated pseudonyms so that only the researcher was aware of identifying information.

### *Data Analysis*

After transcription the researcher read the transcripts several times in order to become familiar with the text so that major themes and categories of behaviour could be readily identified. During this stage, salient words, phrases, comments and sentences were highlighted in each transcript. Highlighted words were then translated into codes in order to give meaning to the descriptive information and facilitate the grouping together of themes. Coding also facilitated data reduction and prevented the formation of irrepressible quantities of information. The next stage involved grouping coded data into meaningful clusters in order to isolate specific themes and build categories of information that explained the meanings embedded in children's experiences of their parents' separation. Once formal categories had been identified, quotes from the transcripts were cut and pasted under each category to explain and define the category developed by the analysis. The emerging themes and meanings given to the text were then verified with the participants to ensure interpretative rigour and were also cross-examined by the research supervisors.

### Findings and Interpretations

Six dominant themes emerged during the analysis of the data: 'the significance of age at time of parental separation'; 'continuity and flexibility in seeing dad'; 'co-residence and closeness: mothers as important sources of support'; 'the positive impact of the step-father'; 'increasing responsibility and positive child attributes' and; 'It was all for the best'. The resultant themes were remarkably unified among participants and were strongly linked to the children's relationships with significant others in their lives.

*Significance of Age at Time of Parental Separation*

Most of the children in the study claimed to have few memories of the separation or could recall little about the intact pre-divorce family. As the majority of children were aged between two and four years when the separation occurred, this finding is not surprising. Furthermore, it is consistent with previous research findings which have indicated that very young children are less burdened by divorce because they retain fewer memories of the painful process following divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Wallerstein, 1987). For example, Lucy commented:

*I was so little, I really don't remember it [the separation].*

Nicole also stated:

*I don't really remember much except one day Dad moved out. I didn't really know why. I was too young to know what happened I guess.*

With the exception of one child (Jessica) who was the oldest of the participants' at the time of separation, the children who could recall most about the separation process were those who remembered scenes of constant bickering or could hear their parents' intense arguments. As Clare articulated:

*I didn't really know it [the divorce] was going to happen. But they were happy one day and the next day they were mad. Happy again the next day and the next day they would get mad again. Up and down, up and down. Like a rollercoaster! They would argue a lot... they didn't really tell me about it but sometimes I could hear them yelling from the room and stuff.*

Stacey also described:

*I remember a lot of fighting and yelling, but I wasn't thinking they would get a divorce.*

Jessica (aged six at the time of separation) recalled a different experience. She described how she was unaware of the impending separation and that she was somewhat shocked upon learning about the reality of her parents' circumstances. When describing the experience she said:

*Well, I was quite happy before that [hearing about the separation] as my Dad mentioned they were getting married soon... but then all of a sudden Dad started looking for houses. I thought they were getting along quite well so when it happened I was quite nervous as I didn't really know what was going on. So yeah, then I asked them and they told me the full on story... and then we moved house.*

Further to the unexpected reality of the ensuing parental separation, it was surprising to learn that these children were not really concerned with the reasons that led to their parents' divorce. Most appeared content with the vague explanations they were given by their parents and they did not ask any questions. Furthermore, no single child appeared to have discussed the issue with both parents to compare the two perspectives. Many children said that their parents "just didn't get along", and that was all they cared to know.

Emma reported:

*... Mum just told me that they argued a lot and they didn't really connect. I guess I kind of just got used to the situation quickly so it didn't really bother me. My Dad moved to Sydney shortly after they separated and I didn't really mind that cos I could go visit him and stuff in the school holidays and it gave me something to look forward to. Also, if I ever wanted to live in Sydney I could. I've always got two homes and I feel like if I get sick of one I can always move to the other.*

Matthew also described:

*Well I can't really remember but Mum just told me that they didn't get along and that they weren't really right for each other and wanted to separate.*

It was clear from the children's reports that the origins of the divorce were of little importance to their present-day lives; it was not something they thought about. Perhaps this is because the majority of children were too young at the time of parental separation to fully comprehend the underlying reasons and they may have been reluctant to pursue these questions growing up for fear of bringing up the past. However, based on the children's reactions during the interview process, the reasons behind the divorce were of no real interest to them. Contrary to research findings which have shown that children who are younger at the time of divorce may be at greater risk for adjustment problems because they may blame themselves for the divorce (Kurdek et al., 1981; Allison & Furstenburg, 1989;

Hetherington, 1989), there was no single instance of self-blame by the children in this study. Children accepted no responsibility for the divorce and seemed satisfied by their parents' explanations that mum and dad "*just weren't right for each other*". The current study provided further support that age at time of divorce can play a significant role in children's adjustment (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). Children who are younger at the time of divorce seem to benefit because they do not remember much about the event and are not disturbed by their earlier fears and suffering (Wallerstein, 1987). Furthermore, because children were young at the time of divorce the post-divorce situation may be all they have ever known, and as such, they may have had less difficulty adjusting.

#### *Continuity and Flexibility in Seeing Dad*

With one exception (a shared-care living arrangement) all the children interviewed resided with their mother following the marital dissolution. Consequently, most of them moved to another home when their parents separated, and some children moved house more than once. When asked how they felt about moving house and living with mum, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Although children had found the initial relocation period difficult (they were sad to lose Dad and leave their former homes), many reported they had settled in well and quickly became accustomed to the new living situation. In addition, children appeared to openly accept the new living circumstances and didn't seem to mind not getting a say in which parent they wanted to live with. As Jessica stated:

*I didn't know if I had to choose a parent to live with. I just assumed that I was going to live with Mum. I think they [the parents] just sorted out that Mum would have me on the weekdays and Dad would have me on the weekends. I didn't really mind as long as I got to see them both plus I got to make lots of new friends at my Dad's place... so I was pretty happy*

Luke also said:

*I didn't get a choice really... my parents just decided that I'd spend weekdays with Mum and every second weekend with Dad. I didn't mind it that way...*

The apparent ease with which children accepted these living arrangements was strongly influenced by the parents' flexibility in allowing adjustments to be made to the visitation schedule, together with the children's desire to maintain continuity and normality in their everyday lives. In particular, children valued the option to make changes to the visitation schedule if it didn't suit their needs and also expressed their desire to maintain an agenda that resulted in minimal disruption. Jessica explained:

*I was okay with it [the living arrangements] because they [the parents] said if I wanted to spend more time with the other parent I could. Like if I wanted to go to lunch or something that could be arranged, so I was pretty happy with that. I had set days... but I could change it if I wanted to. Plus, I had school anyway, so it was easy for me to be with Mum during the weekdays...*

Lucy also described:

*... I think it's fine this way [the living arrangements] because I don't have to move around all that much and if I've got something on, like if I've got a sleepover on with one of my friends or something, I can always change it... a few weeks ago we [she and her sister] went down to Mandurah for four days... it's usually me and my sister who go to dad's together but like if one of us is sick or something then it might just be me. Like Ali [sister] had the flu last week so she didn't really want to move anywhere... so I just went to Dad's by myself.*

In addition to the importance of flexible living arrangements for children's successful adjustment, children who were most satisfied were those who maintained continuity in their relationship with their non-resident father following parental separation. Children who had experienced a dramatic decline in their father-child relationship were less satisfied. Central to this notion was the importance of maintaining sufficient contact with the non-resident father. As Lucy stated:

*... as long as I get to see him every week, I'm okay with it.*

In accordance with previous research findings, frequency of contact with the non-resident father appeared to be directly associated with children's degree of affinity, and contributed significantly to their perceptions of affection and attachment (Dunn et al., 2004). However, similar to the findings of Amato and Gilbreth (1999) it appeared that the

quality of time children spent with their non-residential fathers was far more important than quantity. It was not so much the issue of how often the children saw their non-resident fathers that determined their level of affiliation, but more about the relationship quality. This actuality was most clearly evident through the words of Emma, who told of a distant but satisfying relationship with her father who moved interstate shortly after the separation:

*... We've always kept in close contact, like we speak on the phone every week... sometimes more, and we write letters. Of course, if I could choose I'd want to have him closer, like living in Perth, but it doesn't really bother me that much cos during the holidays I've actually got something to look forward to. I go there every school holidays... it's probably even better this way cos I think we get on better now and I appreciate more the time we spend together... We have a really good relationship now... he's really supportive of me and he knows I'm happy over here...*

Lucy also emphasised the importance of relationship quality with her dad:

*... I don't really go out with my friends and stuff if I'm spending the weekend with my dad, I like to keep that time with him. Sometimes we do fun things together like he takes us to the movies and stuff... or we take Timmy [the dog] down to the beach for a swim... but some weekends we just hang around the house... dad's a lot stricter than mum, he makes sure we have all our homework done before we can do anything...*

Other children in the study had little or no contact with their fathers since the separation, and this affected them in different ways. For some children, their fathers' absence seemed to be something they quickly adapted to, or didn't really yearn for, so remote father-child relationships were of no great concern. For other children, their relationship with their father appeared to be very much the same as before the divorce, thus they experienced no significant decline in the quality of their father-child relationship which otherwise might have affected them differently. However, for a select few children who experienced a relationship decline with their fathers following separation, the transition was more difficult. Clare described how she had experienced no contact with her father since the separation (five years ago), but seemed satisfied because he had never

played a prominent role in her life. It appeared that she had substituted her mum's new partner for her father, referring to him as the father figure she never had:

*It's a lot better now that my mum's got Kevin [new partner]. He's a lot better dad than my dad ever was... I didn't really like my dad that much. He was quite mean. He wasn't a very good dad... I don't see him anymore. I don't know where he is but I don't really care...*

Matthew explained how he was used to spending only a limited amount of time with his father, who for as long as he could remember undertook 'fly in fly out' work.

*... nothing much changed with dad, he's always worked away in the mines so I never really got to see him all that much anyway... he works away for three weeks, then back for one...*

However, the importance of continuity in children's relationships with their non-resident father was clearly evident through the words of Jessica. She described how her relationship with her father had deteriorated somewhat in recent times, which she attributed to the interference of her father's new wife. Although it appeared that this relationship decline did not bother her immensely as she had never been especially close to her father, it was clear that she was disturbed by his actions. In particular, she was annoyed that the alliance he had created with his new wife was at her expense.

*...Dad and I aren't getting along really well at the moment, we're going through a bit of a rough patch. We don't really talk that much, only occasionally. I text him sometimes to see how he is, and sometimes we catch up for lunch, but we haven't really done that in awhile. The main reason is because of his new wife... she's kinda jealous that I was there first. She wants to be top priority... and I can't handle how she wants him all to herself, that's why we're kinda not speaking... I don't really like her and dad doesn't like that. If he wants to spend time with just me then that's fine but it seems like she won't let him or he doesn't want to upset her... it's up to him. Anyway, it doesn't really bother me cos we've never really been that close... I'm a lot closer to mum. It's their life and I don't have to be part of it if I don't want to...*

The findings stress the importance of continuity in the father-child relationship and indicate that acceptance of the step-parent is an important mediating variable. Specifically, the introduction of a step-parent who competes against the child for the parent's affection may engender feelings of hostility and place significant strain on the parent-child

relationship (Bray & Berger, 1993). However, if a step-parent can form a close, supportive relationship with the step-child, this bond improves child well-being and adjustment (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). It was evident through children's detailed reports of their solid and supportive relations with their resident mothers that mothers played a critical role in their children's successful adjustment. This was especially true for children who had no or minimal contact with their fathers, as these children indicated that because they had a strong and satisfying relationship with their mother, they were happy.

The findings from the current study are consistent with previous research that has indicated that a quality relationship with at least one parent is necessary to promote positive adjustment outcomes in children following separation (Hess & Camara, 1979; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Specifically, close relationships with supportive, authoritative mothers who are empathic but firm, and who exert consistent control and supervision are generally associated with the most positive adjustment outcomes in children (Forehand et al., 1990; Maccoby et al., 1993; Hetherington, 1999). Moreover, a solid relationship with one parent, especially with the residential parent, may protect children from negative effect when relations with the other parent are troublesome (Hetherington, 1989; Pedro-Carroll, 2001). In the present study, it is likely that the children's positive relations with their mothers acted as a buffer against disrupted or non-existent father-child relations. Thus, residential mothers who maintain high quality relations with their children may actively shield their children from divorce-related stress and facilitate their successful adjustment.

#### *Co-residence and Closeness: Mothers as Important Sources of Support*

This theme acknowledges the intimate nature of children's relationships with their mother following parental separation. In response to how divorce may have changed children's relations with their mother, many children described how they had grown a lot

closer to their mum since the separation, and that they thought of her more as a 'best friend' or 'sister' rather than solely as a mother. Central to the formation of this friendship identity was the level of self-disclosure that occurred between mothers and their children, particularly among daughters. In addition, supportive parenting practices, such as listening and providing guidance were also identified as important contributors to the friendship status. As Emma described:

*I'm definitely a lot closer to my mum now, we have a really good relationship. I can talk to her about anything. She understands me and I know I can trust her. Sometimes we argue about stuff, but we always make up... I guess we don't have that normal mother and daughter bond... we're more like sisters...*

Lucy described a similar experience:

*I'm a lot closer to my mum, I can tell her a lot more things. And she lets me get away with more stuff, whereas dad's really strict. I think Mum knows that I'm old enough to make my own decisions now and she trusts me a lot more. Dad treats me like his little girl still, and I know if I ask him to do something he'll probably say no... Dad doesn't really know much about my life, unlike Mum. If I have a problem or need to ask her something I know I can always go to her... Like if I'm having trouble at school, I can always tell Mum. Like some of the girls are real bitchy at school, I can tell her all the stuff that happens and she'll tell me how to handle it and stuff...*

Living with their mothers not only provided children with an important context for closeness, availability, and support, but also fostered a deep sense of awareness and growing appreciation for all their mother had done for them. Clare described how her Mum was the most important person in her life, and how her respect for her had increased over the years:

*... I was writing on this piece of paper for school the other day... we had to write a letter to a person who was special to us. We had to choose a special day of the year that was important to us and I chose Mother's Day because my Mum's really the most special person to me. She's always there for me and Tom [younger brother] and she does everything for us. She's the best Mum anyone can ask for... I'm so lucky to have her...*

The finding that co-residence provides an important context for closeness is one that has received ample support in the literature (Arditti, 1999; Hetherington &

Clingempeel, 1992; Maccoby et al., 1993). Despite the increasing opportunity for conflict, researchers have found that pre-adolescent girls often develop close, supportive, companionate and confiding relationships with their mothers following divorce (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). In addition, research findings have indicated that children's relationships with their resident mothers after divorce differ substantially from relationships children have with their non-resident fathers (Arditti, 1995). Due to more frequent contact, children have a greater opportunity to develop positive and meaningful relations with the residential parent. Since the majority of children in this study were female and resided with their mother following divorce, the close mother-daughter relations formed are not surprising.

For many children, the transition to *'best friend'* status was often synonymous with an increasing sense of equality. One indication of this concept for children was the content of disclosures between mother and child, which sometimes included the sharing of confidences or the provision of emotional support. Children interpreted such mutual disclosure positively, and appreciated the sense of being needed and leaned on by their mothers for emotional support. Jessica captured the essence of equality in her relationship with her mother:

*... my Mum is like my comfort body, and I guess sometimes I'm hers. She's always there when I need her and I've always been there for her when she needs me too. Like when either of us have a problem or something we're usually not afraid to speak up about it. Like if she's upset or something I'll usually go and ask her what's wrong and she usually tells me. I like that about our relationship, I think it's good we can talk openly about that sorta stuff...*

Stacey also summarised her feelings about her relationship with her mum:

*... After the divorce we grew a lot closer... we talk about anything really... how I'm going at school, if she's had a bad day at work, whatever's on our minds really... yeah, sometimes she wants to know what I think about certain things, and I tell her. It means a lot to me that she cares about my opinions...*

While it is evident through children's descriptions that mutual support and intimate disclosures with their mothers was something they valued and generally interpreted positively, the findings conflict with previous research findings which suggested that mothers leaning on their children is 'burdensome'. For example, Jacobvitz and Bush (1996) asserted that when parents discuss personal problems with their children or rely on them for support, children's own needs are compromised and they may experience elevated levels of anxiety. Similarly, Satir (1967) emphasised the danger of creating a false sense of equality between parent and child, which may result in boundary violation and lead to undue stress for the child who may be expected to assume inappropriate roles. Despite such criticisms in the literature, the current study suggests that children benefit from a shared sense of equality and that intimate disclosure ultimately facilitates the strengthening of the mother-child relationship, rather than creating a burden. Moreover, the descriptions of the mothers' behaviour draw attention to parenting strengths from the children's perspective and essentially form the basis of what children perceive constitutes a 'good mother'. Children seemed to value the progression of the stereotypical care-giving, nurturing mother (who does the cooking, cleaning, washing, etc) to a mother who is also a close friend who listens to them, offers and asks for advice, and treats them with integrity and respect.

#### *The Positive Impact of the Step-Father*

For many of the children, as long as they could see that their mum was happy and that their new living situation was accommodating to their needs, they were happy.

Jessica's maturity and confidence in her parents' decision to separate was apparent:

*... my mum is very happy now, and that's all that I want for my parents. I want them to be happy. I know lots of parents stay together because they don't want to upset their kids, but I would rather that they tell me the truth. If they want to leave then that's fine, as long as both parents are still there to support me at the end of the day. Then I'm happy.*

Prominent factors contributing to children's feelings of happiness were children's positive relations with the step-father and the positive impact the step-father had on their mother. Children noted that the step-father had made a significant contribution to the household, not only financially, but his presence was welcomed because he was a good father-figure and most of all, he made the mother happy. Stacey said:

*... I look at mum's relationship now and she's so much happier. Steve [new partner] really loves and appreciates her, he's a really good guy. With Dad, I dunno, it was just different, they didn't really match... Steve's a bit younger than dad too, so he's a bit easier to talk to. I feel like he understands me better, and he's more cruisy than dad. Dad's more strict and he only ever really talks to me about school and stuff...*

Luke described:

*Before Mark, mum was a bit all over the place, like I always remember her rushing around... she worked a lot and she always seemed so tired. But since Mark, everything's going really well, he's cool and he makes mum happy. She doesn't have to work as much anymore either.*

In support of existing research, the introduction of a stepfather to the single-mother household was advantageous to children's well-being because his presence made a significant contribution to the family (Kerr & Beaujot, 2002). The step-father helped to ease the financial strain, but more importantly, he brought happiness to the household through his positive relations with both parent and child. Interestingly, this finding was consistent for both boys and girls in the current study and does not support previous research findings which suggest that girls have more difficulty in their relationships with step-fathers than boys (Clingempeel, Brand, & Sevoli, 1984). Although many daughters reported that acquiring the residential step-father presented a new phase of adjustment, they were not threatened or disturbed by his arrival as much of the literature suggests (Clingempeel et al., 1984; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991). Rather, like sons they viewed him as an asset to the family and were happy he was there.

*Increasing Responsibility and Positive Child Attributes*

As a consequence of the altered family structure and role shifts that occurred following parental separation, many children reported that they had acquired certain strengths. In particular, children conveyed how they had gained an increasing sense of responsibility and competence since the divorce. Interestingly, this increased competency was predominantly expressed by the females in this study; males tended to view the divorce experience more as a challenge they conquered. However, children of both genders expressed respect for their mothers and understood and appreciated the additional responsibilities they were required to take on. Luke described:

*Mum's been working so much lately... but I know that it's all for us... to get money and stuff. I know that when Mum works she's working for money to buy us things, so we can have a good life. She works a lot, but at the same time I think she's home enough already. She's a good Mum... and she tries to be with us as much as she can... I guess I have to do more around the house now, but we all do our part... and I s'pose that's only fair... I guess that's all part of growing up anyway, isn't it? ... when you get older you have to be more responsible and stuff... help out more... but I don't mind really...*

Similarly, Jessica also stated:

*... I had to do more around the house and stuff, more chores, but I don't really mind helping, I've always liked helping people. I'd rather make someone else do less and me do more. Mum works a lot more now so I try and make a bit more of an effort to help out... like with dinner and cleaning and stuff...*

In addition to the children's positive interpretations of having to take on more responsibility, children also discussed how they felt the divorce had facilitated their sense of independence. Children considered themselves to be more self-sufficient and mature individuals, which they attributed to more autonomous decision making and increased assignment of responsibilities. Furthermore, children spoke of a welcomed freedom that resulted from the elevated level of trust in the parent-child relationship. Lucy commented:

*... I've kind of grown more independent of myself... I make my own decisions and Mum trusts me more now to make the right decisions... I guess I've kinda shown that I can be responsible so I'm allowed to do more... I like being my own person... I don't need to be told what to do all the time.*

Similarly, Matthew also described his emerging sense of independence:

*... I've learnt to deal with things better on my own, like if I have any problems and stuff I try to deal with them myself first before asking for help...*

While the current findings reveal that greater responsibility can lead to highly positive outcomes among children of divorce, the literature is dominated by the negative implications of role overload for children. Many researchers have associated increasing workload and responsibility with low self-esteem, anxiety and depression among children (Hetherington, 1989; Sandler et al., 2000; Walsh & Stolberg, 1989) and have often referred to the description of the 'overburdened child' (Wallerstein, 1985). Others have described how taking on adult responsibilities interferes with children's ability to engage in typical child activities and often leads to resentment and rebellion (Hetherington, 1989). However, the findings from the current study suggest that increasing responsibility following divorce facilitates the development of autonomy in children and enhances their level of maturity.

#### *It Was All For the Best*

There has been much debate in the literature about whether or not it is best for parents to stay together for the sake of their children. Indeed, some research findings have shown that when divorce is associated with increased stress, conflict and adversity, children in divorced families exhibit more adjustment problems than those in high-conflict intact families (Amato & Booth, 1996; Hetherington, 1999). Such theorists believe that if children are going to continue to be exposed to adversity, it is better to remain in a less than desirable two-parent household than suffer the ramifications of divorce. However, when divorce is associated with a transition to a more harmonious, less stressful environment, studies have found that children in divorced families are similar in adjustment to those in intact families where parents are happily married (Amato et al., 1995; Hetherington, 1999). Furthermore, when children remain in conflict-ridden

situations they are exposed to constant stress and destructive behaviour, which severely threatens their psychological development (Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). When asked about the overall level of satisfaction with their current lifestyles, and if whether or not they wish their parents had stayed together, the responses were unanimous. Every child was happy with the present circumstances and did not wish to revert to the previous situation. In particular, children expressed their contentment at being removed from a hostile environment where parental conflict was rife, and were satisfied with their current lifestyles. Clare reflected:

*...I'm pretty happy with everything. I wouldn't go back or anything. I like my life how it is now. I didn't like my life before. Like when I was in my bedroom playing and I heard arguing and yelling all the time, I didn't like that. If I had the power to have mum and dad together again, like skip back through time, I would say no, I'm not using it. I don't wanna be back there. I'm happier now.*

Lucy also stated:

*I think it's better this way... I'm fine with the way everything is so I wouldn't wanna change it. ... if they hadn't of got a divorce they would still be fighting heaps and stuff... and I wouldn't of had my little sister [2-year-old half sister].*

In addition to understanding the divorce as a transition to a more favourable environment, many children had accepted the reality of the divorce situation and considered the resultant outcome as positive. Jessica articulated:

*... of course it would have been nice to have the opportunity to grow up with both parents, I mean, sometimes when I go over to my friends' houses and see their parents all happy together and everything I wish my parents could have been like that. But they weren't so it would never have been like that anyway. But that's ok, you can't have everything I guess. And I'm pretty happy now with the situation so I wouldn't really change things...*

Nicole also commented:

*It's funny, my parents get on a lot better now than they did when they were married, they're really good friends now... it makes things easier for me cos there's no arguing and mum comes inside now for a coffee sometimes too. It's still like two families though, like we still have separate gatherings and stuff, but that's okay... I get two Christmases and stuff... twice as many presents so that's cool!*

Other children spoke about the positive personal effect, including having become stronger, more capable and confident individuals. Stacey remarked:

*... I think the whole thing has made me a stronger person... I feel like I could deal better with any future challenges that come my way. It's been difficult at times, but it's made me stronger...*

Luke also stated:

*... the first few months were hard, but after that I didn't really mind. I just got used to it I guess, I learnt to deal with it.*

The responses provided are consistent with research suggesting that children are better off having been removed from a conflictual family situation to a more harmonious one (Amato et al., 1995; Hetherington, 1999). Children acknowledged that they had adapted to the family changes and were satisfied with their current situation. Furthermore, the children in this study were strongly focused on the present, and had successfully built a new life-world that accommodated their parents' separation. This finding suggests that although children may have experienced divorce negatively at one point in time, what matters is how it feels to them in the present. Thus, in a supportive and nurturing environment that is conducive to healthy development, the children in this study were able to demonstrate remarkable resilience in response to divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Pedro-Carroll, 2005).

### Discussion and Conclusion

In light of existing research, the current study has attempted to provide a unique perspective on children's experience of divorce and a greater understanding of the factors that can promote or inhibit their successful adjustment. Utilising a phenomenological approach, the 'voice of the child' was recognised, and children were invited to tell their own stories about *their* divorce experience. As a result, children spoke openly and honestly about the divorce experience, and seemed enthusiastic to convey their thoughts and opinions. The key finding of the study was that children are exceptionally resilient in the

face of divorce, despite the many changes and challenges they encounter as a result.

Overall, the children appear to have adjusted well to the stressful transition and view their current living situation in a positive light.

The main limitation of this study was the lack of male participants. Therefore, the findings are predominantly limited to preadolescent daughters whose parents have separated. In addition, although an attempt was made to recruit participants who were representative of the general population, the need for parental consent may have biased the results as it may be that only parents who knew their child had coped reasonably well with the divorce allowed them to participate. Future research containing a more equal gender distribution and focusing on the experience of divorce for older children who do not need informed consent, may help remedy this limitation. Furthermore, studies with children who come from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds may enhance participant diversity, and may better represent the general population.

In terms of the value of the current study, there are a number of significant implications for practice and intervention that derive from this analysis of children's adjustment following their parents' separation. First and foremost, the findings suggest that children are competent individuals who reflect and devise their own ideas and strategies for coping with family life after their parents separate, and it is important to hear their perspectives. Often, children's competence and understanding is underestimated and their views are overlooked because parents and health care professionals assume they know what is in the 'best interests of the child'. Instead, children need to be recognised as specialists in their own lives and consulted in decisions affecting their welfare. If parents listen to their children they can better understand how they can contribute to their child's successful well-being.

Second, although divorce presents many risks for children's well-being, it is not the occurrence of divorce itself that threatens children's adjustment but the nature and bearing of resultant mediating processes that determine a child's outcome. In the present study, the quality of the parenting environment and the presence of close parent-child relationships were identified as important predictors of children's well-being. Specifically, close mother-child relations served an important protective function and contributed to children's positive sense of self. In addition, the absence of parental conflict, positive relations between biological parents, and the transition to a more favourable living situation facilitated children's successful adjustment. Hence, health care professionals should use this information to provide guidance to parents and should seek to emphasise the importance of these positive parenting behaviours.

Third, divorce is a common event that for many individuals affected by it results in resilience and positive outcomes. Although divorce is often associated with numerous stressors that place children at risk of negative development, it can benefit children's development by removing them from an acrimonious environment and enhancing their sense of competence. This is a salient clinical implication and highlights the necessity for practitioners to shift away from the pathology and negative attitudes that are so often associated with divorced households, and begin to acknowledge the diversity and family strengths inherent within these structures. Thus, instead of viewing this family structure as a deviation from the norm or something that places the child at risk or disadvantage, separated households should be reconceptualised as a unique and viable system with its own set of norms, processes and patterns of behaviour that may ultimately benefit children's behaviour.

Finally, the remarkable display of resilience by children in the current study advocates the viability of separated households and suggests that many parents are already

doing many things right. It would be useful for future research to embrace this concept and engage in further qualitative investigation that focuses on children's analyses of family strengths. By looking more at children's perspectives of the processes which take place in families after separation, practitioners may be better able to isolate the characteristics of the family environment that lead to positive outcomes for children.

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## Appendix A

## Parent Information Letter

Dear Parent,

My name is Esther Kint and I am a student at Edith Cowan University, currently completing my Honours degree in Psychology. As part of my studies, I am undertaking a research project that aims to identify how children adjust to their parents' divorce. This research will further understanding in the field of divorce, and provide valuable information for preventive intervention and support programs that promote children's successful adjustment. The study has the approval of the University Ethics Committee and will be supervised by Associate Professor Lynne Cohen.

With your consent, I invite your child to participate in an interview with me that is expected to last for approximately 30 minutes, at a convenient time and place. During this interview your child will be asked to describe their experiences relating to their parents' divorce, and specifically, to identify how they have coped with the stressful circumstances that accompany the divorce process. The interview will be audio recorded, as this is necessary to ensure an accurate record of what is discussed and for transcription and analysis purposes. Transcribed data will be stored in a locked cabinet at Edith Cowan University. Furthermore, all information gathered is strictly confidential, and at no time will participants' names or any other identifying information be reported.

I wish to advise that your child's participation in the research is completely voluntary and that s/he may withdraw from the study or decline to answer any questions at any time. I do not anticipate any major discomfort to arise as a result of the interview process, however, should your child experience any distress my colleague Lisa Lemme will be present to ensure your child has access to appropriate support. Furthermore, in the event that your child becomes distressed during the interview process you will be directly informed. Should you or your child experience any difficulties, Janice Dickinson at Anglicare can be contacted on 9263 2069 for information and support.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please do not hesitate to contact either myself (0439 753 336, [ekint@student.ecu.edu.au](mailto:ekint@student.ecu.edu.au)) or my supervisor, Associate Professor Lynne Cohen (6304 5575) at the School of Psychology. Should you wish to contact someone independent of this study, please contact the university research officer Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170. If you wish to obtain the results of the study, I will be pleased to share them with you upon its completion, which is scheduled for December 2007.

I would like to thank you for your interest and support of this project, and I value the unique contribution that your child's experiences will bring to this study and to further understanding in the field of divorce. I hope this experience will be a positive and enlightening one for your child.

Yours sincerely,

Esther Kint

## Appendix B

### Participant Information Letter

Dear Participant,

My name is Esther Kint and I am a student at Edith Cowan University. As part of my studies I am completing a project which involves talking to children whose parents are divorced. I wish to talk to children whose parents are divorced to hear about their feelings and experiences of their parents' separation. The reason for this is so I can understand what it is like for children like you to go through a divorce, and understand what things could help make this difficult time a bit easier. Hearing about your experiences will also help other children to cope better with their parents divorce in the future.

I would be very happy if you could help me with this project. If you are interested I would love to meet you when it is convenient for you. During our talk, I have some questions that I would like to ask you about things you felt made it hard for you when your parents separated. Also, I want to talk about any issues you feel are important to you and I will listen to anything you want to talk about.

During our talk I want you to know that everything we talk about is private. My friend Lisa will also be with us incase we need her help with anything but everything we talk about will be just between us. I also want you to know that your name or any other personal details won't be used in the research project, so nobody who reads the project will know it was your information. If it is okay with you, I would also like to tape-record our talk so that I can listen to it later and remember everything you said.

Please understand that you do not have to take part in this research and you are free to stop it at any time or not answer any questions if you don't want to. I don't think you will have any problems with the things we talk about but if you do have a problem with anything we talked about please call Anglicare on 9263 2069 or Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800 where a friendly person on the telephone will be able to help you.

Finally, if you have any questions about my project, please feel free to call me on 0439 753 336, or email me at [ekint@student.ecu.edu.au](mailto:ekint@student.ecu.edu.au). My friendly teacher at university – Lynne Cohen (6304 5575) will also be happy to answer any of your questions. When the project is finished, I will be happy to tell you about the findings if you want to know them. They should be ready by December 2007. I'm sure you will enjoy talking to me and I look forward to meeting with you.

Thank you very much for your help,

Esther Kint

Appendix C

Return Form: Parent Contact Information

Dear Parent,

Thank you for your interest in this project.

If you wish to be contacted for research please detach and return this letter in the enclosed reply paid envelope.

Yours sincerely,

Esther Kint

---

Dear Esther,

I have read the enclosed information letter and I am happy to let my son/daughter participate in the research project.

I have spoken to my son/daughter (please circle) \_\_\_\_\_ (name) who has also read the information letter and s/he has agreed to participate in the interview process.

Please contact me on the following number: \_\_\_\_\_  
to arrange for a convenient time and place for the interview to occur.

Thank you,

---

Name of Parent

Parent Signature

Appendix D  
Parent Consent Form

I \_\_\_\_\_ (the parent/guardian) of \_\_\_\_\_ have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that all information gathered in this study is strictly confidential, and that no identifying information of any kind will be employed in the research project.

I understand that the interview will be tape recorded and transcribed.

I hereby give my consent for my child to participate in this study, realising that s/he may withdraw at any time, without explanation or penalty.

If required, I give consent for the researcher to contact me and my child again on the following number to verify the results of the study.

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number or email: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E  
Participant Consent Form

I \_\_\_\_\_ (the participant) have read the  
information letter and I am happy to participate in this project.

I understand that anything I say is private, and that my name will not be used in the  
research project.

I understand that the interview will be tape recorded and transcribed.

I know that I can stop the interview at any time, without having to explain why.

If needed, I give Esther Kint permission to contact me again to ask me questions about any  
results of the study.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix F  
Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about yourself...
  - What grade are you in at school?
  - What are your hobbies?
  
2. Can you tell me a bit about your experience of your parents divorce?
  - How old were you when your parents separated?
  - Was it a shock for you, or did you know it was coming? How did it make you feel?
  - Did your parents explain to you why they divorced?
  
3. Who are you living with? How did that happen?
  - Did you get a say in which parent you wanted to live with?
  - Do you get to choose how often you see the other (non-resident) parent?
  - How often do you see your mum/dad? (non-resident parent). How do you feel about this? Would you like to see them more or less often?
  
4. What sort of things were going on when your parents separated?
  - Did your parents argue a lot when they separated? How did this make you feel?
  - What is their relationship like now? Are they friends or do they just keep in contact to discuss matters concerning you?

5. Did you have much support from others when your parents separated?
  - Who supported you? (family, friends, teachers)
  
6. Has your life changed since your parents divorce?
  - How?
  - Did you have to move house, make new friends, go to a new school, take on more responsibility, miss out on activities, etc?
  - Has this been difficult for you?
  
7. Has your relationship with your parents changed since the divorce?
  - How?
  - What was it like before and after the divorce?
  - Are you a lot closer to one parent now or more distant?
  - How would you describe this relationship?
  
8. Do either of your parents have a new partner?
  - What is your relationship like with them?
  - What do you think of their relationship with your parent?
  
9. Were there any things you found difficult to cope with when your parents separated?
  - What have been the most difficult?
  - How did you manage these difficult situations?
  - Is there anything you think could have helped you cope better with your parents' separation?

10. Do you feel that there have been any good things to come from your parents' separation?

Examples of probes:

- Can you give me some examples?
- Can you tell me a little more about that?
- How did that make you feel?

# Child Development

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