

# Parental Divorce and Children's Adjustment

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**ABSTRACT**—*This article reviews the research literature on links between parental divorce and children's short-term and long-term adjustment. First, I consider evidence regarding how divorce relates to children's externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, academic achievement, and social relationships. Second, I examine timing of the divorce, demographic characteristics, children's adjustment prior to the divorce, and stigmatization as moderators of the links between divorce and children's adjustment. Third, I examine income, interparental conflict, parenting, and parents' well-being as mediators of relations between divorce and children's adjustment. Fourth, I note the caveats and limitations of the research literature. Finally, I consider notable policies related to grounds for divorce, child support, and child custody in light of how they might affect children's adjustment to their parents' divorce.*

In the United States, between 43% and 50% of first marriages end in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), and 50% of American children will experience their parents' divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). Given the large number of families affected by divorce each year, parents, clinicians, and policymakers alike are concerned with understanding how experiencing parental divorce affects children's adjustment. Indeed, many parents considering divorce ask whether they should stay together for the sake of their children.

Key questions in the research literature have focused on whether divorce per se affects children's adjustment and, if so, why and how. The literature has at times portrayed two extreme positions on whether divorce affects children's adjustment (Cherlin, 1999). The first extreme position holds that the long-term effects of divorce on children are quite debilitating and that children carry a lasting negative burden years after the divorce in terms of mental health and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Glenn, 2001; Popenoe, 1993, 2003; Wallerstein, Lewis, &

Blakeslee, 2000). This work has drawn criticism for methodological (e.g., reliance on small samples of clinical populations) and ideological reasons. For example, Coontz (1992) points out that many condemnations of divorce and nontraditional families stem from misguided perceptions of family life in previous decades and that myths about family life in the past reflected reality for only a small subset of middle-class European Americans. At the opposite extreme is the position that divorce has no measurable long-term effects on children (e.g., Harris, 1998). This extreme has been criticized because it appears to conflict with hundreds of empirical studies to the contrary.

Between these two extremes, most researchers have come to the conclusion that divorce has some negative effects on children's adjustment but that these effects may be small in magnitude and not universal. For example, in a meta-analysis of 92 studies conducted in the 1950s through 1980s, Amato and Keith (1991b) reported that 70% of studies found lower well-being for children whose parents had divorced than for children whose parents had not divorced; the median effect size was .14 of a standard deviation. Conduct problems and father-child relationship outcomes showed the largest effect sizes, and psychological adjustment and self-concept outcomes showed the smallest effect sizes (Amato & Keith, 1991b). Amato (2001) updated the meta-analysis using 67 studies published in the 1990s. Although 88% of the effects suggested lower well-being for children whose parents divorced than for children whose parents did not divorce, only 42% of the effects were significant (Amato, 2001). There has been considerable debate in the literature regarding the extent to which these effects are attributable to divorce per se or to correlated factors such as exposure to interparental conflict.

The main purpose of this review is to provide an overview of the nuances represented in the patterns of findings regarding links between parental divorce and children's short-term and long-term adjustment. First, I consider how divorce is related to several different aspects of children's adjustment. Second, I examine the timing of divorce, demographic characteristics, children's adjustment prior to the divorce, and stigmatization as moderators of the links between divorce and children's adjustment. Third, I examine income, interparental conflict,

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parenting, and parents' well-being as mediators of relations between divorce and children's adjustment. Fourth, I describe the caveats and limitations of the research literature. Finally, I consider the notable policies related to grounds for divorce, child support, and child custody in light of how they might affect children's adjustment to their parents' divorce.

### INDICATORS OF CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Although findings regarding whether and how parental divorce is related to children's adjustment are not always clear in the literature, there is agreement among most researchers that children experiencing parental divorce are at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes (see Cherlin, 1999, for a review). However, the magnitude of these effects appears to depend on the indicators of adjustment under consideration, and some studies find no differences on particular outcomes between children whose parents divorce and those whose parents stay together (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005). Externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, academic achievement, and quality of social relationships are frequently included indicators of adjustment in the divorce literature. Studies that have examined these indicators of adjustment at discrete time points provide some evidence that children whose parents have divorced have more externalizing and internalizing problems, lower academic achievement, and more problematic social relationships than do children whose parents have not divorced (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1991; Emery, Waldron, Kitzmann, & Aaron, 1999).

Meta-analyses have revealed that divorce has larger effects on relationships with nonresidential fathers and externalizing behaviors than it does on internalizing problems or academic achievement (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991b). In the earlier meta-analysis (Amato & Keith, 1991b), divorce was found to have larger effects on academic achievement than on internalizing problems, but in the later meta-analysis (Amato, 2001), divorce was found to have larger effects on internalizing problems than on academic achievement. In these meta-analyses, effect sizes depended on the methodological sophistication of the studies under consideration. More methodologically sophisticated studies (e.g., those with multiple-item scales and control variables) showed smaller effect sizes than did less methodologically sophisticated studies. Methodologically unsophisticated studies may overestimate the effects of divorce on children. For example, if socioeconomic status is not controlled, children who have experienced divorce and are living with a single mother may show worse adjustment than do children who are living with two parents in part because of the confounding effect of having fewer economic resources in single-mother families.

A problem with relying on indicators of adjustment measured at a single point in time is that these indicators are likely to look worse if they are assessed in close temporal proximity to the time

of the divorce, but they show improvement over time because the short-term effects of divorce tend to look worse than the long-term effects. The examination of developmental trajectories of adjustment has several advantages over the examination of adjustment at discrete points in time. The examination of trajectories makes it possible to track change over time from before the divorce occurs to some period following the divorce. The inclusion of predivorce adjustment in these models is important because of evidence that children whose parents eventually divorce show poorer adjustment prior to the divorce than do children whose parents do not divorce (e.g., Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998; Doherty & Needle, 1991). Links between parental divorce and children's adjustment are often attenuated or eliminated by controlling for predivorce adjustment. For example, Sun and Li (2001) used longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample and found that differences in academic achievement between children whose parents divorced and children whose parents stayed together could be accounted for almost entirely by children's academic achievement and family functioning prior to the divorce.

Although one can control for prior adjustment in analyses predicting subsequent adjustment at a discrete point in time, such analyses do not allow for an examination of how these effects continue to develop over time. Children often have more short-term adjustment difficulties immediately after their parents' divorce, but these difficulties may lessen in severity or disappear following an initial adjustment period (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990). Studying trajectories of adjustment that extend from before the parents' divorce to a period well after the divorce will provide a more complete picture of children's long-term adjustment.

To overcome the limitations of cross-sectional approaches, Cherlin et al. (1998) followed a large sample of children born in 1958 in Great Britain prospectively from childhood to the age of 33. Prior to their parents' divorce, individuals whose parents eventually divorced had more internalizing and externalizing problems than did individuals whose parents did not divorce. However, divorce itself also contributed to higher levels of long-term internalizing and externalizing problems into adulthood. It is important to note that their findings suggested that some of the effects of divorce during childhood may not manifest themselves shortly after the divorce and that they may not become apparent until adolescence or adulthood. The gap between groups of individuals whose parents had and had not divorced widened over the course of several years from childhood to adulthood. Cherlin et al. (1998) suggested that parental divorce may curtail educational achievement or disrupt social relationships in ways that are not apparent until children try to enter the labor market, marry, or have children of their own.

In a sample of American children followed from before kindergarten through Grade 10, Malone et al. (2004) used latent change score models to examine trajectories of teacher-rated externalizing behavior over time. Parental divorce was unrelated

to girls' externalizing behavior trajectories, regardless of the timing of divorce. Parental divorce was related to boys' externalizing trajectories differently depending on the timing of the divorce. In particular, parental divorce during elementary school was related to an increase in boys' externalizing behaviors that began in the year of the divorce and persisted for years afterward. Parental divorce during middle school was related to an increase in boys' externalizing behaviors in the year of the divorce that declined below baseline levels in the year following the divorce and persisted into subsequent years.

Several studies also address whether parental divorce during childhood relates to long-term effects on adults' own romantic relationships and their relationships with their parents later in life. Intergenerational studies suggest that parental divorce doubles the risk that one's own marriage will end in divorce, in part because individuals whose parents have divorced are less likely to view marriage as a lifelong commitment (Amato & DeBoer, 2001); the risk is exacerbated if both spouses experienced their parents' divorce (Hetherington & Elmore, 2004). There is also evidence that intergenerational transmission of divorce is mediated by interpersonal skill deficits (e.g., communication patterns not conducive to supporting a long-term intimate relationship) that make it more difficult for individuals whose parents have divorced to sustain their own intimate relationships (Amato, 1996). In addition to being at greater risk for difficulties in romantic relationships, adults whose parents divorced have lower quality relationships with their parents (particularly fathers) during adulthood, on average (Lye, 1996). However, these associations depend on the parents' marital quality prior to the divorce, the gender of the parent, and the gender of the adult child (Booth & Amato, 1994; Orbach, Thornton, & Cancio, 2000).

To summarize, research suggests that children whose parents have divorced have higher levels of externalizing behaviors and internalizing problems, lower academic achievement, and more problems in social relationships than do children whose parents have not divorced. But, the magnitude of these effects is attenuated after controlling for children's adjustment prior to the divorce and other potential confounds. Furthermore, even though children whose parents divorce have worse adjustment on average than do children whose parents stay together, most children whose parents divorce do not have long-term negative outcomes. For example, in their longitudinal study of a representative sample of 17,414 individuals in Great Britain who were followed from ages 7 to 23, Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, and Kiernan (1995) reported that the likelihood of scoring in the clinical range on the Malaise Inventory, which measures a wide range of adult emotional disorders, was 11% for young adults who had experienced their parents' divorce and 8% for young adults who had not experienced their parents' divorce. Nevertheless, analyses using data from this sample after they were followed to age 33 led Cherlin et al. (1998) to conclude that the adjustment gap between individuals who had and had not ex-

perienced parental divorce widened over time and that although part of the effect of parental divorce could be attributed to factors prior to the divorce, experiencing parental divorce during childhood was related to worse mental health when the offspring were in their 20s and 30s.

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) concluded that 25% of individuals whose parents divorce have serious long-term social, emotional, or psychological problems in adulthood in comparison with 10% of individuals whose parents have stayed together; still, this means that 75% of individuals whose parents divorce do not have serious long-term impairment during adulthood. Even studies that do find long-term effects of divorce generally report that the effect sizes are small. For example, Allison and Furstenberg (1989) used longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample and concluded that although divorce was related to behavior problems, psychological distress, and low academic achievement, the effect sizes for divorce were smaller than those found for gender differences (but larger than those found for several other demographic variables). Amato (2003) concluded that about 10% of children whose parents divorce grow up to have poorer psychological well-being than would have been predicted if their parents had stayed together, 18% of children whose parents divorce have more marital discord as adults than do children whose parents stayed together, and 35% of children whose parents divorce have worse relationships with their fathers than do children whose parents stayed together. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) caution that researchers and clinicians may reach different conclusions regarding the long-term effects of divorce because researchers often study psychological or behavioral problems, whereas clinicians often are faced with clients' subjective impressions of their psychological distress (which may not be manifest in psychological or behavioral disorders). Taken together, these findings indicate that the majority of children whose parents divorce do not have long-term adjustment problems, but the risk of externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, poorer academic achievement, and problematic social relationships is greater for children whose parents divorce than for those whose parents stay together. Different children may manifest adjustment problems in different ways. Future research should adopt a more person-centered approach to investigate whether, for example, those children whose grades are dropping are the same children whose internalizing or externalizing problems are increasing following their parents' divorce.

#### MODERATORS OF LINKS BETWEEN DIVORCE AND CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Despite the research suggesting that divorce is related to children's adjustment, there is considerable evidence that these effects do not operate in the same way for all children. Links between divorce and children's adjustment are moderated by several factors, including children's age at the time of their par-

ents' divorce, children's age at the time of the study, the length of time since the divorce, children's demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity), children's adjustment prior to the divorce, and stigmatization of divorce (by location or historical period).

### **Children's Age at Divorce, Age at the Time of the Study, and Length of Time Since Divorce**

Studies have shown mixed results with respect to how the timing of divorce affects children's adjustment (see Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Hetherington (1989) suggests that, in comparison with older children, young children may be less capable of realistically assessing the causes and consequences of divorce, may feel more anxious about abandonment, may be more likely to blame themselves, and may be less able to take advantage of resources outside the family to cope with the divorce. All of these factors may contribute to findings that young children experience more problems after their parents divorce than do children who are older when the divorce occurs (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). Note that this conclusion applies specifically to divorce; other findings suggest that adjusting to parents' remarriage may be harder for adolescents than for younger children (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). It may be that divorce has effects on particular outcomes that are salient during the developmental period during which the divorce occurs. For example, academic achievement, identity development, and emerging romantic relationships may be affected by divorce that occurs during adolescence because these domains of functioning are developmentally salient then.

A methodological problem is that in many studies, children's reported age reflects their age at the time of the study rather than their age at the time of their parents' divorce. Amato (2001) noted this lack of availability of children's age at the time of the divorce as a limitation in his meta-analysis. The most common approach is to study children in a particular developmental stage (e.g., early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence) and compare the adjustment of children whose parents have divorced with the adjustment of children whose parents have not divorced. A drawback of this strategy is that the length of time between the parents' divorce and the time of the assessment will vary considerably across the sample. Lansford et al. (2006) addressed this limitation by using the time of parental divorce as an anchor point and modeling trajectories of adjustment over a period from 1 year prior to the divorce to 3 years after the divorce. This approach makes it possible to compare children at comparable points of time in relation to their parents' divorce. Lansford et al. (2006) also analyzed a matched group of children whose parents did not divorce. Results suggested that parental divorce occurring from kindergarten to Grade 5 exerted more adverse effects on internalizing and externalizing problems than did parental divorce occurring from Grades 6 to 10, whereas parental divorce occurring from Grades 6 to 10 exerted more adverse effects on grades.

### **Children's Demographic Characteristics**

Researchers have attempted to understand how children's demographic characteristics (primarily gender and race) may moderate the link between parental divorce and children's adjustment. Early research findings suggested that parental divorce was related to more adjustment difficulties for boys than girls but that parents' remarriage was related to more adjustment difficulties for girls than for boys (see Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). However, recent findings have been more mixed; there is no consistent pattern regarding whether divorce has more adverse effects on girls or boys. Some studies report that boys have more adjustment problems following parental divorce than do girls (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993). Other studies report that girls have more adjustment problems following parental divorce than do boys (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). Still other studies report no gender differences (e.g., Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002). There is also evidence that the particular outcomes affected by parental divorce may differ by gender. For example, early childbearing has been found to be associated with parental divorce for girls, and more unemployment has been found to be associated with parental divorce for boys (McLanahan, 1999). In their meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (1991b) found no gender differences except that boys whose parents divorced had a harder time adjusting socially than did girls.

It has been proposed that parental divorce may have a less negative effect on African American children than on European American children (Jeynes, 2002). Specifically, researchers have suggested that because African American children tend to experience less of a decrease in household income following parents' divorce and there is a greater norm for single parenthood in the African American community (Cherlin, 1998; Laosa, 1988), these factors may mitigate the effects of divorce on African American youth. Research assessing these effects has produced mixed results, but a meta-analysis of 37 studies investigating links between parental divorce and adults' well-being found that effect sizes were smaller for African Americans than for European Americans (Amato & Keith, 1991a), which is consistent with the hypothesis that divorce would have a less negative effect on African American children than for European American children.

### **Children's Adjustment Prior to the Divorce**

Some evidence suggests that children whose parents eventually divorce already have more adjustment problems many years before the divorce (Cherlin et al., 1998). Genetic or other environmental factors may be contributing to these adjustment problems, and the children's adjustment may have appeared to be just as problematic even if the parents had not divorced. Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) found a steeper increase in adjustment problems after parental divorce for children who were well-adjusted prior to the divorce than for children with pre-divorce adjustment problems (or for children whose parents did

not divorce). However, the long-term adjustment of children with predivorce adjustment problems was worse than it was for children who were better adjusted prior to the divorce (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995). Controlling for children's adjustment prior to their parents' divorce greatly reduces differences between children whose parents divorce and those whose parents stay together (Cherlin et al., 1991).

Children with positive attributes such as attractiveness, easy temperament, and social competence are also more resilient following their parents' divorce (Hetherington et al., 1989). In part, this may be because children with such attributes are more likely to have strong support networks outside the family (e.g., from teachers or peers) and to evoke positive responses from others. In an epidemiological sample of 648 children who were initially assessed when they were 1–10 years old and assessed again 8 years later, Kasen, Cohen, Brook, and Hartmark (1996) found significant interactions between temperament assessed in the first 10 years of life and family structure in the prediction of subsequent adjustment. In particular, the risk of oppositional defiant disorder was exacerbated for children who had early affective problems and were living with a single mother or in a stepfamily; the authors speculated that the stress of adjusting to new living arrangements may have overwhelmed the coping capacities of these already vulnerable children. On the other hand, Kasen et al. (1996) also found that the risk of overanxiety disorder was reduced for children (especially boys) who were socially immature early in life and were living with a single mother; the authors speculated that needing to play more "adult" roles in a single-parent family may have enhanced the social skills of previously immature children. Thus, children's adjustment can moderate the effects of divorce on subsequent adjustment.

### Stigmatization

At a societal level, stigmatization has been considered as a potential moderator of the link between parents' divorce and children's adjustment. Divorce would be expected to have more detrimental effects for children in societal contexts in which family forms other than two-parent biological families are stigmatized than it would in societies that are more accepting of diverse family forms. There is some empirical support for this perspective. For example, Amato and Keith's (1991b) meta-analysis revealed smaller effect sizes for some outcomes in more recent studies than in studies from earlier decades, suggesting that the effects of divorce became less pronounced over time from the 1950s to the 1980s. Amato and Keith also reported that studies conducted outside the United States on average found more problems with conduct, psychological adjustment, and both mother-child and father-child relationships than did studies conducted in the United States. One explanation for these findings is that divorce is less stigmatized in the United States than in many other countries (Amato & Keith, 1991b). On the other hand, Amato (2001) found that although the adjust-

ment of children whose parents had and had not divorced became increasingly similar over time from the 1950s to the 1980s, the gap between these two groups began to increase again in the 1990s (Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, & Telesca, 2001, reached a similar conclusion). It is not clear that stigmatization increased again over this same time period.

### MEDIATORS OF LINKS BETWEEN DIVORCE AND CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Most researchers no longer simply compare the adjustment of children whose parents have and have not divorced. Instead, researchers have adopted more complex models of how divorce may be related to children's adjustment and now investigate moderators as described previously or analyze their data to understand the mechanisms through which divorce might affect children's adjustment. Several scholars have argued that processes occurring in all types of families are more important than family structure in relation to the well-being of children and adolescents (e.g., Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & O'Connor, 1998; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Taking family process and other mediating variables into account attenuates the association between the experience of parental divorce and children's adjustment (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991b; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). It is also important to keep in mind that divorce can be conceptualized more as a process than as a discrete event, with the family processes leading up to and following the divorce being an integral part of the divorce itself.

### Income

In a review of five theoretical perspectives on why marital transitions may be related to children's adjustment, Hetherington et al. (1998) found some support for an economic disadvantage perspective suggesting that a drop in household income often accompanies divorce and mediates the link between parents' divorce and children's adjustment. Twenty-eight percent of single mothers and 11% of single fathers live in poverty in comparison with 8% of two-parent families (Grall, 2007). Following their parents' divorce, children most often live with single mothers who do not have the same financial resources they did prior to the divorce, especially if they are not receiving regular child-support payments from nonresidential fathers. This sometimes necessitates a change for the worse in housing, neighborhoods, and schools. These economic hardships and their sequelae can lead to behavioral and emotional problems in children. For example, Guidubaldi, Clemenishaw, Perry, and McLoughlin (1983) surveyed children whose parents had and had not divorced and found differences between them on 27 out of 34 outcomes before controlling for income, but only found 13 differences between them after controlling for income, suggesting that income plays an important role but does not account for all of the effect of divorce on children's adjustment. Furthermore, children's adjustment often worsens rather than

improves following remarriage and its accompanying increase in economic resources (Hetherington et al., 1989). Taken together, these findings suggest that income is important, but there is more contributing to children's adjustment problems following divorce than a decrease in household income.

### Interparental Conflict

Interparental conflict has received substantial empirical attention. There is consistent evidence that high levels of interparental conflict have negative and long-lasting implications for children's adjustment (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Amato (1993) and Hetherington et al. (1998) found more support for a parental conflict perspective on why divorce is related to children's adjustment than for any other theoretical perspective that has been proposed to account for this link. Averaging across measures in their review, children in high-conflict, intact families scored .32 standard deviation below children in low-conflict, intact families and .12 standard deviation below children in divorced families on measures of adjustment, suggesting that exposure to high levels of conflict was more detrimental to children than was parental divorce (Hetherington et al., 1998). To illustrate, using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Vandewater and Lansford (1998) found that when interparental conflict and family structure (married and never divorced vs. divorced and not remarried) were considered simultaneously after controlling for family demographic covariates and children's prior adjustment, high interparental conflict was related to more externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, and trouble with peers, but family structure was not significantly related to child outcomes. The finding that children whose parents divorce look worse before the divorce than do comparable children whose parents do not divorce is also consistent with this perspective; worse adjustment prior to the divorce could be accounted for, in part, by exposure to interparental conflict.

If divorce leads to a reduction in children's exposure to interparental conflict, one might expect that their adjustment would improve. Indeed, this issue is at the heart of parents' question of whether they should stay in a conflicted marriage for the sake of the children. In an important longitudinal investigation of this issue, Amato, Loomis, and Booth (1995) found that children's problems decrease when parents in a high-conflict marriage divorce (which encompassed 30%–49% of divorces), whereas children's problems increase when parents in a low-conflict marriage divorce. Booth and Amato (2001) examined correlates of divorce for low-conflict couples and found that factors such as less integration in the community, having fewer friends, not owning a home, and having more positive attitudes toward divorce were related to an increased likelihood of divorce; the authors suggest that because these factors may be less salient to children than conflict between their parents, the divorce may come as more of an unwelcome and unexpected

shock, accounting for the more negative effects of divorce on children from low-conflict families than those seen in children from high-conflict families.

Researchers have moved beyond monolithic characterizations of conflict into descriptions of particular types of conflict and specific aspects of interparental conflict that may be especially detrimental to children. Overt conflict may be physical or verbal and includes behaviors and emotions such as belligerence, contempt, derision, screaming, insulting, slapping, threatening, and hitting; exposure to overt conflict has been linked to children's externalizing problems (Buehler et al., 1998). Covert conflict may include passive-aggressive techniques such as trying to get the child to side with one parent, using the child to get information about the other parent, having the child carry messages to the other parent, and denigrating the other parent in the presence of the child; covert conflict has been linked more to internalizing problems than to externalizing problems (Buehler et al., 1998). Amato and Afifi (2006) found that the feeling of being caught between parents even into young adulthood was associated with high-conflict marriages but not with divorce and that it was related to more internalizing problems and worse parent–child relationships. Thus, children whose parents divorce may have better long-term adjustment than do children whose parents remain in high-conflict marriages if divorce enables children to escape from exposure to conflict and feelings of being caught between their parents.

### Parenting

Another mechanism that has been proposed many times in the literature as an explanation for the links between parental divorce and children's adjustment is the disruption in parenting practices that may occur following divorce. Divorce can make it more difficult for parents to monitor and supervise children effectively (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), to discipline consistently (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979), and to provide warmth and affection (Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, & Brody, 1990; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). After divorce, parent–child conflict often increases, and family cohesion decreases (Short, 2002).

As with studies of children's adjustment showing that children whose parents eventually divorce have significantly more pre-divorce adjustment problems than do children whose parents do not divorce, parents who eventually divorce have been found to have more problematic parenting practices as long as 8–12 years before the divorce than do parents who do not divorce (Amato & Booth, 1996; Shaw et al., 1993). Parenting problems contribute to children's adjustment problems in all types of family structures. Several studies provide evidence that controlling for the quality of parenting attenuates the link between parental divorce and children's adjustment (Amato, 1986; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994; Tschann, Johnson, & Wallerstein, 1989; Videon, 2002). For example, in a study of mothers and their sons in Grades 1–3,

Martinez and Forgatch (2002) found that mothers' encouragement of academic skills mediated the relation between marital transitions and boys' academic achievement and that a more general indicator of effective parenting mediated the link between marital transitions and externalizing and internalizing problems.

Some studies have investigated whether contact with the noncustodial parent and the quality of this relationship also mediate the link between parental divorce and children's adjustment. In a meta-analysis of 63 studies, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that improved child adjustment (academic achievement and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems) was unrelated to frequency of contact with nonresident fathers but was associated with nonresident fathers' payment of child support, authoritative parenting, and feelings of father-child closeness.

### Parents' Well-Being

Yet another possible mediator of the link between parental divorce and children's adjustment is parents' well-being. Marital conflict and divorce increase parents' depression, anxiety, and stress, which decrease parents' ability to parent well and may in turn negatively affect children's adjustment. Mothers' history of delinquent behavior has also been found to account for much of the link between parental divorce and children's externalizing behaviors (Emery et al., 1999). These relations are complicated. Through assortative mating, parents with problems such as depression, substance use, or antisocial behavior are at risk of selecting spouses with similar problems (Maes et al., 1998). These parental risk factors increase marital conflict and divorce (Merikangas, 1984). Children may share some of these parental characteristics genetically or through shared environmental experiences.

### CAVEATS

Because children cannot be randomly assigned to family structure groups, studies of links between parents' divorce and children's adjustment are necessarily correlational. Despite researchers' attempts to control for potential confounds, it is possible that uncontrolled variables account for associations between divorce and adjustment. Two large bodies of research that present important caveats for understanding links between parental divorce and children's adjustment are studies of children's adjustment in stepfamilies and studies of genetic effects.

### Remarriage and Stepfamilies

Much of the literature comparing the adjustment of children whose parents have or have not divorced is complicated by the fact that children are often exposed not only to one marital transition (i.e., their biological parents' divorce) but to multiple marital transitions (e.g., the initial divorce plus subsequent remarriages and divorces). If these multiple transitions are not

taken into account, children's adjustment to divorce may be confounded with children's adjustment to remarriage and possibly multiple divorces. The present review focuses on parental divorce rather than stepfamilies, but several excellent reviews provide nuanced information about children's adjustment following their parents' remarriage (e.g., Dunn, 2002; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington et al., 1999).

### Genetic Effects

Recent research has attempted to estimate the relative contributions of genes and environments in accounting for the likelihood that parents will divorce and the adjustment of their children following the divorce (Neiderhiser, Reiss, & Hetherington, 2007). Lykken (2002) presents evidence that a monozygotic twin has a 250% increase in risk of divorcing if his or her cotwin has divorced. Furthermore, divorce is more concordant between monozygotic than dizygotic twins (McGue & Lykken, 1992). These findings support the role of genetics as a risk factor for divorce, but Jocklin, McGue, and Lykken (1996) further specified the personality mechanisms through which this effect occurs. That is, they found between 30% and 42% of the heritability of divorce to be associated with the heritability of the personality characteristics of positive emotionality, negative emotionality, and less constraint, which were, in turn, associated with divorce (Jocklin et al., 1996).

Research also has begun to examine genotype-environment interactions to understand under what environmental conditions genes may express themselves. An important question is whether the genetic contributions to divorce also account for the poorer adjustment of children whose parents have divorced or whether experiencing parental divorce contributes above and beyond the genetic risks. In a longitudinal study of 398 biological and adoptive families, O'Connor, Caspi, DeFries, and Plomin (2000) found that children who experienced their biological parents' divorce by the age of 12 had higher levels of behavior problems and substance use and lower levels of achievement and social adjustment than did children whose biological parents did not divorce. Children who experienced their adoptive parents' divorce by the age of 12 also had higher levels of behavior problems and substance use than did children who did not experience their adoptive parents' divorce, but these two groups of adopted children did not differ on achievement or social adjustment. These findings suggest the importance of gene-environment interactions in contributing to achievement and social adjustment and suggest the importance of the environment in accounting for links between parental divorce and children's behavior problems and substance use (O'Connor et al., 2000).

Using a high-risk sample in Australia, D'Onofrio et al. (2005) compared the offspring of adult twins on externalizing, internalizing, and substance-use problems and concluded that environmental (rather than genetic) effects of divorce accounted for

the higher rates of problems among the group that experienced their parents' divorce. In a further elaboration of the process involved in genetic versus environmental effects, D'Onofrio et al. (2006) found that the experience of divorce was related to earlier age of first intercourse and more emotional and educational problems, whereas earlier use of drugs and likelihood of cohabitation were predicted by genetic and other selection factors. Using a children of twins design with a population-based American sample, D'Onofrio et al. (2007) found that genetic and other selection factors, rather than divorce per se, accounted for differences in internalizing problems, whereas substance use was not accounted for by genetic factors. The reasons for the discrepancies between the findings from these studies are not clear. However, although the precise nature of which genetic or environmental factors contribute to distinct developmental outcomes is not clear from the research to date, it is apparent that genetic and environmental contributions both shape whether individuals will eventually divorce and, if they do, how their children may adjust to the divorce.

### DIVORCE LAWS AND POLICIES

The questions of whether family structure per se affects children's adjustment and, if so, why and how it does so are important in informing policy because one can adjust policy to influence different proximal mechanisms that may affect children's adjustment. At one level, answers to questions related to whether and how divorce affects children's adjustment also influence how hard it should be for parents to divorce in the first place (e.g., determining if it is better to stay in a conflicted marriage for the sake of the children). States differ in terms of requirements related to waiting periods, counseling, the length of separation needed prior to divorce, and other factors that affect how hard it is to get a divorce in a given state. Despite shifts in rates immediately after a new policy is implemented, the difficulty of divorcing and rates of divorce are for the most part unrelated after this initial phase (Wolfers, 2003), so policies are unlikely to influence how many parents divorce over the long run.

At another level, understanding children's adjustment following divorce is important for implementing policies that can help children once their parents have decided to divorce. For example, if divorce increases children's risk for externalizing behaviors because it results in more limited financial resources available to children and, in turn, the risks of dangerous neighborhoods associated with lower SES, then a reasonable policy response would be to make noncustodial parents more responsible for child-support payments. Similarly, state policies may minimize or exacerbate interparental conflict, with implications for children's adjustment. Key policy issues related to children's adjustment involve the divorce process (e.g., grounds for divorce), custody decisions, and financial support of children. Each category of policies is reviewed below.

### Grounds for Divorce

The primary distinction of importance related to grounds for divorce involves whether fault is considered in the divorce proceedings. If fault is considered, then divorce is granted only if one spouse is determined to be "guilty" (of adultery, physically or sexually abusing the spouse or a child, abandoning the home for at least a year, or other serious offenses) and the other spouse is determined to be "innocent" (Nakonezny, Shull, & Rodgers, 1995). The consent of the "innocent" spouse is needed to grant the divorce, and divorce is not granted if both spouses are "guilty." In theory, the innocent spouse is awarded alimony, child support, and property in a fault-based divorce. If fault is not considered, both spouses do not need to provide consent, and alimony, child support, and property are no longer awarded according to fault but according to needs and the ability to pay.

No-fault grounds for divorce were enacted in all 50 states between the 1950s and 1980s, and all 50 states now allow no-fault divorces. However, only 15 states have entirely eliminated fault-based divorces (*Grounds for Divorce*, n.d.). In the other 35 states, one may choose between a no-fault divorce and a fault-based divorce. The most common reasons for selecting a fault-based divorce are to avoid a longer waiting period often required for a no-fault divorce or to obtain a larger share of the marital assets or more alimony. A main concern related to children's adjustment is that proving guilt and innocence in a fault-based divorce tends to perpetuate acrimony and conflict between the parents, which may lead to worse outcomes for their children.

### Child Custody Policies

Child custody policies include several guidelines that determine with whom the child lives following divorce, how time is divided in joint custody situations, and visitation rights. The most frequently applied custody guideline is the "best interests of the child" standard, which takes into account the parents' preferences, the child's preferences, the interactions between parents and children, children's adjustment, and all family members' mental and physical health (see Kelly, 1994). Recently, the approximation rule has been proposed as an alternative to the best interests of the child standard because of concerns that the latter does not provide enough concrete guidance and leaves too many factors to be evaluated at the discretion of individual judges (American Law Institute, 2002). The approximation rule holds that custody should be awarded to each parent to approximate the amount of time each spent in providing care for the children during the marriage. Opinions range from support of the approximation rule as an improvement over the best interests of the child standard (Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005) to criticisms that the approximation rule would lead to biases against fathers and be less sensitive to the needs of individual families than is the best interests of the child standard (Warshak, 2007). Regardless of the custody standard applied, custody disputes that are handled through mediation rather than litigation have been found to be related to more



involvement of the nonresidential parent in the child's life, without increasing interparental conflict (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001; Emery, Sbarra, & Groer, 2005).

A distinction is made between legal custody, which involves making decisions regarding the child, and physical custody, which involves daily living arrangements. The most common arrangement following divorce is for parents to share joint legal custody but for mothers to have sole physical custody. Several studies have investigated whether children's adjustment is related to custody arrangements following their parents' divorce. Using data from a large national sample, Downey and Powell (1995) found few differences between the adjustment of children whose fathers had custody following divorce and those whose mothers had custody. For the few outcomes in which differences did emerge, children appeared somewhat better adjusted in paternal custody families if income was left uncontrolled, but after controlling for income, children appeared somewhat better adjusted in maternal custody families (Downey & Powell, 1995).

Major benefits of joint custody include the access to financial resources and other resources that a second parent can provide and the more frequent and meaningful contact that is possible between both parents and the child (Bender, 1994). The major concerns raised with respect to joint custody are that it may prolong children's exposure to conflict between parents with acrimonious relationships and reduce stability that is needed for children's positive adjustment (Johnston, 1995; Twaite & Luchow, 1996). In a meta-analysis of 33 studies comparing joint physical or legal custody with sole maternal custody, Bauserman (2002) concluded that children in joint custody (either physical or legal) had fewer externalizing and internalizing problems and better academic achievement and social relationships than did children in sole maternal custody. Parents with joint custody reported having less past and current conflict than did parents with sole custody, but the findings regarding better adjustment of children in joint custody held after controlling for interparental conflict. Nevertheless, caution is warranted, because there are a wide array of factors affecting the selection of joint versus sole custody that can plausibly explain differences in adjustment for children in these different custody situations. An additional methodological concern is that only 11 of the 33 studies included in Bauserman's meta-analysis were published—21 were unpublished dissertations, and 1 was another unpublished manuscript. Therefore, the majority of the studies included in the meta-analyses have not passed the rigor of peer review. The finding that joint physical and joint legal custody were equally associated with better child adjustment is consistent with the finding from Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) meta-analysis that there was little relation between children's adjustment and the frequency with which they had contact with their father. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that the quality of children's relationship with their father is a more important predictor of children's adjustment than is frequency of contact. If joint physical

or legal custody promotes more positive father-child relationships, this might account for the more positive adjustment of children in joint custody reported by Bauserman (2002).

### Child-Support Policies and Enforcement

Child-support policies involve a diverse set of factors related to ensuring that noncustodial parents provide financial support for their children. States vary in their statutory criteria for child support: whether the state can take a percentage of the noncustodial parent's wages, formulas for child support, discretion to have payment made directly to the court, and long-arm statutes. Historically, public assistance played an important role in the economic status of divorced mothers and children (see Garfinkel, Melli, & Robertson, 1994, for a review). Guidelines of "reasonableness" were used by states to determine noncustodial parents' responsibility to pay child support. Local judges used budgets submitted by custodial parents in conjunction with the ability of the noncustodial parent to pay (based on income and other factors), but awards differed considerably from court to court, and the child-support awards were generally too small to pay for a fair share of rearing the children (Garfinkel et al., 1994).

Federal legislation in 1984, 1988, and 1996 provided numerical formulas to guide decisions about child-support awards, authorized states to withhold the noncustodial parent's wages to make child-support payments, and implemented other changes to make it easier for custodial parents to obtain a support award and for courts to enforce those awards (see Roberts, 1994). For example, some states will not issue driver's licenses, vehicle registrations, or state-issued permits to individuals who are behind in child-support payments. Nevertheless, only 57% of custodial parents have a child-support award, and only 47% of those receive full payments (Grall, 2007). Whether custodial parents receive payments is still highly dependent on noncustodial parents' motivation and ability to pay (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005).

In addition to policies specifically focused on child-support payments, policies related to alimony and distribution and maintenance of property also affect the financial resources available to children following divorce. Long-term alimony is no longer as common as it was in the past, except in situations with extenuating circumstances (e.g., a spouse has health problems that prohibit work; Katz, 1994). More common is short-term alimony or rehabilitative alimony, which is provided for a limited period of time during which the spouse receiving alimony (usually the wife) goes to school or gains other skills to enable her to return to the workforce (Katz, 1994). In determining how property is divided following divorce, both monetary and nonmonetary factors are typically considered. Over time, the nonmonetary contributions of parents who stay home with children and the economic needs of children have been given greater consideration in changing statutory laws affecting the

distribution of assets following divorce. To the extent that they affect the financial resources available to children, policies involving child support, alimony, and distribution of property following divorce can be important for children's postdivorce adjustment.

### Summary

In contrast to the necessity of correlational studies on effects of divorce itself, it is possible to collect experimental data to examine the effects of policies related to divorce. This will be an important direction for future research. Some data could come from natural experiments (e.g., comparing children in states with a particular policy of interest to children in states with a different policy). Other data could come from true experiments in which some children are randomly assigned to interventions being evaluated and other children are randomly assigned to the state's status quo (evaluations along these lines have been conducted in relation to different methods of determining child-support payments, such as in New York's Child Assistance Program; Hamilton, Burstein, & Long, 1998). Policy evaluations have the potential to lead to recommendations for a set of standards that could improve children's adjustment following their parents' divorce by making the divorce process less acrimonious and the decisions regarding finances and custody as conducive to children's well-being as possible.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I reviewed the research literature on links between parental divorce and children's adjustment. First, I considered evidence regarding how divorce is related to children's externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, academic achievement, and social relationships. Research suggests that children whose parents have divorced have higher levels of externalizing behaviors and internalizing problems, lower academic achievement, and more problems in social relationships than do children whose parents have not divorced. However, even though children whose parents divorce have worse adjustment on average than do children whose parents do not divorce, most children whose parents divorce do not have long-term negative outcomes.

Second, I examined children's age at the time of the divorce, age at the time of the study, length of time since the divorce, demographic characteristics, children's adjustment prior to the divorce, and stigmatization as moderators of the links between divorce and children's adjustment. There is evidence that, for behavioral outcomes, children who are younger at the time of their parents' divorce may be more at risk than are children who are older at the time of the divorce, but for academic outcomes and social relationships (particularly with romantic partners), adolescents whose parents divorce may be at greater risk than are younger children. The evidence is inconclusive regarding whether girls or boys are more affected by divorce, but there is

some evidence that European American children are more negatively affected by divorce than are African American children. Children who have adjustment difficulties prior to divorce are more negatively affected by divorce than are children who are functioning well before the divorce. In cultural and historical contexts in which divorce is stigmatized, children may show worse adjustment following divorce than they do in contexts where divorce is not stigmatized.

Third, I examined income, interparental conflict, parenting, and parents' well-being, as mediators of relations between divorce and children's adjustment. All four of these mediators attenuate the link between parental divorce and children's adjustment difficulties. Interparental conflict has received the most empirical support as an important mediator.

Fourth, I noted the caveats of the research literature. This review focused on the relation between divorce and children's adjustment, but stepfamily formation and subsequent divorces are often part of the experience of children whose biological parents divorce. Recent work using adoption and twin designs demonstrates the importance of both genetics and environments (and their interaction) in predicting the likelihood of divorce and children's adjustment following parental divorce.

Fifth, I considered notable policies related to grounds for divorce, child custody, and child support in light of how they might affect children's adjustment to their parents' divorce. Policies that reduce interparental conflict and provide economic security to children have the potential to benefit children's adjustment. Evaluating whether particular policies are related to children's adjustment following their parents' divorce has the potential to inform future policymaking.

It is important to end this review by emphasizing that not all children experience similar trajectories before or after experiencing their parents' divorce. Thus, trajectories of adjustment that may be typical of many children may not be exhibited by an individual child. Furthermore, what initially appear to be effects of divorce are likely to be a complex combination of parent, child, and contextual factors that precede and follow the divorce in conjunction with the divorce itself.

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