

Parenting after Separation

A Position Statement prepared for The Australian Psychological Society

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Introduction

Separation and divorce are common phenomena in the community today, but still represent a major life stressor for the individuals involved. Approximately 43 per cent of all marriages in Australia will end in divorce (ABS, 2000). Remarriage following divorce is common, but these marriages have the highest risk of divorce (ABS, 2000). In Australia, it is estimated that 50,000 children will experience the effects of separation and divorce each year (ABS, 2004). Approximately 50 per cent of all divorces involve children under the age of 18 years (ABS, 2004). These figures are likely to be even higher when you consider the numbers of children in Australia born to people who are not actually married (cohabiting). Of all Australian families in 2003, 84% (4.6 million) were couple families and 14% (799,800) were one parent families. Families with children made up 60% of all families (ABS 2003).

How do we as an organisation of professionals support families to make this life transition less stressful for all concerned, especially children? This paper summarises current research relating to parenting in the context of separation and divorce, and considers some of the services, policies and community-based interventions that might be supportive of positive parenting functions during such major life changes.

Although children's resilience should not be discounted, and the majority of children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring emotional or behavioural problems (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003), children of divorced parents are still at twice the risk of problems as the non-separated community (McIntosh, 2003).

The association between intense marital conflict and children's poor adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated, and children are found to have more psychological problems when their parents are in conflict, either during marriage or following divorce. We know that children who live with violence between their parents are at risk for psychological and behavioural problems. Separation and divorce can protect children from ongoing exposure to within-marriage conflict (and violence), but also have the potential to expose children to increased interparental conflict, particularly during the transition from marriage to separation.

Children need a secure emotional base after their parents separate, exactly as they needed before (McIntosh, 2005). Separation and divorce have the potential to disrupt vital parenting functions (Kelly, 2000). The major protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to divorce are low inter-parental conflict, effective and constructive resolution of conflict between the parents, the quality of the parent-child relationship, nurturing, authoritative parenting from at least one parent, and cooperative co-parenting with good communication (McIntosh, 2003). Recent reviews of the literature show that it has become increasingly clear that it is these family *processes* that contribute to determining children's well-being and 'outcomes', rather than family *structures* per se (such as the number, gender, sexuality and co-habitation status of parents).

Key research findings

Impact of divorce on separating partners

The stress of separation and divorce places both men and women at risk for psychological and physical health problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, psychosomatic problems, and accidents (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989).

Separation and divorce invariably involve financial changes and economic stress, and different residence arrangements require different financial costs (Smyth, 2004). Women and children are more likely than men to experience financial hardship after divorce (Smyth & Weston, 2000).

Divorce also affects the couple's relationship as parents and the way in which they fulfil their parental functions (Baum, 2003), and a period of less effective parenting is often found following divorce, for both emotional and practical reasons (Amato, 2000, Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Simons & Associates, 1996). For example, changes in living arrangements and household economics can directly affect parenting functions. Both residential mothers and fathers tend to feel overburdened by their parenting and life responsibilities following separation and divorce (Baum, 2003).

Parental roles have to be reconstructed. Some divorced couples establish collaborative co-parental relationships; others are in perpetual conflict over their children (Baum, 2003). Still others disconnect from one another, not only as spouses, but also as parents.

Adjustment among divorced individuals is positively associated with education (Booth & Amato, 1991), employment (Booth & Amato, 1991; Demo & Acock, 1996) and large networks of supportive kin and friends (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). Unhappiness, distress, depression and health problems largely subside two or three years after separation, and new relationships tend to predict adjustment to divorce (Amato, 2000). This finding is consistent with the adjustment of lesbian mothers post heterosexual relationships (McNair et al., 2002).

The impact of divorce on children

Children of divorce have been found to experience substantial distress (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), and divorce is associated with an increased risk for a number of adjustment, achievement and relationship difficulties. However, resilience is the normative outcome for children, and most children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring behaviour problems (Amato, 2001).

Divorce is related to a greater risk of externalising problems (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991a). However, family processes, such as inadequate parenting and interparental conflict, not family structure alone, account for many of the externalising problems found among children (Emery, 1999).

Children of divorced families, compared with never divorced families are:

- More disobedient, aggressive, non-compliant and lacking in self-regulation (Wadsworth et al, 1985).
- More likely to have problems in social and close relationships, such as those with their mothers and fathers, authority figures, siblings and peers (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington, 1997).
- More likely to associate with antisocial peers (Amato & Keith, 1991a).
- More likely to use alcohol, cigarettes and drugs (Neher & Short, 1998).
- More likely to commence sexual activity earlier, to give birth to a child as a teenager, and to have more pregnancies outside marriage than children of non-divorced parents (McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Divorce has also been associated with child internalising problems (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Children and adolescents from divorced and high conflict families experience:

- Higher levels of depressed mood in comparison with those from non-divorced or low-conflict families (Conger & Chao, 1996; Peterson & Zill, 1986).
- Greater incidence of anxiety disorders, although differences have typically been modest (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).
- More likelihood of receiving psychological treatment, having more illnesses and medical problems, and of visits to the doctor (Howard et al, 1996; Zill et al, 1993).
- Parental divorce in Australia has been found to reduce children's educational attainment, particularly the chance of completing secondary school (Evans, Kelley & Wanner, 2001).

Gender differences in response to divorce are not pronounced (Amato & Keith, 1991a). However female adolescents from divorced and remarried families are more likely than their male counterparts to drop out of high school (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Some girls in divorced, mother-headed families emerge as exceptionally resilient individuals following divorce, but this does not occur for boys following marital transitions, or for girls in step-families (Hetherington, 1989). For some girls in divorced families who have been overburdened with responsibilities or emotional support of a parent, there is an increased risk of depressive symptoms, low self-worth, and a sense of inadequacy and failure, despite their achievements (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Boys are more likely than girls to benefit from being in step-father families (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993). Close relationships with supportive step-fathers are more likely to reduce antisocial behaviour and to enhance the achievement of step-sons than of step-daughters (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993; Zimiles & Lee, 1991).

Developmental differences

Parental divorce can have differential effects across infancy and childhood, impacting on the differing developmental goals and age related needs of children at different stages of their psycho-emotional development. Chronic or frightening conflict beginning at an early age has significant developmental consequences, by virtue of its long term impact on parenting and thus on a series of vital developmental processes in young children (McIntosh, 2003).

Infants (under 3) have biologically grounded needs for continuous, reliable care from a primary caregiver. Enduring parental conflict can disrupt attachment processes in infancy and toddlerhood in a number of ways, through parents' pre-occupation with the conflict, parenting schedules that disrupt predictability of care, and direct witnessing of conflict by infants. All are associated with higher rates of disorganized and insecure attachments (Solomon & George, 1999; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson & Collins, 2005).

Parenting plans should aim to prevent increased challenge and risk for the infant at a time when social and emotional development are reliant on predictable, stable, responsive care (Klein Pruett, Ebling & Insabella, 2004). It is important for living arrangements post divorce to accommodate the developmental needs of infants, helping them to maintain their naturally occurring attachment hierarchy (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008), without undermining the infant's psychological and neurological need for a continuous, reliable care-giving experience with a primary attachment figure (Solomon & Biringen, 2001). Extended overnight time away from a primary parent is one factor that may erode security of attachment to that parent (Solomon & George, 1999). Studies suggest that attachments to other caregivers may not be similarly affected by amount of time spent together (Ainsworth, 1967; Solomon & Biringen, 2001), but that other qualities, particularly emotional availability and responsiveness, strongly predict the infant's security in these relationships. Maintaining relationships with others in the infant's attachment hierarchy is optimal when appropriate and possible (i.e., adequate cooperation between the adults, emotional maturity and availability of the caregivers, geographic proximity and a care-giving plan that does not fragment the infant's schedule). Where practical, regular day contact and limited over-night contact may be of benefit to maintaining secure and trusting relationships with other members of the infant's attachment hierarchy (Kelly & Lamb, 2001).

Preschool children (3-4 years) are less able than older children to appraise accurately the divorce situation, the motives and feelings of their parents, their own role in the divorce, and possible outcomes. They may blame themselves for the divorce, may fear abandonment by parents, may misperceive parents' emotions, needs and behaviours, and may harbour strong fantasies of reconciliation (Hetherington et al., 1989). In the right circumstances (parental cooperation, responsive care, clear care patterns and emotional facilitation of the separation), kindergarten aged children can often manage consecutive nights away from a primary caregiver (Klein Pruett, Ebling & Insabella, 2004).

For all infants and pre-school children, the pattern of care post-separation is best determined case by case, considering carefully the impact of all relevant factors, particularly the psychological capacity of each parent to maintain a care environment that supports the child's core developmental needs (Smyth, 2004; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008).

Older school aged children (9-12) are more able to understand some of the reasons for the separation, but often in simple black and white terms. Approximately 25 per cent will see one parent as the 'good guy' and the other parent as the 'bad guy', align with one parent (usually the mother or the residential parent) and blame or reject the other to reduce conflict and anxiety. These children tend to be most sensitive to whether an argument has been resolved or not (McIntosh, 2003). They may have a tendency to take responsibility for looking after their parents' wellbeing. They are better able to talk about their feelings, so their concerns and how they are coping can be discussed. The primary feeling is commonly anger at one or both parents, but also shame, embarrassment, sadness, loneliness, fear, low self-esteem, powerlessness.

Adolescents experience considerable initial pain and anger when their parents divorce; however they are better able to accurately assign responsibility for the divorce, to resolve loyalty conflicts, and to assess and cope with additional stresses such as economic changes and new family role definitions. Adolescence is a particularly challenging time in terms of their development, and this may exacerbate problems in adjustment in adolescents of divorced parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Many adolescents experience premature detachment from their families, which can lead to greater involvement with peers (Hetherington, 1987).

Risk Factors affecting children's adjustment to separation and divorce.

The degree of parental conflict is a major risk factor associated with children's adjustment to divorce. The association between intense marital conflict and children's poor adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated. Children have more psychological problems when their parents are in conflict, either during marriage or following divorce (McIntosh and Long, 2006, Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Grych, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Such difficulties include higher levels of anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour (Grych, 2005).

Recent research has also uncovered the risks that litigation presents to children. There is an elevated risk of poor outcome for children subjected to prolonged exposure to conflict from parents (McIntosh 2006).

Children exposed to multiple stressors and changes are at greater risk for poor adjustment following the separation or divorce of their parents (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989). Children who place some of the blame for the divorce on themselves tend to be more poorly adjusted (Bussell, 1995).

Children with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as social and emotional problems, are at risk of poorer outcome following parental separation (Amato & Keith 1991b).

There is also evidence of an increased risk for children with a parent with a mental illness or personality disturbance, and this is worst for borderline and narcissistic personality disorders (McIntosh & Long, 2006). Children with parents with a prodromal illness also had a poor outcome.

Children who become alienated (child unreasonably rejects one parent due to the influence of the other parent combined with the child's own contributions) and estranged from the non-residential parent (child, for good reasons, becomes reluctant or refuses to see the parent, typically because they have experienced poor treatment, been overwhelmed developmentally by the visiting arrangements, or suffered family violence) are also at high risk of poor adjustment (Kelly & Johnston, 2002). Early intervention (usually specialist intervention) in alienation and estrangement is advocated.

Protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to divorce

The major protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to divorce identified in the research literature are the experience of low inter-parental conflict (Kelly & Emery, 2003), effective and constructive resolution of conflict between parents (Shifflett-Simpson & Cummings, 1996), the quality of ongoing family relationships, and in particular, the parent-child relationship (Davies & Cummings, 1994), nurturing, authoritative parenting from at least one parent (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989) and effective co-parenting, with good communication and cooperation and little active undermining of the other parent (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Despite the fact that cooperative, mutually supportive and non-confrontational co-parenting relationships are advantageous to parents and children (Hetherington et al, 1998), research indicates that between only 25 and 30 per cent of parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship characterised by joint planning, flexibility, sufficient communication and coordination of schedules and activities.

Individual factors that buffer the negative impact of divorce on children include intelligence, easy-going temperament, specific talents, physical attractiveness, and the ability to respond effectively when confronted with stressful events (McIntosh, 2003).

Children's needs following separation according to developmental stage

Across all age groups, what children need after their parents separate is exactly what they needed before: a secure emotional base. They need help to solve their problems, encouragement to learn, routines that help them feel in control, firm and loving limits to be safely independent, a trusted parent when they need to be dependent, and protection from trauma (McIntosh, 2004). These needs are more likely to be adequately met in a low-conflict environment, with a parent who is not continually stressed about ongoing unresolved issues in their relationship with their ex-partner.

In particular, infants need parents who are tuned into their needs. They need predictability, and a lot of time with parents who nurture them. They need parents who play with them, listen carefully to their efforts to communicate, and keep their world small and safe.

Adolescents need the daily stress in their life kept as low as possible. They need their parents to be available on a daily basis to listen and give support. They need predictable routines, and consistent rules and expectations. They need parents who are able to supervise them, and take a real interest in their life. Adolescents also need time and space to work out their own reactions to their parents' separation. If pressured, they are likely to react with anger and rejection. Adolescents typically need flexibility in arrangements to allow them to participate in normal adolescent social activities and school events (Family Court of Australia, 2001).

Impact of different care arrangements on children following separation

Studies focusing on residential arrangements following divorce tend to show that children can fare well under joint (not necessarily 50/50) arrangements (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbush, 1996) rather than sole mother or father residency, provided certain conditions within the family dynamic exist to support that arrangement. McIntosh and Long (2006) found that long term mental health outcomes for children in shared care are poorest for children under 10 years of age whose fathers had low formal education, who had a distant relationship with their mother, and whose parents remain in high conflict. It does not appear to matter whether children reside with a same-gender or opposite-gender parent (Downey & Powell, 1993). However, it is probable that especially cooperative and well-resourced parents are more likely to choose and be able to maintain joint residency than are other parents (Smyth, Caruana and Ferro, 2004).

Predictions about the nature of child adjustment following parental remarriage are unclear. Residential step-parents can add complexity to the adjustment scenario, but research shows that sensitive, emotionally available relationships that become forged between the adult and child can become protective (Musick, Meier & Bumpass, 2006; Smith, 2006).

Interventions to ameliorate the impact of divorce on children

Parenting programs following divorce have been shown to be effective in treating and preventing a wide variety of child adjustment difficulties. These interventions have essentially focussed on psycho-education and skills-based programs for parents following divorce, with program content based on demonstrating the links between divorce, parental behaviour and child adjustment (Kelly, 2000).

Prevention and early intervention parenting programs for ameliorating the impact of divorce on children have been supported throughout the literature (McIntosh, 2006, McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003; Thoenes & Pearson, 1999), with outcomes including the reporting by parents of increased parental cooperation, restoration of parental alliance, improved children's well-being, and a belief that early attendance at separated parenting programs will prevent or reduce enduring parental conflict. Research comparing collaborative forums for dispute resolution with litigation following separation, found that parents who mediated their dispute had significantly lower conflict with each other, and that both parents were significantly more involved in their children's lives (Emery et al., 2001).

In cases with a heightened risk of domestic violence, the appropriateness of divorce mediation needs to be considered by policy makers as well as at the service delivery level. The complexity of such concerns requires careful screening for current and historical safety issues, and modified mediation practices if mediation goes ahead. It has been argued that power imbalances enhanced by domestic violence render mediation inherently unfair and unworkable (Pearson, 1999).

RESOLUTIONS

The impact of separation or divorce on parents and their children is far-reaching and complex. It impacts on all aspects of family life and the process of adjustment is important for individuals, their families and our society. The APS takes this issue seriously and sees it as a significant public health issue. Psychologists can contribute practice skills and knowledge of prevention approaches to separation, mediation of conflict, and social and practical supports for families in transition.

Statements of general principles

Children need a secure emotional base after their parents separate. There is a need to promote family *processes* that contribute to determining children's well-being, particularly in times of stress and change in family structure.

The APS recognizes the heightened risk as a result of family separation of psychological, emotional and physical vulnerability for parents and their children.

The APS acknowledges the pivotal role of parents and parenting in the post-separation adjustment of children and recommends early and ongoing support for parents in their own management of this transition.

The APS acknowledges the role of social science and legal professionals in facilitating collaborative dispute resolution and the early reestablishment of a cooperative co-parenting relationship.

Statements of general policy

In the light of the weight of evidence about the best way to provide a secure environment for children during and after parental separation and divorce:

- the APS supports developmentally appropriate care and parenting arrangements following separation. Arrangements must be tailored around parental capacity to provide stable and emotionally available relationships, which take into account the developmental stage and needs of the child.
- the APS supports care arrangements that minimize exposure of children to risk factors (especially high conflict), and which do not undermine attachment formation and security.
- the APS recommends sensitive interpretation of current legislation around shared parenting, and does not support an assumption of shared care post separation. Rather, the APS recommends a case-by-case consideration of appropriate arrangements tailored to the developmental needs of each child, and the parenting capacity of each parent.
- the APS advocates that shared care is contra-indicated in climates of high, on-going, poorly managed conflict and poor parenting, particularly for children under 10.
- the APS supports collaborative dispute resolution as a preferred forum for the mediation of parenting disputes.
- the APS recommends greater collaboration between the family law field and psychology, e.g. by cross representation at professional conferences, and joint working groups on appropriate care arrangements after separation.
- the APS supports early intervention and prevention programs that ameliorate conflict and promote cooperative parenting.
- the APS promotes the education of primary health care providers (and others) and legal representatives in key risk and protective factors for parents and children following separation, and education in appropriate referral pathways.

The APS recommends that separating parents:

- focus on building a secure emotional base for their children after separation, wherever possible through cooperative co-parenting
- do not expose their children to high levels of unresolved conflict
- carefully consider their children's developmental and emotional needs when constructing visiting schedules or parenting plans.

The APS recommends that professionals working with separating families help parents:

- to focus on the needs of the child as separate to their own needs
- to understand their children's developmental needs
- to focus on building a secure emotional base for their children after separation
- to reduce conflict
- to establish good co-parenting practices.

The APS supports the development of community education campaigns that educate families about the normative stress and strain of separation, and of the key risk and protective factors for children.

The APS supports the development of a guide to multi-media psychological resources for parents, and for individuals and organizations working with separating families.

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