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Divorce and Family Stress

Michigan State University Extension Service

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DIVORCE AND FAMILY STRESS

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Introduction: Divorce and Family Stress

THE UNITED STATES has the highest divorce rate in the world. The explosion that began in the 1960s and 1970s has not lessened significantly, and every year over one million children under 18 go through the painful process of watching their parents divorce.

Between 1968 and 1973, the divorce rate increased 50% for those under 25 or 40 to 64 years of age. The age group from 25 to 29 experienced the sharpest increase — 70% (Glick, 1979). A Johns Hopkins University report in 1982 indicated a 2% drop in national rates, the first decreases in a decade.

Family life professionals differ in their interpretation of the data, some seeing a renewed commitment to family life. Others, who are more skeptical, suggest that the depressed economy has had an effect on divorce rates. Because settlements involving property and children continue to require fairly expensive legal advice, it is thought there may actually be a number of couples waiting for an economic turn-around before taking the necessary legal steps to dissolve their marriages.

Despite the relative frequency of divorce, there is good evidence to suggest that the effects on family members are often devastating, prompting serious legal, economic, and psychological changes in family structure.

Many of these families will become single-parent families, at least for a while. As they attempt to “go it alone”, role strain, economic problems, parenting concerns, and the struggle to merge again into society as a single person will require tremendous coping resources. Single-parent families now constitute about 20% of all American families, and it is estimated that half of all children born after 1976 will

spend some portion of their lives in a single-parent household.

Apparently, the high divorce rate does not demonstrate total disenchantment with married life, for 70% of all those who shed a mate will remarry within 3 to 5 years. It can be said, perhaps, that “serial monogamy” — a series of marriages and divorces for individuals — is becoming a predominant marriage style. This practice has resulted in a dramatic increase of blended family, or step-family structures. Because of unresolved problems from the first marriages of these couples, or because of considerable overload in trying to deal with the complexities in the blended situation, 43% of all these new unions will fail.

This publication looks at this rather new phenomenon in family life and provides information about personal and family stresses that occur when these changes are made. Too often, our attention to separation and divorce is remedial. We react to individual and family failure rather than taking a preventative approach. The latter calls for knowledge **ahead** of these events so that potential pitfalls might be avoided. It is hoped that this publication will be useful to professionals or lay persons interested in a better understanding of the following social and psychological factors:

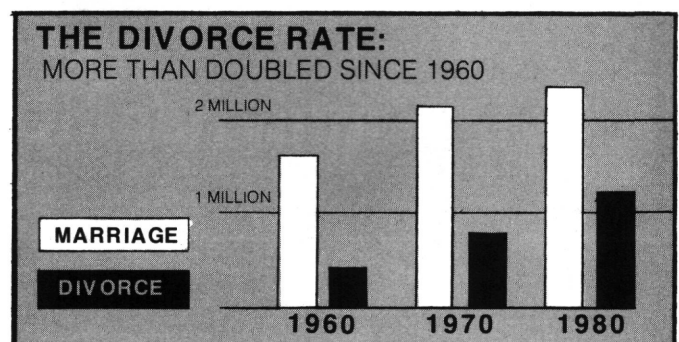
- personal and family conflict experienced at the time of separation and divorce
- effects of family dysfunction and rearrangement on children
- the unique stressors encountered by those attempting to parent in single families
- preventative stress management strategies for families who find themselves enmeshed in difficulty because of separation, divorce, or single parenthood.

Marrying and Unmarrying

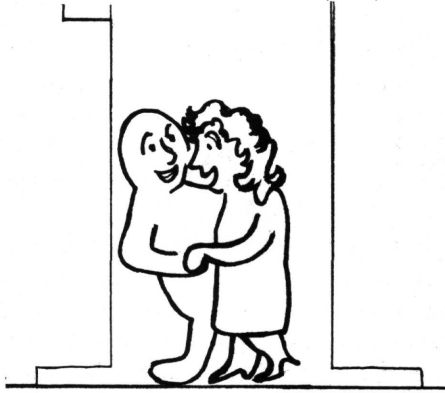
As many as one million families this year will decide that their marriages are no longer fulfilling and that divorce is the best solution to their problems. Separation and divorce have come to be seen by many couples as viable alternatives to coping with the stress involved in managing their strained relationships in married life.

Whenever couples marry, they establish what has been called a “giving-getting” contract. Usually unwritten, and frequently never really talked about,

For names and dates in parentheses, see References on page 29.



this giving-getting contract consists of a couple's expectations of one another. These expectations usually grow out of each spouse's previous experience as a member growing up in a family. People develop attitudes toward roles and interaction patterns they feel are all right or **not** all right. For example, he may believe that husbands should be the primary or only breadwinner in the family. She may be the daughter of a working mother and have very different views. He may want children right away. She may want to establish a career first or not



have children at all. He may find it demeaning to do dishes. She may become resentful if he doesn't.

More often than not, our expectations of what marriage is all about, or at least the marriage **we** expected, are highly unrealistic. We expect to do so much better than other parents did with their marriages. Yet, we know that family life today has become much more hurried and is more highly loaded with daily demands.

We are expected to be better parents, contribute significantly to both labor-force participation and high-quality family life, be highly satisfying sexual partners, and fulfilled individuals. Can we do it all? Statistics on the numbers of persons shedding spouses and redefining family structures indicate that we may be asking too much of ourselves and of family life. We may not have the resources to deliver.

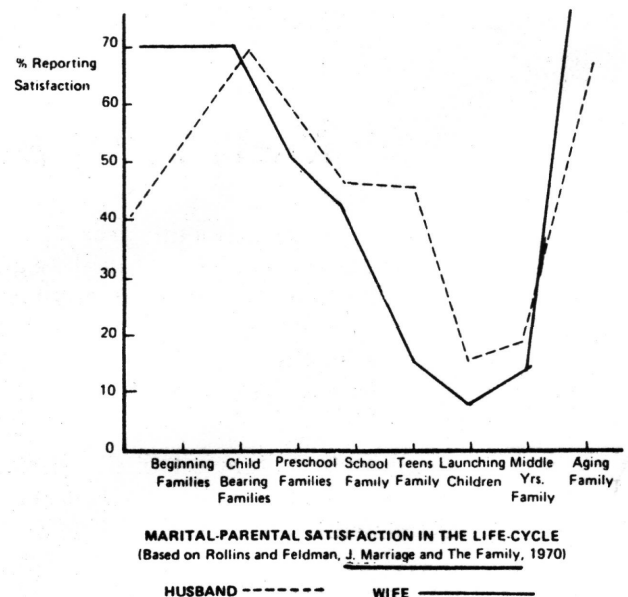
Numerous factors have been found to be predictive of more difficult marital adjustment in couples:

- The couple meets or marries shortly after a significant loss.
- The wish to distance from one's family of origin is a factor in the decision to be married.
- Family backgrounds of each spouse are significantly different (religion, education, social class, ethnicity, age, etc.).
- The couple has incompatible sibling constellations.
- The couple lives either extremely close to or at a great distance from either family of origin.
- The couple is dependent on either extended family — financially, physically, or emotionally.

- The couple marries before age twenty or after age thirty.
- The couple marries after an acquaintanceship of less than six months or more than three years of engagement.
- The wedding occurs without family or friends present.
- The wife becomes pregnant before or within the first year of marriage.
- Either spouse considers his or her childhood or adolescence as an unhappy time.
- Either spouse has a poor relationship with his or her siblings or parents.
- Marital patterns in either extended family were unstable.

Social Changes Affecting Family Life

Most divorces continue to occur in the first seven years of marriage. This is a period when both spouses may be working hard to establish a career or complete degrees in higher education. Many women no longer look on labor-force participation as an opportunity to supplement their husbands' earnings. Instead, they are more intensely committed to the work arena, resulting in less time and energy for family responsibility. Instead of performing only **expressive** or nurturant roles in the family, women now are taking on a greater share of **instrumental** responsibilities: they, too, are breadwinners. As a result, there have been critical changes in families with respect to power, communication, and affectional structures. Since she earns more, she expects to play a greater role in total family decision-making. She no longer has the time to "always be there" when spouses or children need support. Hall and Hall (1979) suggest that the new



"careerism" may be a contributing factor to the doubling divorce rate of the last ten years, that "preoccupation with career and success can lead to personal and family failure."

Dropping birth rates may be a spin-off of this "careerism". Families are now barely replacing themselves. Many couples are choosing to have fewer children and are spacing them closely together. Others are choosing not to have children. When married life becomes tense, it may be easier to think about the possibilities of separation or divorce when fewer children are involved.

Inflation and high unemployment rates characteristic of the last decade may also be considered a factor. We are a nation in debt for billions of dollars. Shaky family finances, whether a result of poor credit practices or sudden and prolonged unemployment, often lead to intense marital strain. Divorce rates continue to be highest among poor families and those who are poorly educated. Young persons who fall into the credit trap of wanting everything available on credit often find themselves arguing frequently about how they're going to climb out of heavy debt loads. They often find their marriages in serious trouble as a result.

Finally, divorces may simply be more widely accepted today, making it easier to throw in a relationship that seems to be troubled and going nowhere. We have come to expect a great deal of marriage and family life. Because of media-depicted "ideal" families, we often believe we are being cheated somehow if our family life is not truly a "haven in a heartless world."

If spouses and children are occasionally non-communicative or troublesome, they are often viewed as limiting personal growth in other family members. Greater numbers of middle aged persons taking a "last stab" at personal fulfillment are trading in marriages that are perceived as stable and boring for the stimulation to be found in newer relationships. The heavy growth in the divorce rate may be a costly but efficient social coping mechanism that allows us to move in and out of short-range and long-range experiments in intimacy.

The Slide Toward Separation and Divorce

It is often said that marriages "break down." More likely, a kind of "melt-down" or "unwinding" of the relationship occurs. Couples may begin their married life based on little more than a strong physical attraction coupled with the "right circumstances" for getting married. The timing seems right, and there is a feeling that this other person is someone who fills a need.



If conditions remain fairly positive following marriage, mutual feelings of understanding and rapport that initially drew the couple together will continue to develop between them. This development of trust and respect allows each partner to reveal to the other his or her "true self", i.e., mutual disclosure that results in increasing dependency on one another and satisfaction in one another. Each spouse is perceived by the other as capable of meeting the other's personality needs. Thus, the friendship of the couple develops into a lasting, deep relationship.

According to Borland (1975), at least three things can go wrong with the generally positive development of the marital relationship over time:

1. the relationship can become **overwound**, diminishing the couple's ability to grow as individuals.
2. **another** relationship can develop simultaneously which becomes more meaningful and detracts from the first relationship (in 75% of all divorces, one or both spouses is involved in an extra-marital relationship, though only 15% of these relationships subsequently result in marriage).
3. the couple relationship winds and unwinds over time, alternating between increasing and decreasing levels of intimacy and meaning. Stressful incidents encountered in the marriage lead toward a strengthening of the relationship or the eventual breaking of the marital "mainspring".

In developing intimacy and revealing their true selves to one another, spouses become more vulner-



able. Each partner knows all of the other's weak spots; therefore, each is open to attack as some of the "perfection" that made him or her so attractive initially is lost. The "knight on a white charger" is not as dashing on a daily basis — at least as dashing as she had thought! She is not as sweet-tempered and pliable as he had imagined she would be. As couples become more aware of one another's faults, either readjustment to the other's "true self" occurs or disillusionment may set in.

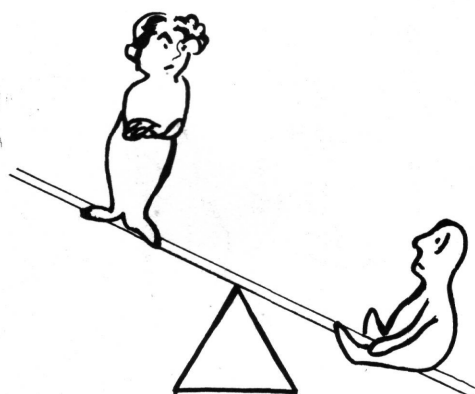
For couples who begin to focus too heavily on one another's faults, they may begin an irreversible slide toward separation and/or divorce if their perceptions about one another or about married life cannot be altered satisfactorily. Instead of becoming more patient, they may become more disappointed with one another. Instead of becoming more sensitive to his spouse's needs, he may chip away at her self-esteem. She may respond with growing resentment, anger, and put-downs of her own.

Though financial troubles and differences over disciplining the children may be frequent battlegrounds, it is thought they are probably symptoms of interactional conflict that has grown between the couple.

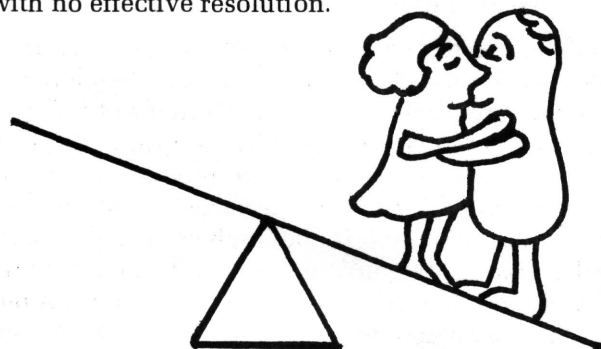
Carter and McGoldrick (1980) have suggested that troubled marriages seem to take at least four different patterns:

- dominative-adaptive
- dual-adaptive
- dual-dominant
- emotional-distancing.

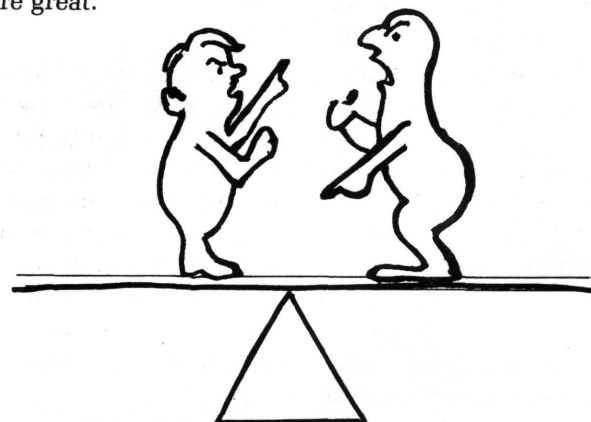
In the first, dominative-adaptive, one spouse usually takes charge when there is conflict or when "emotionally-based issues" crop up. The other spouse assumes a more subordinate role. Often, additional conflict develops when adaptive spouses become anxious or depressed as a result of the position they hold, or the dominative spouse becomes turned off with accepting major responsibility for family decision-making. If the couple cannot mutually adapt to a more satisfying arrangement, chances of break-up are heightened.



Spouses involved in dual-adaptive patterns are often immobilized in stressful situations. They might be considered non-functional. That is, neither one wants to assume primary responsibility or can become action-oriented in tense situations. They tend to "put up with" negative situations rather than working toward positive change. Carter and McGoldrick (1980) suggest that these marriages are usually characterized by such chronic symptoms as alcoholism, depression, and spouse abuse in both spouses or a long-term, highly conflicted marriage with no effective resolution.



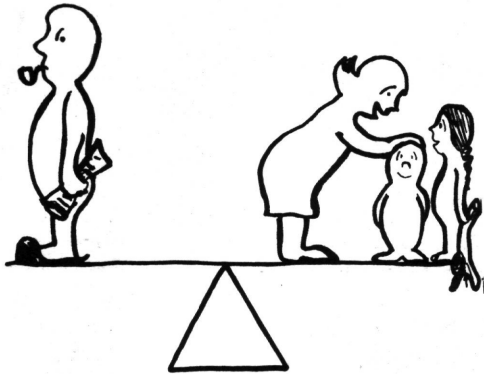
A third major tendency involves spouses who both assume a primarily dominant stance when the relationship is under stress. Both want to lead rather than follow. They actively and aggressively compete with one another for power and control. It is thought that this particular pattern puts couples at highest risk for marital conflict and, unless one partner is successful in learning to back off somewhat, chances for eventual separation and divorce are great.



The fourth pattern is constructed when emotional-distancing occurs between spouses, and/or one of the spouses becomes too enmeshed with the children so that affectional and communication gaps develop within the family. Parents are clearly at odds with one another and have developed a sort of "non-relationship" to cope with their differences.

More often than not, a triangle develops, involving one parent and children as allies and excluding the other parent from the clique. Occasionally, the pattern involves role reversals so that children take

on a "caretaking posture" toward their enmeshed parent. This pattern, if continued or escalated after divorce, can become intensely harmful to a child's emotional development and the parent's ability to move forward.



When couples cannot successfully communicate their disappointments and frustration to one another, chances are high that eventually one or the other will drift into an apathetic attitude about the relationship. When this happens, the desire to "keep working" at the relationship disappears. An "I-don't-care, just-let-me-out-of-this" attitude takes over, seriously limiting the likelihood that the relationship can be reconstructed. The next step is usually a decision about the now dysfunctional relationship. The marriage patterns that were discussed earlier will have a great impact on the conflicted couples' ability to resolve their differences. Some will choose to stay in a very unsatisfying relationship, continuing to argue and be abusive toward one another, or they will withdraw from one another in cold, uncaring silence. Some marriages like these are broken only by the death of one partner. Other couples will move toward an equally painful decision to separate or divorce. It is at this time that individual stress levels will be the highest.

Reaction Toward Separation, Divorce

Following a separation, there may be considerable uncertainty about whether divorce is the "right thing" to do. Spouses may experience wide mood swings. On a particular day they may feel a great sense of relief that they have made some effort to resolve their problems, that there's no one around to argue with. The very next day, they may feel they have made a major mistake, that if they had only been more patient, more understanding, or easier to get along with, it wouldn't have happened.

Studies indicate that these ambivalent feelings continue even years following a divorce. After a year has passed, 3/4 of all women and 2/3 of all men

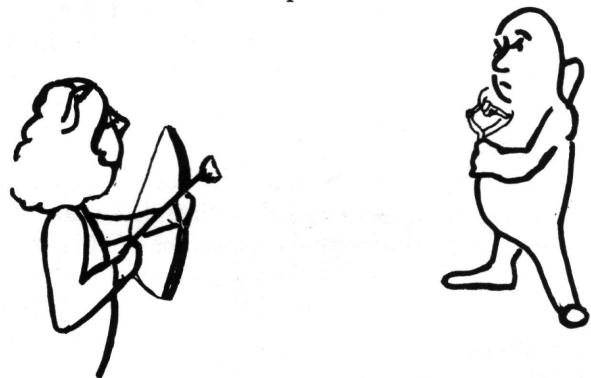
report they would have second thoughts, given the chance to do it all over. However, after two years have passed, only 1/4 of all men and women feel they made the wrong decision.

The majority feel that, while the dissolution of the marriage was difficult, the choice was positive, overall. One young woman who had been through 8 years of a very difficult marriage expressed it this way:

"I tried. I really did. I didn't want to admit that our marriage couldn't work, but I finally had to face it that one person can't make all the necessary changes; it takes two. My only regret is that I waited so long. I can see tremendous relief in the kids that there isn't any more fighting . . . and I can't tell you how different I feel. I wake up in the morning now and I don't have that black cloud hanging over me. I actually feel excited about what's around the corner for me instead of dreading what might be coming. There's this tremendous surge of creative energy I haven't felt since I was in high school. . . ."

A critical aspect of the divorce process is the process of **mourning** that must take place. Whether or not children are involved, there must be acknowledgement by the couple that they have lost a primary relationship with another person. This loss cannot be tossed off lightly. Spouses who refuse to deal appropriately with the impact of this loss will be left with some rather important unfinished business. Feelings that are denied or failure on the part of each spouse to attend realistically to the problems that brought the couple to divorce may result in unhappiness in subsequent relationships.

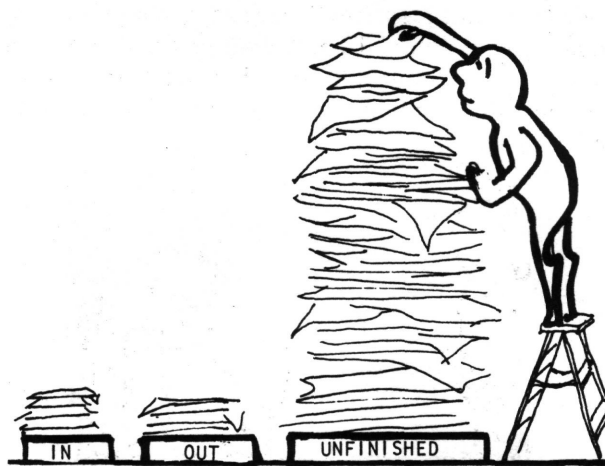
This period is going to require full use of each person's coping skills. Divorce has been listed on the Holmes Rahe scale (see appendix) as one of the most highly stressful events that anyone can experience, topped only by the death of a family member. In many cases, it is possible that divorce is **more** stressful than a death in the family if regaining balance is hampered by a couple's inability to acknowledge psychologically what has legally taken place in their relationship.



It has been said that a successful divorce can happen only when 1) there is a realization by the pair that they do **not** have a constructive future together and 2) that they have emerged from a very trying period with a more realistic and positive understanding of their own needs and what it takes to make a marriage work.

While mourning the lost relationship is necessary, there is a danger that one spouse or the other can remain in this stage for **too** long, experiencing intense feelings of anger, hurt, loneliness, depression, and helplessness. When this happens, closure is forestalled as well as any sort of healing process.

In order to become “unstuck” and move along, one or both of the individuals may require the help of a counselor or therapist. Carter and McGoldrick (1980) warn that it is important for the therapist not get drawn into seeing one of the spouses as “persecuted” or “functional” and another as the “persecutor” or “non-functioning” spouse. In most cases, both spouses have contributed in some way to the now-dysfunctional relationship.



The last stages of working through a divorce will require both individuals to assess the damage to their self-esteem and to reconstruct their identities. This will take conscious examination of values, the re-evaluation of former relationships (for example, with former in-laws and relatives), and the development of new relationships and support systems.

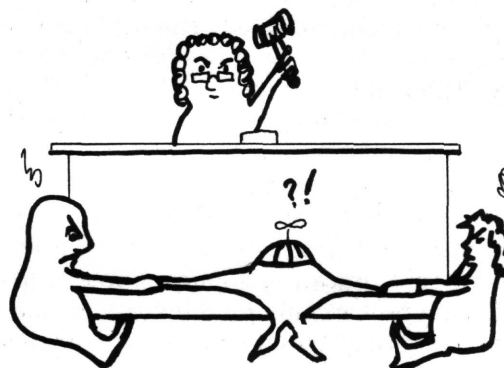
Arranging Custody

Besides reorganizing their own personal lives, the greatest task faced by many divorced or separated couples is arranging for the care of their children. Since 3/5 of all divorces occur in 25 to 39 year-olds and most women divorcing do so before age 30, children of divorce are often less than seven at the time of their parents' physical separation and/or legal divorce (Carter and McGoldrick, 1980).

Until 1839, there was no question about custody in this country. Children were considered property and were automatically awarded to their fathers in the very rare event of divorce. In the latter part of the 19th century, however, what has come to be known as “the tender years doctrine” emerged. Because of the rising influence of psychologists and child development experts, mothers were more frequently awarded custody.

The mother-child bond was believed to be naturally stronger than the father-child attachment. Today, that arrangement is still considered the most positive child-rearing situation, and 90% of all custody decisions are awarded in favor of mothers. However, there is growing awareness that there is reason to question this practice.

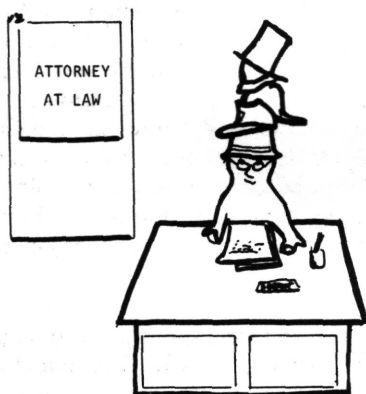
Since children form bonds with both parents, the question needs to be asked in each individual case, “Who has been the primary caretaker of this child and to what degree has each parent emotionally invested in the welfare of the child to date?” There is also substantial evidence that children are better able to cope with separation or divorce of their par-



ents when they are allowed to maintain a close relationship with **both** parents following the break-up.

In matters of custody, the choice of one lawyer over another and the luck-of-the draw in having a particular judge hear the case have been found to be extremely important. Despite the availability of no-fault divorce in 48 states, most couples find it difficult to resolve issues over property and children without legal help. Lawyers play many different roles in guiding their clients toward dissolution of a marriage. Though they also act as psychological counselors and financial managers, more often than not, the stance they take (and encourage their clients to take) is an adversarial approach. Often, this approach operates under the assumption that only one parent is telling the truth. It automatically tends to increase conflict in resolving questions of custody or financial arrangements. In short, each

lawyer is working to get the “best deal” for his client.



Mediation, an alternative to the traditional adversary process, is a strategy for resolving conflict whereby a couple uses a third party to ease communication and guide them through negotiation. The mediator also acts to balance power between the couple and to provide a more impartial perspective. It is not the job of the mediator to help the couple stay together — only to break up more amicably and sensibly. Vroom, Fassett, and Wakefield (1982) describe this process:

Mediation is generally informal and less structured than are alternative procedures. Because mediation is private, it encourages an openness that is impossible in a public setting. The disputants retain control of the outcome rather than turning the decision-making power over to a judge or an arbitrator.

The mediator can help them to negotiate an agreement about property distribution, support, and child custody by which they can both abide. Rather than acting as adversaries vying for the sympathy of a judge, the couple in mediation cooperates to solve their conflict. The result is a new, workable relationship in which both parties are winners, and the family continues in a transformed state.

Types of Custody Arrangements

Currently, there are three main types of custody arrangements operating — joint custody, “birdnest” custody, and legal custody.

1. Joint Custody

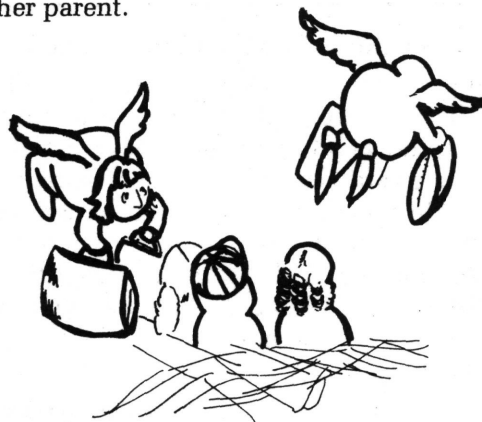
Following California’s lead in 1979, 27 states now allow a judge to decide that a couple may share custody of their children. Many judges in those states, however, continue to view this as a limited alternative, feeling that, if the couple were able to work cooperatively with one another in important matters, they probably would not be in divorce court.

In cases where spouses are able to remain united and cooperative about the needs of their children, however, joint custody allows each parent the in-

teraction time necessary to maintain a satisfactory and natural relationship with their children. These arrangements vary dramatically from one family to another. Children may spend the school year with one parent and summers and vacation with another. In some cases, the child stays with one parent for a specified time period and then moves to the other parent’s home for a similar time period. If parents reside in different school districts or neighborhoods, this kind of pattern can be disruptive to the child’s education or ability to form and maintain friendships with other children.

2. “Birdnest” Custody

In another type of arrangement, children remain in a family residence, with parents moving in and out of the family home. Though not very prevalent, this arrangement allows more continuity for the child, in that surroundings remain entirely familiar, belongings need not be carried back and forth, and the family pets, siblings, and neighborhood friends are not left behind in order for the child to be with the other parent.



Constructing this sort of custody arrangement could be very positive for children but demands considerable maturity and flexibility from parents. They would be required to put aside their own emotional hurts and cooperate reasonably well with one another in maintaining a household primarily for their children. It also would demand that parents remain in fairly close proximity to one another so that commuting to their workplaces is possible.

3. Legal Custody

A third arrangement, and one that remains the most popular arrangement, is legal custody. In these cases, a child is awarded to one parent, and it will be this parent alone who is able to make medical, legal, and educational decisions with respect to the child. Visitation rights may or may not be awarded to the other parent.

Child support is usually awarded to the custodial parent to help with the expenses in rearing the child. In most states, the non-custodial parent will pay 20% of his or her income (depending upon ability to pay) for the first child and 10% more for each

additional child, up to as high as 50% of total income. These payments currently average about \$2,110 annually. However, it is interesting to note that only 43.5% of the 4 million women (figures are not available for males) awarded child support actually receive it (Schmid, 1983).

A primary reason for non-payment is out-and-out refusal to do so. Often, a non-custodial parent begins to "feel like a wallet rather than a parent" and payments are made grudgingly particularly when the relationship with the children has been significantly stymied. Other reasons include inability to locate a delinquent spouse or financial difficulties of the non-custodial parent.

Recent legislation in some states now authorizes the Friend of the Court to call for payroll deductions of the amount. In 1983, President Regan promised in his State of the Union Address to more aggressively attack the problem of non-support experienced by millions of single parents and their children.

YOU DECIDE: WHO KEEPS NANCY?

Following is a fictitious case study based on a real-life custody battle. Consider each of the parent's viewpoints and then make the decision to award custody to one parent or another. In this case, you may not award joint custody but must decide legal custody. To help you make your decision more objectively, the parents' viewpoints are followed by a listing of 10 factors commonly used to settle custody disputes.

Harold Meiers: — I have a four-year-old daughter, Nancy, and I love her dearly. My marriage of seven years is over. I realize that but I can't lose Nancy, too. I think all of this is the result of my wife Carole getting too involved in her job.

I'm not a wealthy man but I do earn a pretty comfortable living as an upholsterer. I've done this full-time for about seven years now, and the shop is attached to our home. My mother, a widow, is living with me, and says she'll stay on to help me take care of Nancy. She's really been a Godsend. I don't know what I would have done without her when my wife left five months ago. I wasn't expecting it, even though we hadn't been getting along too well. I really fell apart when Carole left . . . became so depressed I couldn't see straight. I still can't believe it's happened. All I ever wanted was just to take care of my family. It's been a real nightmare. I've been getting some help from a counselor.

I'm sure Carole is seeing someone from her office. He used to call her at home and, every time I'd ask her about it, she'd fly off the handle, telling me it was business. She was all business as far as our marriage was concerned. Sex was completely off-limits. Carole was always too tired. She brought

home work every night — never had any time for me or Nancy.

Nancy is a good kid. She's been enrolled in the Montessori program at Knight school and is just starting to take off in her reading. I let her teacher know what Carole and I are going through — thought she should know — and she said she hoped we would not take Nancy out of school right now — that it wouldn't be good. Nancy likes going to Sunday School, too, and I know Carole would never see that she got there. It doesn't mean that much to her.

* * * *

Carole Meiers — this is a spot I never thought I'd be in. I thought marriage was for life, but it's turned into a constant battle. I agonized over leaving Harold because it meant leaving Nancy behind temporarily; but he wouldn't leave, and I felt my own mental health was being threatened. I desperately want Nancy back. It's already been five months, and I'm worried about her. She's so little, and I just feel a child that age belongs with her mother.

I wouldn't have any trouble supporting her. I suppose that's been part of the problem. Harold has resented my working, especially since I've earned more than he does. I'm a regional manager for a block of fairly large accounting companies. There are several times during the year when I have to be gone but I have a good friend in the same neighborhood where I'm renting a small home. She cares for several children in her home and is willing to care for Nancy even overnight if I have to be gone. There are a lot of kids Nancy's age in the neighborhood, and I'm sure she would adjust easily.

Harold won't give her up easily. He's as unstable as they come! Shortly after I left him, he drank a liquid cleaner. It was just fortunate that his mother found him in time and got him to a hospital. She's been a thorn in our marriage right from the beginning, always interfering with our life and especially in decisions that we make about Nancy. She's been so critical because she doesn't feel Nancy is getting good religious training — says it's my fault.

Sunday morning is the only time that I get to sleep in, and I feel that I'm a better mother when I get that extra rest than when I don't. Harold refuses to take Nancy to Sunday School unless we all go together. The other thing I think tore our marriage apart was Harold's jealousy, his constant insinuations about men I work with. While we were married, I never looked at anyone else. I have been dating someone at work lately but only the last month, and it's been wonderful to have another adult to talk to.

FACTORS FOR CONSIDERING CUSTODY

1. The love, affection and other emotional ties existing between the competing parties and the child.
2. The capacity and disposition of competing parties to provide the child love, affection and

guidance and continuation of the educating and raising of the child in its religion or creed, if any.

3. The capacity and disposition of competing parties to provide the child with food, clothing, medical care or other remedial care recognized and permitted under the laws of this state in lieu of medical care, and other material needs.
4. The length of time the child has lived in a stable, satisfactory environment and the desirability of maintaining continuity.
5. The permanence, as a family unit, of the existing or proposed custodial home.
6. The moral fitness of the competing parties.
7. The mental and physical health of the competing parties.
8. The home, school and community record of the child.
9. The reasonable preference of the child, if the court deems the child to be of sufficient age to express preference.
10. Any other factor considered by the court to be relevant to a particular child custody dispute.

WHO KEEPS NANCY . . . THE DECISION

What was your decision? _____

What were the most prominent factors in making this decision?

Think carefully about any **biases** you may have that interfered with the objectivity of your decision.

What effect will this decision probably have on the relationship Nancy has with the significant people in her life?

What effect will the decision have on the non-custodial parent?

What possible **new** stressors are in store for the custodial parent?

Note — This exercise can also be used as a simulation activity with small groups. Participants may take the roles of mother, father, lawyers, and judge. It is interesting to note the variability of decisions when more than one group participates at the same time. That variability often depends upon the persuasiveness of those who play certain roles as well as the attitudes and values of those "hearing" the case. Similarly, the outcome of custody battles in courts every day often depends on these same factors. Turn to page 12 to find out which parent gained control of Nancy in the real-life battle on which this case was based.

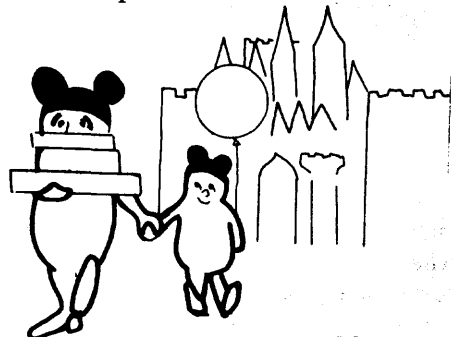
National and local organizations whose goal is to provide solace, refuge, compassion, understanding and assistance to non-custodial parents are:

- **Mothers Without Custody**
P.O. Box 26
Sudbury, Mass. 01775
- **Fathers for Equal Rights**
1-313-354-3080
- **National Congress for Men**
1-313-354-3080

Other Custody Problems

Often, the first court decision made with respect to custody of a child is not the last. Some spouses may be highly dissatisfied with the original decision, feel cheated, or may use the situation later to exercise control over an ex-spouse. Also, because family life continues to be dynamic after a divorce as well as before, situations and people change, calling for changes in legal arrangements. Some common problems emerging from custody arrangements include the following:

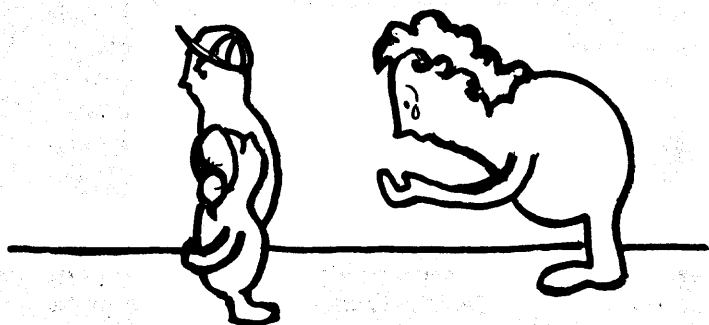
- **Non-Custodial Parent Becomes "Disneyland Daddy" (or Mama); Custodial Parent Becomes "Mean Mama" (or Daddy)** — Spouses may become ex-spouses, but parents never become ex-parents. Unless they can cooperatively establish common guidelines and expectations for the children and communicate those expectations to one another and the children, efforts to gain some sort of balance in establishing a new family structure will be severely hampered. Considering the strained emotions leading to and following a divorce, this is asking a lot! However, children are less confused when they have to shift fewer gears in moving from one parent to another.



Expectations of behavior, the child's responsibilities, discipline strategies, and financial outlay ideally will be reasonably similar from situation to situation. Non-custodial parents need to watch for the easy trap of trying to insure a child's love by being highly entertaining, purchasing numerous or expensive gifts, and sanctioning or ignoring a child's irresponsible behavior. When this happens, children gain unrealistic and unhealthy perspectives of what life with the non-custodial parent would be like and may begin to play one parent off against another in a form of emotional blackmail. The child may also request a change of custody in order to take advantage of what seems to be a more highly satisfactory living arrangement.

- **Non-Custodial Mother is Viewed with Contempt** — Because of the growing number of fathers gaining custody or because of inability to care financially or emotionally for their children, more than 500,000 mothers are now living apart from their children. Many of these women are viewed by

their own children, families, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or some educators as probably unfit or



uncaring. They are highly disapproved of by society, in general, as self-indulgent, and consequences of this disapproval can significantly damage a woman's self-esteem, her ability to establish a good relationship with her children, and may lead to mental health problems. Two women describe the kind of pain that accompanies their efforts to deal with their non-custody:

"I dread the phone calls and at the same time I enjoy them," said Peg Dhont, whose children now live in Pennsylvania. "If I get too involved in their day-to-day life, it's too painful. I handle the pain better by being far away. Yet, it's difficult. They tell you the things they're doing without you, and you realize how separate they are from you, that you're not part of their lives."

And

"It occurred to me I didn't know how he looked when he went to school in the morning," said Dorian Yeager, "So I spent all the money I made in summer stock on clothes for Jeremy. I figured this way I could wake up in the morning and think" — and here the 33-year-old woman starts crying — "maybe he's wearing the rust corduroys." (Aig, 1983)

- **Case of the Disappearing Grandparents** — When families fracture, relatives are also caught in the break-up. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) discovered in the sample of divorcing families they studied that children benefited greatly when they were able to maintain contact with the extended family and, particularly, with their grandparents.

Maternal and paternal grandparents can provide valuable emotional support and continued continuity to a child in the face of family dissolution. A few even provide temporary homes for children or occasional child care. The majority of grandparents, however, simply lose all contact with their grandchildren.

The loss of interest and contact appears to be closely related to whether or not paternal or maternal custody is gained. Grandparents whose own children gain custody are more inclined to

remain supportive and in contact. Occasionally, despite a grandparent's **wish** to remain supportive, a spouse may view an ex-spouse's parents as a threat. The feeling may be that grandparents will undermine a parent's authority or communicate a biased picture of the break-up to the child. As a result, grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren are often clamped off abruptly, decreasing the child's available resources during the crisis and adding to both generations' distress.

Grandparents may now petition for visitation rights in 42 states. However, this privilege is not granted automatically and depends upon a judge's perspective that such contact is in the best interests of the child. (Newsweek, 1983).

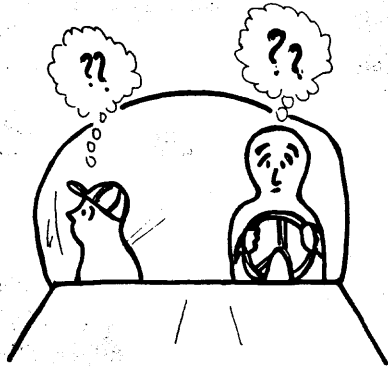
- **You've Got 'Em — Now Take Care of Them!** —

Poor outcomes for families following divorce can almost be predicted when one or both parents fail(s) to make a reasonable adjustment to the restructured situation. When a non-custodial parent's attitude toward loss of custody remains one of intense disappointment or anger, or the parent was unstable or a poor parent to begin with, it becomes easier for a non-custodial parent to dump all of their parenting responsibility in the lap of the custodial parent, including financial responsibility and total child care.

The result can be severe stress overload in the custodial parent due to overwhelming economic and psychological responsibility and a marked decline in any leisure time or positive social interaction. Unless a custodial parent can quickly build new support systems in friends, the extended family, or the community, the chronic stress generated in this kind of a situation will eventually impact on the physical and/or mental health of the responsible parent. Parent burn-out or apathy may result.

Custodial parents who make visitation extremely difficult for the non-custodial parent because of unresolved anger may actually promote this kind of situation, thereby increasing their own problems and distress levels in their children and ex-spouse. It is important that the situation be viewed objectively from every perspective if couples are to work themselves out of this damaging pattern.

- **Losing Touch** — Seeing children only several times a year or occasionally on weekends and holidays may lead to difficulty in knowing what their changing interests are or what to do with one another. It's sometimes easy to spot the non-custodial parent and child at restaurants or amusement places. Parent-child interaction seems strained and unnatural because there's a getting-acquainted-all-over-again and let's-get-ready-to-break-it-off-again component in these relation-



ships that's missing in the custodial parent-child relationship.

Dr. Doris Jonas Freed, chairwoman of the Custody Committee of the American Bar Association and an advocate for joint custody, has suggested that visiting rights aren't enough to allow for satisfactory continuing contact for non-custodial parents. They tend, she says, to become "zoo" or "movie" parents. (Coy, 1982). In some cases, the relationship deteriorates to little more than an omni-present painful memory:

Joe DiMaggio, Jr.: "I never knew my father. My parents were divorced when I was little and I was sent away to private school, and my father was totally missing from my childhood. When they needed a picture of father and son, I'd get picked up in a limo and have my picture taken. We were on the cover of the first issue of *Sport* magazine when it came out in 1949, my father and I, me wearing a little No. 5 jersey. I was driven to the photo session, we had the picture taken, and I was driven back. My father and I didn't say two words.

I cursed the name Joe DiMaggio, Jr. At Yale, I played football . . . I deliberately avoided baseball . . . but then I ran out on the field and they announced my name, you could hear the crowd murmur. When I decided to leave college and join the Marines, I called my father to tell him. So I told him, and he said, "The Marines are a good thing," and there was nothing more for us to say to each other." (King, 1982)

Single custody continues to be awarded in the majority of cases, and Dr. Jeanne Brown, Human Development Specialist at Michigan State University, has suggested the following tips to help non-custodial parents and their children maintain closer relationships and communication:

- Write letters regularly . . . weekly or even more often. You may want to use stationery that is distinctive . . . either in color or design . . . so that your children will recognize it immediately. Tell them about your work, help provide a basis for future discussions, as well as helping them to feel that they know you better.



- Play a game via mail . . . something like tic-tac-toe for younger children and checkers or simple board games for older children.
- Send jokes, cartoons, or pictures that you think they might enjoy.
- Have telephone conversations with your children. They are worth the cost of the calls. Phone calls allow you and your children to talk over special moments and problems. And hearing each other's voice adds a special dimension to your relationship. Short calls at frequent intervals can be better than long calls spaced at long intervals.
- Provide your children with an inexpensive cassette tape player-recorder; then you can tape and send messages back and forth. Cassette tapes can allow you to talk about something more at length than you could perhaps afford to do on the phone. Your messages could include such things as reading or telling them a story, teaching them a new song or poem, etc. This could work both ways, with them telling you a favorite story, singing a song, or reciting a poem.
- Provide your children with an inexpensive instant camera to take pictures of activities and special moments to share via the mail. If your children are too young to operate the camera, perhaps the custodial parent could take the pictures for them. You, in turn, be sure to send them pictures of yourself. A photo album they could keep their pictures in would be a good gift idea.

Dr. Brown notes that the essence of all these strategies is that parent and child are able to share experiences and interests. Developing a sharing relationship under such circumstances requires time and patience but is worthwhile. What is required is that both parents be able to put aside any animosities between them that may limit the development of such a relationship.

When non-custodial parent and child are able to spend time together, every effort should be made to have that time be adequately balanced between structured, more intense activity and non-structured freedom. Instead of a restaurant meal, it might be a better idea to go grocery shopping together and cook the meal at home, even if cooking abilities are low-level. Instead of constantly being on the go, parent and child might want to spend a more relaxing evening watching a t.v. program together . . . unless the parent uses this as a cop-out for interaction with the child.



- **Custody Decisions Carved in Stone** — Some couples bounce in and out of court, spending a great deal of their psychic and financial resources over continued custody disputes to maintain (or alter), at all costs, the initial decision. Often there is an effort on the part of one or both of these spouses to continue to exploit or manipulate one another even after legal dissolution of their marriage.

There are cases, however, where it would be truly beneficial to re-evaluate a prior custody decision because of changing needs in various family members. Perhaps the custodial parent simply needs a rest from parenting responsibility or needs to put more energy into a career than ear-

lier. Children grow older and may find one parent more satisfactory in fulfilling their needs at a particular time. For example, it has been suggested that, when children become adolescents and are struggling to organize their own identities, it is helpful for them to be with their same-sex parent. Also, unless a child's safety is involved because a parent has been found to be unfit or irresponsible, children can only get to know their parents intimately when they live with that parent on a daily basis, watching attitudes, values, and coping skills being put into practice. For these reasons, custodial parents need to be considerate of the child's developing needs in periodically reassessing whether or not they are able to provide the best possible environment for that child at a particular time in the family's life span.

WHO KEEPS NANCY?

Nancy was awarded to her father in the real-life case on which the simulation exercise was based. The judge decided that Nancy's mother was more interested in her business than in her daughter. How fair is the decision in your opinion?

Effects of Divorce On Children

Why Can't They?

Parents
Why can't they
stay together
forever?
Didn't they think
about it in
the b
e
g
i
n
n
i
n
g

They keep on
hurting themselves
and us.
I wish they would decide
one way or the other.

Author: Nina Cantrell, 14, Tacoma, Wash.
Source: Larrick and Merrian, 1968, p. 128.

In order to assess the impact of divorce on children, it is necessary to know what family life was like **prior** to divorce.

- What kinds of interactions existed between parents when expressing their dissatisfactions about the marriage — cold, tense, hostile behavior, or outright physical and verbal warfare?
- How much or how little were children aware of family problems?
- What kinds of attachments had grown between the children and each of their parents?

Since not all families are the same, it is possible that losses are greater in those families where secure, long-term attachments have been formed between family members, where respect and love were expressed in interactions between members before intense personal or family stress led to dysfunction and breakup.

In other families, relationships between parents, and between parents and their children, may have been so loosely organized that they hardly existed at all — or entirely too close and interdependent. Despite close or problematic interaction, however, it must be recognized that the foundation each particular family builds is **its** foundation, no matter how shaky. When it comes crashing down, no family member escapes unhurt.

Children are more vulnerable than adults in any crisis because they are in the process of developing



the ability to think logically about events, act independently, establish their own identities as separate from important people in their lives, and problem-solve. Thus, they are family members at especially high risk.

Children also have a lot to lose — the potential loss of a developing relationship with one parent — perhaps a dramatic change in income support or life style. They may suffer loss of extended family support, familiarity of neighborhood or school, friends, home, and a general sense of security. Childhood may be aborted suddenly as children are urged inappropriately to help parents deal with intense disappointment, hurt, or outrage. There is confusion, as parents become less consistent in discipline or parent by mood, depending upon how well they are coping with the divorce process on any particular day. Holidays can become exhausting marathons of celebration with parents and extended family.

How Children React To Divorce

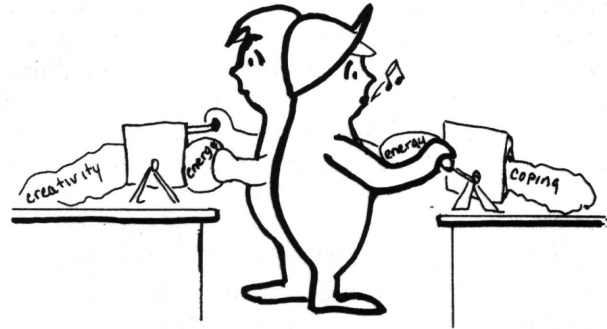
Though some children become more aggressive and discharge their anger by acting out or rebelliousness, many more are inclined to withdraw. High levels of stress are reflected in greater incidents of daydreaming (they have a lot to think about or escape from), physical symptoms such as stomachaches, headaches, accident proneness, a marked gain or loss of weight, and listlessness. Some children will evidence fatigue, restlessness, moodiness, or irritability not previously seen. Others may have sleep problems — insomnia or nightmares, depression, or increased attention-seeking behavior and clinging.

Children, like adults, react individually to stressful situations, depending upon their perceptions of what's going on in their lives. Though some children appear to be almost immune to fallout from a family crisis, many will hide any symptoms and the strong emotions they are feeling. They continue to function pretty well in almost every situation, achieve well in school, and move about with an air of well-being.

These children have been called "invulnerables" by David Elkind (1981) who has taken a hard look at children and the stressors they face in today's world. It is possible, he says, that the energy these

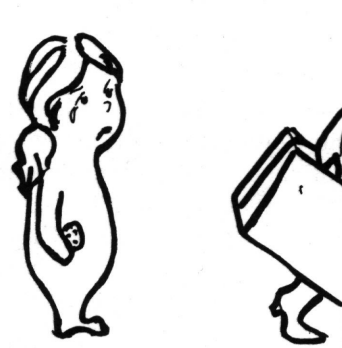
children expend in coping with such experiences is then lost to more creative involvement. It's difficult to assess the real costs.

Researchers who have looked at the effects of divorce on large populations of children have noted that, while all children are susceptible to the catastrophic effects of divorce, there are fairly significant differences depending upon the **sex** of the child (boys at all ages tend to take the event harder) and **age**. Apparently these two factors impact heavily on the ways children are able to cope with their parents' divorce.



The Preschool-Age Child

Since divorce rates continue to be highest during the early years of marriage, the greatest number of childhood divorce victims are naturally found in preschool populations. There is evidence that young children, two years to five, suffer the most severe short and long-term effects when their parents split up. They are highly susceptible to instability in daily routine and family life and are more dependent on the family as a source of nurturance and help. They are also intensely hampered by childhood interpretations of events. For example, because of the magical-thinking characteristics of this age group, these children may make up macabre fantasies about why one parent has left or feel they are responsible in some way for the break-up. They were naughty, causing a parent to leave; they wanted Mother or Daddy to go away, and now they have; after being punished, they were angry, wished something bad would happen, and it did. Tremendous guilt feelings can result.



There are other social and emotional spinoffs to the loss of the dual-parent family unit for a young child. Schoyer (1980) notes that each parent potentially provides something for the child: male and female role models; the stability that is necessary for the normal separation process to occur, enabling children to move out beyond the family arena; resolution of the Oedipal conflict, which is dealt with between three and six years of age; and the powerful presence of two parents to reinforce discipline codes and behavioral expectations, leading to more mature moral development.

Rules are absolute at this age and, to the child, consequences are unrelated to intentions. Therefore, "If Daddy can leave Mother because they weren't getting along very well, Mother might leave, too, unless I'm **really** good!" The possibility that such a thing could happen strikes fear into the hearts of young children. Many begin "hanging around" the remaining parent, keeping a desperate eye on the situation, even getting up in the middle of the night to see if the parent is still there. They may become too eager to please in order to avoid the imagined abandonment. When this happens, children are said to become "relationship oriented". They tend to bend with the situation in favor of what they perceive another person wants, rather than developing and practicing strong internal control. Implications for later situations involving peer pressure are obvious.

Play behaviors are often negatively affected, and these children show a marked inability to play creatively, to verbalize out loud during their play, or become involved in free expression with art media. The double danger in this lessened interest in expressive play is that, in this age group, play functions as a mode for emotional expression, something these children need for discharging the tension of the crisis they are undergoing. Ironically, it is **because** of the crisis that many of them are cut off from this particular outlet.

Defense mechanisms are commonly used by these young children. They often regress to some behaviors common in an earlier, more comfortable stage in their young lives. Thumb-sucking, bet-wetting, wetting or soiling their pants, throwing temper tantrums, and prior eating problems may reappear, adding worry and frustration to the burdens already being carried by their parents.

Children may refuse to play with other children, expressing their anger in more hitting and kicking. They may indicate increased preference for adult companionship or comforting in favor of playing with their own age-mates. Some will spend inordinate amounts of time engaged in solitary play with toys they played with earlier in their development.

Books to aid awareness in young children about

what happens when divorce happens in the family include:

Ets, Marie Hall. *Bad Boy, Good Boy*. New York: Crowell, 1967.

This book shows the changes that can occur when a discouraged child is given positive direction and adjusts to his parents' separation.

Gardner, Richard A. *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce*. New York: Aronson, 1970. Dr. Gardner, a child psychiatrist, candidly discusses the problems which young children encounter when their parents divorce. Among the topics discussed are: whom to blame for the divorce, love between parents and child, anger and its uses and the fear of being left alone.

Lexau, John M. *Emily and the Klunky Baby and the Next-Door Dog*. New York: Dial Press, 1972. The feeling of rejection depicted in this story is often experienced by a child whose parents are divorced.

Rogers, Helen Spelman. *Morris and His Brave Lion*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976. The author's tender and straightforward handling of the divorce issue, without condescension, shows depth and understanding of children's needs as well as a basic respect for human feelings.

Berger, Terry. *A Friend Can Help*. WI: Raintree Publications, 1974. This short, first-person account tells how important it is for a child to have a peer with whom to discuss important problems.

_____. *How Does It Feel When Your Parents Get Divorced?* New York: Massner, 1977. This series of questions and thoughts of a girl whose parents have been divorced for two years encourages children who are going through the same experience to think about their feelings; i.e., anger, unhappiness, guilt and love.

Source: Schoyer, 1980, pp. 6 & 7.

Children in Middle Childhood

Intense sadness and longing to have parents reunited are characteristic of children in the middle years of childhood. Crying is common. These children are also frequently very angry people but are "wise enough" not to confront parents directly about the source of their anger. There is a sense of not being able to control important events in their lives. They tend to express that anger in whining, extreme mood shifts, physical complaints, fears, and significant drops in school achievement.

It's hard to concentrate on the 3 R's or something the teacher is talking about when there are more important things to deal with: being ashamed of what's happening in your family — (If I play in the concert Friday, will both my mom and dad be there? Will they fight in front of everybody?); wondering if your dad will feel you don't love him anymore if you ask to stay with your mother; agonizing over who's going to get the dog; wondering if Uncle George will still be your Uncle George.

Even if the divorce itself took place earlier in their lives, these children will need to deal with it all over again because of the dramatic changes that will take place in their thinking. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that an important milestone in development occurs when children are about 8 or 9 years of age. They become somewhat more sophisti-



cated in their ability to understand complex reality and to handle their unhappiness, feelings of loss and rejection, and the helplessness and fear of loneliness that preoccupies them most of the time. They try hard not to think about the situation at all. They get involved in vigorous activity. They are more able to verbalize their now-conscious, intense anger . . . not to their parents, necessarily, but to someone else who will listen. They tend to move toward establishing blame in one parent and intense loyalty toward the other one who is perceived as more virtuous.

Despite these newly emerging coping skills, these children still experience the pain of having their own world turned upside down, not having enough



information about what is happening in their lives, and trying to construct a workable concept of what their family life is going to be like.

Because children in this age group must widen their world to include peer involvement, homework, and extra-curricular activity, the necessity of having to schedule "social time" with a non-custodial parent may be costly in terms of friendships with other children, completion of homework assignments and normally-available leisure time to just "mess around".

Children in middle years are prone to misconceptions. Information they gain by way of eavesdropping on telephone conversations or screening the mail tends to be inaccurate. Also, they often misinterpret the importance of other adults in their parents' lives: a date or a phone call is perceived as the first step toward a stepfamily situation.

Effects on Adolescents

There is a widespread misunderstanding about the effects of divorce on adolescents. Despite their increased access to support systems outside the family — peer groups, parents of friends, school counselors, etc. — many teenagers are absolutely

shaken up when their families dissolve. According to information about the timing of divorce, parents of adolescents are the second fastest growing group of spouses divorcing. Marital satisfaction is reported to be at an all-time low in the period where families have teenagers or adult children are leaving.

Many parents feel that since they aren't getting any younger, their marriage is at such a low point, and the children are now fairly independent, it is a good time to make the break if one is going to be made. While it is true that some marriages are better off dissolved, it may also be true that there is not a "best" time for doing so. Apparently, family rupture is painful for different reasons — at all periods in the family life cycle.

We were not surprised to find many adolescents like Tina shaken by the marital rupture. We were, however, unprepared for the quality of their anguish and, particularly, for their frantic appeals to us to restore their parents' marriage. — (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980 p. 81).

When parental divorce occurs in the adolescent's life, the press toward growing up and becoming independent from parents is usually more hurried than in intact families. Time needed for moving back and forth between independent and dependent behavior is usually significantly telescoped, and the opportunity to use parents as sounding boards is decreased because of preoccupation with their **own** needs. Thus, according to Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), a "potential major impact of divorce is either to drive the adolescent development forward at a greatly accelerated tempo or to bring it to a grinding halt.

"Other family functions crucial to maintaining adolescent development were also weakened by the divorce. These include providing discipline, external structure, and controls. The shaky family structure of the newly divorced family and the loosened discipline of the transition period combined with parent self-absorption or distress to diminish the available controls. Some of the youngsters lacked inner controls, the consolidated conscience and independent capacity to make judgments that they needed to maintain themselves without strong parental support and guidance. The divorce left them feeling vulnerable to their own newly strengthened sexual and aggressive impulses, and surrounded by the temptations of the adolescent world without the supports that would hold them to a straight course. Although many youngsters were able to maintain their own course, their efforts to do so were costly."

Other problems in this age group identified by these researchers:

- Divorced parents often tend to be viewed by their children as sexual beings because of the re-entry into the dating mainstream. This perception con-

trasts with a relative invisibility of parental sex in intact homes.

- Separated or divorced parents sometimes date people who are close in age to their own children, evoking sexual fantasies in their own children.
- Adolescents become anxious about their own chances for future marital success, given the failure of their parents' marriage.
- There is marked de-idealization of parents by the teenagers; in short, parents are viewed as fallen idols.
- There is anger. Part of the anger expressed by these adolescents is related to their age, but the divorce gives them new excuses for venting it.
- There are intense loyalty conflicts, with both parents wanting the teenager's primary allegiance, putting the child squarely and painfully in the middle.
- Although many adolescents cope with the conflict and do move toward resolution, allowing them to get on with their own development, others regress toward childhood, either temporarily or for prolonged periods. Regression includes playing with younger children or spending large amounts of time alone, disrupted school performance, and increased dependency on a parent.
- Pseudoadolescent behavior may be present, with heavy involvement in sexual acting-out.

Adult Children

Potential difficulties for children with parents divorcing do not end necessarily with adolescence.



Since divorce is not a single event, but a process that involves adjustments before **and** after the legal dissolution, problems surrounding the event can exist for years or even a life time, depending upon the family's ability to get back on the track and moving again. Late-life divorces, which are on the increase, are as devastating to grown children and their parents as those experienced earlier in the family life cycle:

After four decades, after the children are grown and gone and the mortgage is paid, after bifocals and bridgework and retirement talk, an increasing number of couples are getting divorced. Seldom is the decision mutual. Rarely is it without pain — (Lansing State Journal, Jan. 30, 1983, page 7D).

Though government statistics are not kept on over-60 divorces, it is estimated that more than 100,000 couples in that age group decide their marriages are more "tarnished than golden". When the female is pensionless or unemployed and without skills, she may be left in alarming financial straits, without income or health-care benefits. Equally devastating is the psychological loss — the expected companionship, feelings of betrayal, and the shame and embarrassment of being rejected.

Though there are counseling programs to help older persons (most are female) deal with legal processes, family and personal stress, and community resources, many become almost immobile and totally dependent on adult children for financial and emotional support.

There is no doubt that this causes tremendous strain on the adult children, who themselves are probably working through their own developmental tasks of getting to know one another again after launching children (that is, if their **own** marriages have survived). Moreover, it must be emphasized again that no matter what age spouses are at the time of their divorce, the event is sure to be traumatic and will impact to some degree on all family members.

Reducing Fallout: Parents Can Help Children Cope

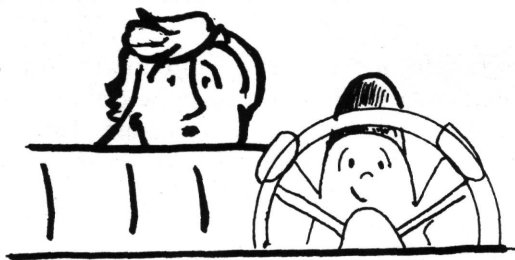
Avoiding Pain Games

Fairly prominent in most problem marriages are certain “games” that are developed and played between family members. These are sometimes consciously played; more often, however, family members are not fully aware that these are operating. They are usually only aware that, for some reason, they become terribly frustrated in trying to interact with one another or a particular family member.

Though anger is usually experienced, a careful look **behind** that emotion generally reveals more basic feelings that result in anger and frustration. First, however, come feelings of guilt, loneliness, rejection, humiliation, feelings of being uncared for or unappreciated, or feelings of being used — exploited or manipulated.

Family members then develop certain behavior patterns in order to control one another or retaliate. Often, these “games” are continued after divorce, though they are probably altered slightly to cope with the newly emerged family structure. Situations change, but power and control often remain the central issue.

A number of professionals have given labels to some of these games, which can be either child-initiated or parent-initiated. Berke and Grant (1981), for example, have titled a common one children play as “I’ll Go Live With Dad”. In this situation, a custodial parent can get caught in emotional blackmail by a child who may threaten to move in with a non-custodial parent everytime (s)he is asked to act responsibly. If the custodial parent responds with anger, “OK. Go ahead . . . I’ll help you pack!” and doesn’t follow through, or does so with fear or uncertainty, a power imbalance may result, with the child thereafter in the driver’s seat.



Parents can avoid such game-playing by remaining as calm as possible and telling the child, “That behavior won’t be tolerated. We both love you but have agreed that you’re going to live with your mother.”

The authors describe other games in their very insightful guide for more positively restructuring family relationships. In the “Wishbone Effect”, parents pull at, stretch, and tear apart their children’s loyalties, each parent wanting to be loved best and respected more.

Spinoffs of this particular game take place when an ex-spouse cuts down another, tries to “buy” the child’s allegiance, or communicates fault or blame by way or verbal or non-verbal messages: “I wouldn’t say anything to your mother about that. You know what she’s like when she doesn’t get her way” or “You know your dad never follows through so keep that in mind when you’re making plans”. These examples of communication convey negative messages. Often, they are more hidden but no less damaging, particularly to a child who identifies closely with the spouse being put down.

Parents may also use children as messengers to carry information back and forth because of an inability to communicate directly with one another. A more damaging sidelight is using children to play “I spy”, i.e., asking the child to report on the other ex-spouse’s activity, relationships, or financial status. Children are also used as collateral: “You didn’t get the child support to me on time, so don’t expect to get the kids on your visitation day this month”.



The authors offer excellent guidelines for clarifying attitudes that may lead to game-playing, avoiding involvement in them, and curtailing those that are already established. They note:

None of us is above playing games before marriage, during marriage or after divorce. After divorce, games are based on a need for strokes, a fractured identity, unconscious childhood decisions and an emotional attachment to an ex-spouse.

Divorce Without Victims

Suggesting that many children suffer severe psychological problems because parents are unaware of the potentially catastrophic impact of divorce, Berger (1974) has developed a number of guidelines for parents in helping them to avoid the victimization of children in the event of divorce:

- Unless one spouse already has abandoned the family, both parents should sit together with all their children and explain the reasons for the divorce.
- Be honest with your children. Whether a parent is leaving the family because of drug or alcohol problems, because of another lover or even because of homosexuality, try to explain the reasons in terms the child can understand. Avoid blaming the problems on "sin" or "sickness," which further confuses children.
- Control emotional outbursts around your children. "Breakdown of all control on a parent's part is terrifying to a child."
- Assure each child that you and your spouse were in love when the child was born. It's important that a child know he or she is "a product of love."
- In determining custody, try to put your own insecurities and fears second to the child's. You and your spouse should decide whether the child's best interest would be served through individual, joint, or split custody arrangements.
- Don't put your child in the position of spying on the activities of your former spouse, which encourages feelings of divided loyalties and makes the child feel he has to lie or take sides in a dispute between two objects of his or her love.
- A child of divorce craves attention. "Strange as it may seem, a child would rather be verbally or even physically abused by his parents than be ignored."
- Avoid any sort of prolonged and intense relationship with your former spouse that might confuse children by encouraging their reconciliation fantasies.
- When you begin dating or develop another sexual relationship, "allow your children and your lover to get to know each other in a gradual, natural way." This often requires a great deal of time, patience and sensitivity toward a child reluctant to accept the parent's new partner.



- Above all, don't ignore a child who threatens to commit suicide or run away, or a child who appears inordinately withdrawn and depressed — Source: Jones, 1983.

Signs of Stress in Children

The stress experienced by parents undergoing divorce often blinds them to signs of stress in their children. Constant tension tends to drive parents inward so they sometimes become insulated from their children's problems. Also, children may work very hard at concealing their stress, but alert, caring parents can interpret the signals. These may include any of the following: frequent complaints of stomachaches or headaches; increased sleep disturbances, including nightmares; aggressive or withdrawn behavior not usually characteristic of the child; sudden gains or losses of weight; an increase or decrease in attention-seeking behavior; accident-proneness, crying or tantrums; poor school performance; a noticeable loss of energy; a change in peer relationships; or regressive behavior that is noticeably more frequent.

Parents should see uncharacteristic displays of anger, whining, and tantrums as signals of distress from their child. These behaviors may be particularly difficult for parents to endure when they are also feeling angry or depressed. It helps to tell children that parents also have some of these feelings and that talking about them helps.

Also helpful is trying to see the **total** child. What extra demands on the child may be causing stress? Is visitation taking too much time away from friends and other responsibilities? Do the children have a good idea about schedule for pick up and drop off so they don't have to guess?

The Home-School Connection

In October 1979, a special issue of *Principal* appeared: "When the Family Comes Apart: What Schools Need To Know." Educators had been aware for some time that children from one-parent homes were becoming what had been termed "the school's most significant minority." On an intuitive basis, they were also aware that many (not all) of these children were in trouble, educationally, and that the problem and possible solutions needed to be explored systematically.

What Happens To School Performance?

In the study, 26 schools or 18,000 individual students were surveyed twice during 1979 in the first leg of a longitudinal study that is still on-going. Preliminary findings confirmed that, as a group, children from one-parent households have more trouble in school than other children. They are also more than twice as likely to drop out. These children were more likely to be from low-income families and families who move often.

It was concluded that a definite correlation exists between school performance and family status. This research group is now trying to extend its investigation to look at other related questions: What age groups are most affected by parental divorce? How soon after the event (separation, divorce, death) are children likely to exhibit problems? Do urban, suburban, and rural communities differ in the kinds of problems manifested by these children? What happens when remarriage takes place?

Clearly, though not all children are stressed to the point where they function poorly when parents are coming apart, the performance of a significant number of them is negatively affected.



Intellectual functioning remains higher in children from intact homes, unless homelife is terribly conflicted. The high amounts of stress in adults caring for children of separation and divorce is reflected in decreased ability in the children to

problem-solve, higher distractability, loss of persistence or attention to tasks, and more deviant behavior. This instability in children is not just a function of having a single parent but is an outcome of a marked decrease in consistent, parental control, fewer demands for mature, independent behavior, and modeling of poor control or coping by parents.

This kind of ineffective parenting may, of course, be found in traditional, intact families, particularly where family life is under stress because of emotional conflict between members, extreme financial difficulty, unemployment, poor parenting practices, alcoholism, or other problems. These families, too are very likely to yield children with similar educational problems.

How Educators Can Help

Increasingly, teachers, counselors, and administrators are being called on to respond to the needs of these children and their families. Educators dedicated to helping all children grow intellectually, morally and emotionally are sensitive to the fact that it is no longer possible to ignore the impact social change is having on family life and, in turn, on children's abilities to attend to classroom learning.

How appropriate is it to ask already overburdened school systems to provide support and guidance to children with separated or divorced parents? Robert Allers, a practicing Michigan school psychologist, notes:

"Why the school? With an already heavy workload, why do teachers have to take on the responsibility for such problems? These are not school problems; they are family problems. The answer is that schools are affected by social changes that educators cannot ignore. It is common knowledge that students' comprehensive test scores are declining and their academic motivation appears reduced. Children simply are not producing in school as they have been. I believe such changes are not the result of poor teachers or materials, nor are they the result of changes in curriculum. Instead, I believe that stress on students, lack of parental support, the present economic situation, and other external factors are adversely affecting the child's performance in the classroom. I predict that these pressures on the child will increase, and that the child's ability to use his talents constructively at school will continue to decrease. . . . Educators affect millions of children each year. They need to remember that teaching involves not only the three R's but also the preparation of a child to deal with his feelings and the people around him. The child of divorce does not have to be scarred and damaged. What happens to him depends upon the response of those in a position to help." (Allers, 1982, p. 149).

Children spend a large part of their waking hours in the school environment . . . an environment that may be the most stable one surrounding them at a particular time in life. In short, the only continuity some of these children experience during a time of family crisis will be that represented by the school.

The educational staff can provide tremendous amounts of support if they are sensitive to the anxiety felt by many of these children, rather than simply remedying poor achievement or helping a child get rid of the negative behaviors that result.

An assertive, positive approach would require an educational system to perform the following actions:

1. **Provide inservice** for educational staff so they can develop greater awareness about what these families and children may be experiencing and how it can impact on the child's learning. **A note of caution:** inservice content should be family-oriented, rather than just directed toward "what makes these kids tick". Families help their children tick, and we cannot effectively address the problem by ignoring this significant aspect of a child's total environment.

In these sessions, educators should be encouraged to examine their own attitudes toward divorce. Too, because teacher preparation rarely includes adequate knowledge and/or skill-building in empathy training or listening skills, inservice activity should include practice in on-the-spot effective communication strategies. Sessions should be offered to acquaint staff with a working knowledge of community and school mental health support personnel.

2. **Develop a strategy for identifying change in family structures** of children attending or moving into the school system: movement to single-parent or remarried status. Parents would be wise to alert school personnel to those changes but may not because of embarrassment or other personal reasons.

3. **Stay alert for signs of stress in these children** and in other children who may come from conflicted family situations. Families are always in varying states of functioning or dysfunction and may remain immobilized for years in very unhealthy, stressful behavior patterns. As pointed out elsewhere in the publication, children may exhibit such symptoms as daydreaming, nervousness, weariness, moodiness, withdrawn or aggressive behavior, physical complaints, and declining achievement.

4. **Act on the child's distress:**

Be empathetic.

Provide personal attention without cultivating a "pet."

Keep in touch with both custodial and non-custodial parents if possible.

Avoid stereotyping the families or the children.

Recommend professional help when needed and provide a list of available helping professionals and agencies.

Choose teaching materials that depict a variety of non-stereotyped family situations.

Talk about changing family patterns in the classroom when appropriate.

Teach coping or survival skills.

Teach decision-making.

Teach children to be aware of their own feelings and those of others.

Consider after-school care programs.

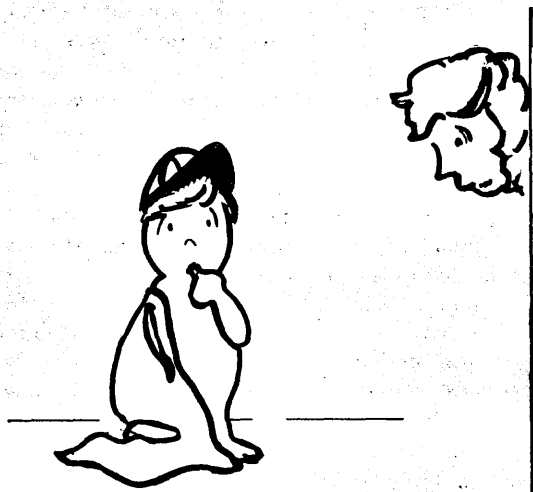
Consider talk sessions for student and parent groups (guidelines for structuring these groups can be found in Allers, 1982).

Communicate to parents when completion of homework is hampered.

Be careful during assignments or activities related to families to avoid embarrassing or confusing the child with a double set of parents or a single parent (making Mother's Day cards, gifts; outlining the family tree, etc.)

Model internal orientation (I am competent; I control my life; I am responsible for what happens to me) and expect students to demonstrate responsible behavior whenever possible.

Create a supportive team-like climate.



Living the Single Life Again

Today, one out of five families is headed by a single parent. Approximately 11 million children under 18 are living with a single parent, one million of them with their fathers. While much of society's concern has been directed toward the welfare of the children in these homes, there is growing awareness of the severe stress experienced by these parents. We know that primary causes of stress are change, overload or too great a demand in our lives, the feeling that we have lost control, and uncertainty or ambiguity. All of these characterize the lives of most single parents.

Mothers as Single Parents

Single parenthood is created in one of three ways. Separation and divorce, death of a spouse, or never-married parenthood. Ninety percent of all children living in single homes live with their mothers, and, according to Weiss (1979), almost all children of never-married parents live with their mothers. It has been said that "single mothers who are resourceful enough to raise well-adjusted children while holding down jobs have something in common with that fellow who leaps tall buildings with a single bound. They may be super moms but the demands require they also be SUPERMOMS (Lee, 1979).

Role strain is a major problem among them. Over 55% of women heading families are in the labor force. Heatherington (1977) found that, if women began working at the time of their divorce, further depriving their children of the accustomed parental contact, they were likely to see more behavior disturbances in their children. However, the instant poverty status that often accompanies divorce forces many non-working women into the labor market.

Though all employed women suffer somewhat from role strain, the single mother is forced to put

in longer hours, sacrificing sleep and leisure or personal time. She is primarily responsible for the care of her children, sole manager of her household, and must learn new roles in order to take over activities formerly handled by her spouse. More often than not, she is responsible for two full-time jobs:

You work all day and then come home and it's like another workday starts all over again. I mean, with three children, if you don't do a certain amount of wash every day, you know what it's like. And the house has to be kept up. So it's almost like two days in one sometimes (p. 55).*

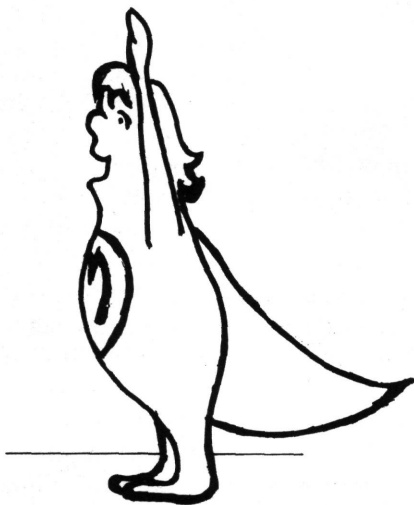
According to another:

What happened was, it would get to be a quarter of eleven and he would still be awake. I began to figure out that my time when from nine o'clock till eleven o'clock, seven days a week, and that's only fourteen hours a week of free time. I was getting cheated out of that. I really got extremely upset about it. I felt deprived of my time and my life. I got madder and madder. I was really angry. I had never been angrier. I understood child abuse for the first time. I didn't do it, but I certainly felt like it. One night I screamed so loud that my voice got all choky and I couldn't really scream any more: "I need my time! This is my time. You have to go to sleep!" (p. 56).*



Loneliness and depression are common. Even more problematic than the work load is the psychological load. There is no one to provide support when a bad report card is brought home, the car breaks down, or the boss yells. A great deal of loss is felt when a primary relationship is dissolved . . . and there may be feelings of failure involved in not having succeeded at marriage. Often prior relationships with friends or certain relatives are disrupted, and the single parent finds it necessary to develop an entirely new "social set".

* All excerpts are taken from Weiss, 1979 (see references)



You look for something to fill that emptiness. You start going out with the girls meeting people. Wrong people, right people, it doesn't make any difference. You start dating, just to get out. When you're not going out, you sit, you talk on the telephone, you read a magazine, but you get tired of it, and you get disgusted with it. It all builds up inside, and then you go (p. 155).*

The nights are long and very lonesome. And sometimes I drink to forget. I drink too much and I hate myself in the morning. For the time being, you do forget, but the problems are still there in the morning, and you feel worse about it. And the children don't like it either. My husband was such a drinker. And I hated it. I hated it, hated it, hated anything to do with it. And now I find myself sometimes drinking too much (p. 207).*

One out of three of these households headed by women fall below the poverty level; median income of female-headed families is only half that of the husband/wife dyad. For example, in Detroit where there are more single-parent households that in anywhere else in the country, 33% of these families exist at a poverty level. Since fewer than half of women awarded alimony and/or child support in a divorce settlement are successful in collecting it, one year following divorce, some persons who have always been part of the middle or upper-middle class suddenly find themselves on welfare, an **extremely** stressful condition. One woman joined a singles group at her church for the social contact with other adults and dropped out after a short time because of the added financial stress.

"Whenever they planned something to do, it was something that involved money — not a lot of money, but more than I felt I could spend. . . . When I went bowling with them it meant balogna sandwiches for the kids, and I just couldn't do that."

Obtaining credit in order to make larger purchases can also be a problem, as can be the continuing social stigma against divorce:



I went into a store one time and I was looking at some beds for my son. I spoke to a salesman and he asked me, "Is this going to be cash or charge?" I said, "Well, I don't know yet," because I was thinking of starting some credit on my own. And he said, "Well, what does your husband do?" And I said, "I'm divorced." And he said, very cold, very distant, "Oh, well, I'm terribly sorry. Are your working?" I went back the next day and I got another salesman. And the same thing, "What does your husband do?" And I said, "I lost my husband six months ago." "Well," he says, "I'm sure we can work something out." Boy, I got all the sympathy in the world (p. 10).*

Being able to afford quality child care offers another frustration and worry for many single women:

An older woman would have charged more (for child care) so I had to hire high-school-aged kids. I had one sitter that was like another child along with them. Then I had a boy who was good with my kids but still and all, half the time he didn't know where they were. I'd call up and say, "How are things going?" and he'd say, "Oh, fine. I haven't seen the kids." He was inside, watching television (p. 27).*

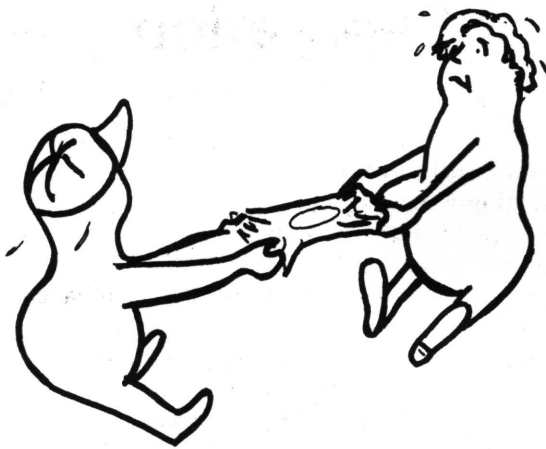
The children of single parents often become their allies in trying to stretch a dollar:

A lot of times we live off what Danny makes on his paper route. After I pay the mortgage, the gas, the telephone, the food, buy the clothes, that's the money we have to live off. And Danny is really a super kid; he doesn't mind.

We had no money yesterday, absolutely zilch. I had twenty-three cents. Payday is Friday. And Danny wanted to go for an ice cream. I said, "Well, why don't we first go down to the store to buy some soap because I have a lot of wash to do." So we went down to the store for soap and we found the cheapest box of soap we could find. We got to the checkout; he had a dollar thirty and I had the twenty-three cents. And the soap came to a dollar fifty-three. I said, terrific, we have just enough. So then we went to another grocery store down the way because I needed milk, and I had some food stamps so I was going to get the milk, and we found a box of soap that was cheaper. So I said, "Why don't we return it? Danny, go get the soap, it's out in the car, and take it back." So that's what he did. He got to buy a doughnut with the difference. (p. 83-84).*

The financial strain eased by the use of such welfare aids as food stamps is often replaced instantly by the shame of having to use them. A mother in a small rural town reported that, with her son's birthday coming, she didn't have any money to buy him a present, but she did have food stamps and decided that she would have a "party" for him that evening.

She went to the grocery store and chose items they couldn't usually afford and didn't purchase, such as potato chips, pop, and t.v. dinners. As she



put the items on the counter in the checkout line and went to pay for them with food stamps, a customer in back of her said loudly to another, "I wish **we** could afford things like that, but my husband has to work for a living . . .".

The mother said, "That little birthday dinner didn't cost me anything in terms of real money, and they knew it too. They all know I'm on welfare. This is a small town. But it cost me a **great** deal in terms of my self respect!"

Fathers as Single Parents

Male-headed, single-parent households are growing as increasing numbers of fathers are awarded custody. Many others are forced to accept the sole responsibility of rearing their children after a wife/mother has left abruptly with no intention of returning. Single fathers are usually in better shape financially than are single mothers, but males are also vulnerable to the same psychological disequilibrium caused by an over-load of responsibility, loneliness, and depression. Said one father:

Do I ever feel lonely? Yeah, I miss my wife a lot. A whole bunch. All of a sudden missing her just flashes through my head like a railroad train. It can happen any place. It can happen in the middle of a ballgame, in the middle of a meeting, in the middle of a conversation. I can get up in the greatest mood in the world and just drive down the street and it can happen (p. 195).*

Heatherington (1977) found that fathers who were primarily involved in traditional roles prior to divorce, i.e., mowing the lawn, working on the car, etc., experience more problems as single fathers when trying to manage a household. As a result, men who take on the primary responsibility of caring for their children and a home usually receive more help from the extended family in their effort than do single mothers. Parents or adult siblings are

more likely to help out. However, while it is common to find a part-time or full-time housekeeper brought in, a single father may have greater difficulty in hiring a babysitter just for an occasional evening out:

Moving to a new neighborhood, trying to find a babysitter that would come into my home was very difficult. I think it was because I was a single man. There was some prejudice against me as a single man. I would have a sitter and I would call her up and she would say she was busy. And I would say "Do you have some phone numbers of other people who sit?" And she would give me names of some of her girlfriends. And I would call a girl and she would say, "Just a minute, I'll have to ask my parents," which to me indicates she wasn't really doing anything that night. And she'd come back on the phone and say, "No, I can't," without any explanation. Parents wouldn't trust their daughters to come into my house. It took some convincing that I was an okay guy, that I really did have kids and that when I come home the daughters left (p. 28).*

Though there is always danger in the single-parent household that the child of the opposite sex will be placed, or place themselves, into the roles voided by the ex-spouse, i.e., "I guess you'll have to be the woman (man) of the house, now", this tends to happen more often with father-daughter dyads. A daughter may slip easily into taking total charge of the children (often, to the dislike of her siblings) or the housekeeping.

This type of situation is not without its pitfalls. The daughter may bear her domestic responsibilities at the expense of school performance, normal peer involvement, or movement toward adult independence. She may also come to expect adult privileges that are inappropriate for her but ordinarily parallel such responsible behavior.



* Weiss, 1979.

* Weiss, 1979.

Handling the Stress of Separation and Divorce

The pressures experienced by those intimately involved in family break-up can be enormous. Though the event of divorce can never be stress-free, many couples maintain unnecessarily high levels of stress following the event because of an inability or unwillingness to move forward actively to meet the demands of establishing a new and separate existence. Unless adaptations can be made, the strain that results eventually begins to show itself in the decline of physical and mental health, the development of problems in other relationships, and the breakdown of coping abilities.

SOURCES OF STRESS FOR SINGLE PARENTS

- Continued hostility toward the other parent
- Dealing with the broken extended family
- Rearranging finances
- Rebuilding self esteem
- Inability to make decisions
- Broken social role (feeling like a 5th wheel)
- Concern about emotional health of children
- Child care demands
- Children playing one parent against another
- Finding acceptable child care
- Lack of social acceptance (broken home syndrome)
- Finding psychic energy to deal with children's demands and personal stress
- Loneliness, access to the opposite sex
- Learning new and strange roles formerly someone else's responsibility
- Time management
- Maintaining old friendships and developing new ones

Heading toward Overload

How much an individual can endure before burn-out occurs will depend upon genetic make-up (energy level, mood, etc.); personal coping resources, such as education or income; age, number, and gender of children; and the amount of outside supports available during the crisis period. We can recognize that stress is out of control, however, by paying attention to the following warning signals:

Health Indicators

- Increased colds and flu
- Sudden loss or gain in weight
- Sleep disorders
- Bowel problems or frequent stomach upsets
- Flare-ups of physical problems such as ulcers, high blood pressure, colitis, headaches
- Constant fatigue

Behavior Indicators

- Radical mood swings
- Flare-ups of anger, irritability
- Tendency to cry easily
- Increased chemical consumption . . . tobacco, alcohol, coffee, colas, drugs
- More risk-taking behaviors and accidents
- Continual complaining, sarcasm
- Forgetfulness, lack of concentration

Relationship Indicators

- Arguments
- Fewer friends
- Isolation from extended family members or co-workers
- More relationships on a down-swing
- Increased judgmental behavior
- Sense of being misunderstood, or unappreciated

Attitude Indicators

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Inability to be enthusiastic
- Free-floating anger or anxiety
- Pessimism, cynicism, degrading of others

Avoiding the "Roller-Coaster Syndrome"

While it is expected that there will be numerous emotional highs and lows throughout the entire process of break-up, the manner in which ex-spouses initially react may have implications for years to come. Intensity of conflict within individuals is said to be highest at the time the decision to separate is made. The pain felt at that particular time will be revisited periodically at the time of the legal divorce and afterwards, again and again, if contact between the couple remains conflicted. It will be felt at such times as visitation pick-up and drop-off, subsequent custody disputes or reshuffling, remarriage of one of the spouses, the birth of children to an ex-spouse and new partner, upon illness or death of a child or ex-spouse, high-school or college graduations, marriages of children, and birth of grandchildren.

Ex-spouses who truly want to get on positively with their lives have some hard work ahead of them. If they are to bring an emotional closure as well as a legal end to their relationship and prepare themselves to handle future interactions with one another more effectively, they will have to acknowledge that there has been a loss. It is also necessary that each person find some objective way to look at the part he or she played in the break-up.



If a spouse continues to look at the dissolution as totally the fault of the other partner or believes the problems experienced probably wouldn't happen with someone else, chances are high that similar problems **will** emerge in the future, given the fact that 75% of divorced spouses will remarry.

More often than not, divorcing spouses are not emotionally equipped to deal adequately with the contribution they each have made to the dissolution. They are too bitter, angry, hurt, or resentful at the time of legal divorce. Often, they develop hurtful ways of contending with one another over the distribution of property or custody of the children, adding to already-present emotional upset. If they are not able to replace emotional warfare with renewed respect for the welfare of one another, they may become caught in some very unhealthy interaction patterns that will continue to make life miserable for them and their children.

Rx for Restoring Balance

Pain can be alleviated over time. However, even though appreciation can be positive and growth-producing, it carries its own stress. Important in reducing stress until new structures become more comfortable will be the following:

- **Establishing a support system.** This step includes keeping in touch with relatives and friends who will be helpful, rather than critical and blaming. Ex-spouses should be looked on as good resources and, in most cases, **can be** if the couple is mature enough to rise above taking pot shots at one another at every opportunity. Single parents should also become as knowledgeable as possible about community supports that may be available, such as drop-in child care centers that provide relief from parenting responsibility, "parents without partners" groups that often supply emotional support and a social outlet, counselors, or religious organizations. Many community mental health agencies offer sliding scales on fees for low-income clients.



- **Setting goals that are long-range as well as short-range.** This is critical to future growth. Since as many as 50% of all single parents are not high school graduates, it is important for them to think beyond the time they will be caring for their children and to structure their future as well as the present. This may call for accepting temporary financial help in order to further education or job training that will lead to more satisfying and rewarding occupational goals.
- **Recognizing that individuals are their own greatest resources . . .** and must control their own lives. This calls for taking action, no matter how small, and moving in a positive direction in the sorting out of what is important to them, identifying priorities, and setting goals. It may require talking with someone else about all possible alternatives for problematic situations and consciously focusing on the positive rather than negative aspects of those situations.
- **Balancing responsibility for others and responsibility for self.** Though we have passed through an era where a focus on self has been fairly prominent, recent backlash to that "me-ism" may actually inhibit adequate attention to a person's own needs during the necessary reconstruction period. Controlling individual stress requires taking an holistic approach toward stress management:
 - Pay attention to daily nutrition.
 - Get adequate rest and sleep.
 - Exercise vigorously 2-3 times per week.
 - Eliminate smoking; watch alcohol consumption.
 - Do something for someone else.
 - Keep weight proportionate to height.
 - Maintain eyesight, hearing, and teeth.
 - Keep in touch with a developed network of friends.
 - Give and receive affection regularly.
 - Maintain a sense of humor.
 - Watch caffeine consumption.
 - Do something for fun.
 - Have goals in mind and work toward implementing them.
 - Attend religious and/or social activities.
 - Practice "The Relaxation Response" (see Appendix)

Helping Organizations and Agencies for Single Parents

— Parents Without Partners, Inc.
7910 Woodmont Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20014

— American Association of Marriage
and Family Therapy
924 W. 9th St.
Upland, Calif. 91786

— North American Conference of Separated
and Divorced Catholics
The Paulist Center
5 Park Street
Boston, Mass. 02108

The above have local organizations in many communities. If not listed in the telephone directory, the national organization will supply the contact person for local chapters.

Check Your Own Stress Level

In an effort to document the relationship between social readjustment, stress, and susceptibility to illness, Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe of the University of Washington School of Medicine developed the following systematized scale, in which they have assigned numerical weights to typical life

events. Since both pleasurable and negative events seem to evoke similar neurophysiological and biochemical reactions in the body (non-specific response referred to by Selye, 1956), the most stress-provoking are included. Directions for assessing stress level follow the scale.

Social Readjustment Rating Scale

Event	Value		
Death of spouse	100	Business readjustment	39
Divorce	73	Change in financial status	38
Marital separation	65	Death of close friend	37
Jail term	63	Change to different line of work	36
Death of a close family member	63	Change in number of marital arguments	35
Personal injury or illness	53	Mortgage or loan over \$10,000	31
Marriage	50	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Fired from work	47	Change in work responsibilities	29
Marital reconciliation	45	Son or daughter leaving home	29
Retirement	45	Trouble with in-laws	29
Change in family member's health	44	Outstanding personal achievement	28
Pregnancy	40	Spouse begins or stops work	26
Sex difficulties	39	Starting or finishing school	26
Addition to family	39	Change in living conditions	25
		Revision of personal habits	24
		Trouble with boss	23
		Change in work hours, conditions	20
		Change in residence	20
		Change in schools	20
		Change in recreational habits	19
		Change in church activities	19
		Change in social activities	18
		Mortgage or loan under \$10,000	17
		Change in sleeping habits	16
		Change in number of family gatherings	15
		Change in eating habits	15
		Vacation	13
		Christmas season	12
		Minor violation of the law	11

Directions for scoring:

1. Check off events which have happened to you within the last year.
2. Add up score.
3. If score is 150 or above, there is potentially a

- 50/50 chance of developing an illness or health change.
4. If score is over 300 points, potential chances of illness or health change become 90%.

Some Final Notes and Quotes

"Every marriage contains two marriages ... the husband's and the wife's." — Jessie Bernard

"A marriage really is a lot like weaving a tapestry: after you've put so many hours and years into the undertaking, it's too important for you not to finish. Our shared history forms the tapestry of our lives, intricately woven, with a few knots showing here and there, but our greatest accomplishment to be sure." — from *Midlife Life Cycle Series*.

"Couples often consult me about a marriage that is no longer satisfying ... I tell them divorce is only one option. Patience is a choice too. I further tell such couples that there is pain in being single, in being married, and in being alive. Marriage does, however, provide a person to blame for pain. I must convince them that ... individualization and maturity can be achieved without shedding a spouse. Marriages need new rules. My wish for my patients is that the solution of the seventies, which was to find a new mate when the current one was no longer need-fulfilling, will be obsolete. I hope that the eighties' solution will be to explore the absurdity of mari-

tal myths and develop rules to allow unhappiness." — Roberta Temes as quoted in *Psychology Today*.

"Although there is evidence that the increasing divorce rate may be leveling off, there is little doubt that divorce will continue at a higher rate in this generation and in future ones than occurred in the past and will effect (sic) a greater percentage of the total population in future generations. The impact and the intensity of the divorce process clearly modifies the shape and structure of those families as well as the shape of their subsequent family life cycle. Custody determinations, parental visitation, remarriage, and single-parent status will increasingly influence the emotional attachments in existing family life. The multigenerational impact of these modifications may be enormous.

"It is the task of the mental health profession, the legal profession, and all those in contact with divorcing families to understand and assist families in resolving these emotional attachments. Problems occurring in nuclear families can be resolved within, passed on to children, or externalized into society." — Edward W. Beal (1980).

Appendix

Relaxation Techniques

DEEP MUSCLE RELAXATION

Description

This technique involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them. For each muscle group, a method is described for creating tension and achieving relaxation.

Procedure

1. Assume position for relaxation (eyes closed, lying on floor, quiet, passive attitude).
2. Go through the following for each muscle group twice.

Muscle	Tensing Method
Forehead	Wrinkle your forehead. Try to make your eyebrows touch your hairline for five seconds. Relax.
Eyes and nose	Close your eyes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.
Lips, cheeks and jaw	Draw the corners of your mouth back and grimace for five seconds. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your face.
Hands	Extend your arms in front of you. Clench your fists tightly for five sec-

onds. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your hands.

Forearms	Extend your arms out against an invisible wall and push forward with your hands for five seconds. Relax.
Upper arms	Bend your elbows. Tense your biceps for five seconds. Relax. Feel the tension leave your arms.
Shoulders	Shrug your shoulders up to your ears for five seconds. Relax.
Back	Arch your back off the floor for five seconds. Relax. Feel the anxiety and tension disappearing.
Stomach	Tighten your stomach muscles for five seconds. Relax.
Hips and buttocks	Tighten your hip and buttock muscles for five seconds. Relax.
Thighs	Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.
Feet	Bend your ankles toward your body as far as you can for five seconds. Relax.
Toes	Curl your toes under as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.

Source: *The Stress Connection* by Judy Ann Goth-Owens, Michigan State University.

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

Description

Probably one of the more dramatic and carefully studied techniques for relieving tension is some variation of the relaxation response.

This is a term used by Dr. Herbert Benson, who has systematically studied this technique. This method is not new — the essence of the relaxation response has been practiced for centuries by various names such as meditation.

The relaxation response can be used simply as a technique for counteracting the harmful effects of stress-overload on the body.

Materials

Learning a new skill takes practice: learning to achieve relaxation response is no exception. Dr. Robert Benson suggests four prerequisites for bringing out the response:

1. Find a quiet place.
2. Concentrate effortlessly on a pleasing phrase or word such as "one" or "love".
3. Maintain a passive attitude. (Empty your mind of all thoughts. Disregard them if they do occur.)
4. Make yourself comfortable.

Procedure

Dr. Benson recommends the following procedure:

1. Sit in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed.
4. Breathe easily and naturally. Repeat the phrase or word effortlessly.
5. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes with your eyes closed, and later with your eyes open.
6. Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace.

Source: *The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson, New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1975.

Tips for Insomnia

What do you do when you have trouble falling asleep? There are many things you can try when you are troubled by sleep problems:

1. Become aware of your sleep "prime-times." You have an individual "prime-time" for sleep — the time during your biological time cycle when

you normally feel drowsy and at which point your body is naturally geared for sleep. If you don't submit to your particular sleep "prime-time," it may be some time before your normal cycle comes back to another sleep "prime-time."

2. Schedule your sleep times. Your body reacts particularly well to regular schedules and quickly falls into habitual patterns of functioning. Determine the amount of sleep you need to function best. Individual sleep needs vary, and you may not need eight full hours, or you may need more. Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Naps **could** disrupt your body's habitual pattern.

3. Develop bedtime rituals — such as reading, drinking milk or herbal tea, or taking a bath to help to reinforce your sleep pattern. Your body quickly learns to associate these rituals with sleep, and these cues trigger relaxation.

4. Exercise during the day. Regular exercise helps you sleep better at night. However, strenuous exercise before bedtime invigorates, rather than relaxes, your body.

5. Get out of bed if you can't sleep. Read, watch TV, or do some dull task until you begin to feel drowsy. Some people who have trouble falling asleep and stay in bed regardless of how awake they feel often begin to associate their frustration with their bed. Soon, just the sight of their bed may cause tension, thus setting up a vicious cycle.

6. Make sure your bedroom is not too warm or too dry. You may have trouble resting if you are too hot because too many blankets or an overly warm room temperature may cause discomfort. Also, a room that is too dry can cause discomfort by making your throat and nose dry. A humidifier or vaporizer might help decrease dryness.

7. Prepare physically and mentally. Slow yourself down **before** retiring. You need the opportunity to unwind from active, alert consciousness to a relatively inactive, relaxed state.

We cannot expect to come in at the end of an active day, climb into bed and fall asleep immediately. We may have nights when we're asleep as our heads hit the pillow, but this is not the usual case especially if we're trouble sleepers. Pure exhaustion might lead to a "trance-like" sleep for some people, but it can also lead to a feeling of "I'm so tired I can't sleep" and complete wakefulness for others. Tensed bodies, thinking about the day's events or tomorrow's, need to be taken care of before bedtime if we wish to sleep when we get there.

Source: *Stress: A Family Affair*, Resource Notebook, Family Living Education, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

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- Not Together Now*. Polymorph Films, 25 minutes.
- Children of Divorce: Transitional Issues for Junior High and High School Ages*. Falls Church, Va. American Personnel and Guidance Association. 12 minutes.
- Feeling Left Out: A Film About Divorce*. AIMS Instructional Media Services, Inc. 15 minutes.
- Me and My Dad's New Wife*. New York: Time-Life Films. 33 minutes.
- Things Are Different Now*. Solona Bench, Cal.: The Media Guild. 15 minutes.
- Sunday Father*. Film Incorporated. 14 minutes.
- Single Parents, Part I and Part II* (each approximately 22 min.) Falls Church, Va. American Personnel and Guidance Association.
- Step Parenting: New Families, Old Ties*. Polymorph Films, 25 minutes.

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