

## **Improving the Quality of Parent-Child Contact in Separating Families with Infants and Young Children: Empirical Research Foundations**

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Social scientists in general, and psychologists in particular, largely agree that parent-child relationships play a crucial role in shaping children's development and adjustment. As a result, considerable efforts have been made to examine the developmental course of these relationships, the features ensuring that some relationships have more positive effects on children's development than others, and the effects of parent-child separations and relationship disruptions on children's subsequent adjustment. In this paper, we briefly summarize the relevant empirical literature, citing the secondary rather than primary literature for the most part in order to minimize the length and density of the text. We first discuss the development of infant- and child-parent relationships, and the factors that affect the strength and quality of these relationships. We then turn to research concerned with the effects of divorce on children, with special focus on the ways in which harmful effects can often be minimized by promoting the maintenance of children's relationships with both of their divorcing parents. We have discussed many of these issues in some detail elsewhere (.e.g., Kelly, 2005, 2007; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Kelly & Lamb, 2000, 2003; Lamb, 2002a, 2002b, in press; Lamb & Lewis, 2005; Trinder & Lamb, 2005) but this chapter provides our most up-to-date statement. Our goal is to provide those professionals conducting custody evaluations or assessments with an underlying empirical foundation for understanding and weighing the many complex issues seen in separating families, including those in which parents are disputing custody and access arrangements. Knowledge of the social science literature also provides evaluators and other professionals with a sound basis for formulating and defending recommendations regarding children's living arrangements to the court if such recommendations are expected or requested (Kelly & Johnston, 2005).

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Kelly and Lamb (2000), among others, have documented how an understanding of normative developmental phases informs both our understanding of the ways in which parental separation and divorce may affect children's development and adjustment as well as the design of post-divorce living arrangements most likely to benefit children. As described by Bowlby (1969), and largely confirmed by subsequent research (for detailed review, see Thompson, 2006), Kelly and Lamb (2000) recounted how infant-parent attachments pass through four broad developmental phases, during the first three of which infants learn to discriminate among adult carers and gradually develop emotional attachments to them.

In the first two months (phase 1), infants indiscriminately accept care from any carer and use a repertoire of innate signals, including crying and smiling, to bring and

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keep potential carers close to them. The relief of distress from hunger or pain and the growing interest in and response to social signals from adults are the building blocks for more discriminating attachment processes but regular interaction is needed to continue the process of attachment formation because infants at this age have very primitive memories and cognitive abilities.

In the period extending from 2 to 7 months of age (phase 2), infants increasingly begin to recognize their parents and other carers and to prefer interaction with them. They also begin to anticipate carers' responses to their signals although they do not yet understand that people (including carers) continue to exist when they are not present. Infants of this age initiate and enjoy social interactions and start to show signs of "attachment in the making." They do not yet typically protest separations from their parents, but require frequent contact with their parents for attachment formation to continue. Importantly, research has shown that fathers are as competent to care for their infants and toddlers as mothers, given comparable opportunities and experiences (Lamb, 1997, 2002a; Parke, 1996).

In the third phase of attachment development (between 7 and 24 months), attachments become increasingly apparent, as infants preferentially seek to be near and to interact with specific carers, by whom they are more easily soothed than by strangers. Contrary to Bowlby's initial speculation and widespread 'common sense', there is considerable evidence that most infants in two parent families do not become attached to their mothers first but rather form attachments to both parents at about the same age, around 6 to 7 months (see Lamb, 2002a, for a review) even though fathers typically spend less time with their infants than mothers do (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). This indicates that, although a threshold level of interaction is crucial for attachments to form, time spent interacting is not the only critical dimension.

Infants begin to protest when separated from their primary attachment figures around 6 to 7 months of age, react warily to strangers, and, in a rudimentary way, start recognizing that parents continue to exist even when they are not present. Over the ensuing months, infants and toddlers become able to tolerate longer separations from their parents or attachment figures, although such separations may remain stressful. Most infants come to 'prefer' the parents who take primary responsibility for their care (typically their mothers), but this does not mean that relationships with their less-involved parents are unimportant. In fact, many toddlers and preschoolers seem to 'prefer' their 'traditional' fathers, especially when they are not stressed or tired (Lamb, 2002a). The amounts of time that infants spend with their two parents does not appear to determine whether or not the attachment relationships with either are insecure or secure. However, the relative prominence of the two parents in caring for and interacting with their children does appear to affect the relative importance of the two relationships with respect to their impact on later development. Specifically, the relationship with the more involved parent tends to have a greater impact than the relationship with the less involved parent, albeit not clearly in direct proportion to the relative levels of involvement.

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Nonetheless, both relationships remain psychologically important even when there are disparities in the two parents' levels of participation in child care.

According to attachment theorists, infants form attachments to those who have been available regularly and have responded to the infants' signals and needs (Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, & Charnov, 1985; Thompson, 2006). All carers are not equivalently sensitive, of course, and individual differences in responsiveness affect the quality or security of the attachment relationships that form. The quality of both maternal and paternal behavior is reliably associated with the security of infant-parent attachment (DeWolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997; Van IJzendoorn & DeWolff, 1997). Interestingly, the association between the quality of paternal behavior and the quality of infant-father attachment appears to be weaker than the parallel association between maternal behavior and the security of infant-mother attachment. However, the quality of both mother- and father-child interaction remains the most reliable predictor of individual differences in psychological, social, and cognitive adjustment in infancy, as well as in later childhood (Lamb & Lewis, 2005; Thompson, 2006).

According to Yarrow (1963; Yarrow & Goodwin, 1973), separation responses of infants become increasingly intense as attachments to parents and other important carers strengthen between 6 and 24 months. As mentioned earlier, most infants initially prefer the parent who provides most of their care and are more likely to seek out their preferred parents for comfort when distressed (see Lamb, 2002a, for a review). Non-preferred parents remain emotionally important, however, and are sought out for other social and emotional needs, and, when primary carers are not available, for comfort. Preference for primary carers diminishes with age and often disappears by 18 months of age (Lamb, 2002a). Although infants and toddlers may resist transitions between parents in the second year, just as they sometimes protest (even more strongly) daily transitions to out-of-home care providers, they generally comfort quite quickly once the transition is accomplished. This is particularly likely when both parents have the opportunity to engage in normal parenting activities (feeding, playing, soothing, putting to bed, etc.) while attachments are being established and consolidated.

Infants and toddlers need regular interaction with their "attachment figures" in order to foster, maintain, and strengthen their relationships (Lamb, Bornstein, & Teti, 2002; Thompson, 2006). This means that young children need to interact with both parents in a variety of contexts (feeding, playing, diapering, soothing, reading, putting to bed, etc.) to ensure that the relationships are consolidated and strengthened. In the absence of such opportunities for regular interaction across a broad range of contexts, infant-parent relationships may weaken rather than grow stronger. When toddlers are separated for as little as a few days from all of their attachment figures (for example, both parents) simultaneously, intense distress and disturbances that persist for 6 months after reunion have been reported (Bowlby, 1973; Heinicke, 1956; Heinicke & Westheimer, 1966; Robertson & Robertson, 1971). Reactions are muted, but not eliminated, when children are cared for by other attachment figures or sensitive substitute carers during the separation (Robertson & Robertson, 1971). Extended separations from parents with

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whom children have formed meaningful attachments are thus undesirable because they unduly stress developing attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1973). The loss or attenuation of important attachment relationships may cause depression and anxiety, particularly in the first two years, when children lack the cognitive and communication skills that would enable them to cope with loss. The absence of regular contact slowly erodes relationships, such that, over time, parents who do not interact regularly with their infants effectively become strangers.

In the final phase of attachment formation, which begins around age two, toddlers better understand why parents come and go, and can enter with their parents into some joint planning around daily activities (Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990; Thompson, 2006). The increased cognitive and language abilities of 2- to 3-year-olds enable them to tolerate somewhat longer separations from their parents without undue stress. However, their very primitive sense of time prevents them from conceptualizing much beyond today and tomorrow, inhibiting their ability to understand and cope with lengthy separations of several weeks or months.

Relationships with parents continue to play a crucial role in shaping children's social, emotional, personal and cognitive development into middle childhood and adolescence (Lamb & Lewis, 2005). Indeed, the quality of both mother- and father-child relationships remains the most reliable correlates of individual differences in psychological, social, and cognitive adjustment in infancy, as well as in later childhood (Lamb & Lewis, 2005; Thompson, 2006). Not surprisingly, therefore, children in both two- and single-parent families appear better adjusted when they enjoy warm positive relationships with two actively involved parents (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hetherington, 1999; Lamb, 1999, 2002b; Thompson & Laible, 1999). Children are better off with insecure attachments than without attachment relationships, however, because these enduring ties play essential formative roles in later social and emotional functioning. There is also a substantial literature documenting the adverse effects of disrupted parent-child relationships on children's development and adjustment, with a linear relationship between age of separation and later attachment quality in adolescents. The weakest attachments to parents are reported by those whose parents separated in the first 5 years of their lives (Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000). Similarly, in a retrospective study of adolescents whose parents had divorced, Schwartz and Finley (2005) found that age at time of divorce was associated with ratings of both paternal involvement and nurturance, indicating that the earlier the separation, the greater the impact on the quality of the children's relationships with their fathers.

#### THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL SEPARATION OR DIVORCE

Researchers have clearly demonstrated that, on average, children benefit from being raised in two biological or adoptive parent families rather than separated, divorced, or never married single parent households (Amato, 2000; Aquilino, 1996; Carlson, 2006; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan

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& Sandefur, 1994; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999; Simons & Associates, 1996; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999), although there is considerable variability within groups, and the differences between groups are relatively small. Indeed, although children growing up in fatherless families are, on average, disadvantaged relative to peers growing up in two-parent families with respect to psychosocial adjustment, behavior and achievement at school, educational attainment, employment trajectories, income generation, involvement in anti-social and even criminal behavior, and the ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships, the majority of children with divorced parents enjoy average or better-than-average social and emotional adjustment as young adults (Booth & Amato, 2001; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Approximately 20-25% of children in post-separation and divorced families give evidence of adjustment problems, compared to 12% in married families. Thus, the majority of children from separated families evince no psychopathology or behavioral symptoms, although they are likely to experience psychic pain for at least some period of time (Emery, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Schwartz & Finley, in press).

Such individual differences in outcomes force us to identify more precisely both the ways in which divorce/single parenthood may affect children's lives and the factors that might account for individual differences in children's adjustment following their parents' separation. Five inter-related factors appear to be especially significant.

### Economic Stresses

Typically, single parenthood is associated with a variety of social and financial stresses with which custodial parents must cope, largely on their own. Single parent families are more economically stressed than two parent families, and economic stresses or poverty appear to account (statistically speaking) for many effects of single parenthood (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; McLanahan, 1999).

### Reductions in Time with Children

Because single mothers need to work more extensively outside the home than married or partnered mothers do, parents spend less time with children in single-parent families and the levels of supervision and guidance are lower and less reliable than in two-parent families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; McLanahan, 1999). Reductions in the level and quality of parental stimulation and attention may affect achievement, compliance, and social skills while diminished supervision makes antisocial behavior and misbehavior more likely (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

### Conflict Between Parents

Conflict between the parents commonly precedes, emerges or increases during the separation and divorce processes, and often continues for some time beyond them. Interparental conflict is an important correlate of children's psychosocial adjustment just

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as marital harmony, its conceptual inverse, appears to be a reliable correlate of positive adjustment (Cummings et al., 2004; Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 2000). The negative impacts of high levels of marital conflict on the quality of parenting of both mothers and fathers have been well documented. In general, parental conflict is associated with more rejecting, less warm and nurturing parenting by mothers, and with fathers' withdrawal from parenting and engagement in more intrusive interactions with their children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych, 2005). Anger-based marital conflict is associated with filial aggression and externalizing behavior problems, perhaps because such parents and children have similar difficulty regulating negative affect (Katz & Gottman, 1993). These and other data support the observation that some of the 'effects of divorce' are better viewed as the effects of pre-separation marital conflict and violence (Kelly, 2000).

The adversarial legal system tends to promote conflict between already vulnerable parents because of its win-lose orientation and the way it fosters hostile behaviors and demands. Although the adversarial process purports to focus on children's "best interests", parents' psychologically-driven legal strategies more often represent their own needs and perceived entitlements, and the effect is to diminish the possibility of future civility, productive communication, and cooperation (Kelly, 2003).

### Quality and Type of Parenting

The quality and type of parenting have emerged as important influences on the post-separation/divorce adjustment of school-aged children and adolescents. Deterioration in the quality of parenting after separation has long been recognized (Belsky, Youngblood, Rovine, & Volling, 1991; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Hetherington, 1999; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Many parents are preoccupied, stressed, emotionally labile, angry, and depressed following separation, and their "diminished parenting" includes less positive involvement and affection expressed with their children, and more coercive and harsh forms of discipline. Additional internal factors affecting quality of parenting include parents' psychological adjustment, violence, and high conflict. External factors such as absorption in dating, new partners, cohabitation, remarriage, and poverty and financial instability are also associated with reductions in the quality of parenting (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003; Simons, Lin, Gordon, et al, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Researchers have identified specific aspects of parenting that can moderate the impact of separation and divorce on children's social, emotional, and academic adjustment, and potentially protect children against the harmful impacts of high conflict. Effective parenting by separated mothers is characterized by warmth, authoritative discipline (setting limits, noncoercive discipline and control, enforcement of rules, appropriate expectations), academic skill encouragement, and monitoring of the children's activities (Amato & Fowler, 2002; Buchanan, 1996; Hetherington, 1999; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Simons et al, 1999). As described in more detail below, the effective parenting of fathers that is linked to more positive adjustment following divorce

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is also associated with effective paternal behaviours including active involvement (help with homework and projects, emotional support and warmth, talking about problems and involvement in school (Amato & Fowler, 2002; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hetherington, 1999; Finley & Schwartz, in press).

### Disruptions in Relationships with Fathers

Divorce commonly disrupts one of the child's most important and enduring relationships, that with his or her father. As Amato (1993; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) has shown with particular clarity, however, the bivariate associations between father absence and children's adjustment are much weaker than one might expect. Indeed, Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) meta-analysis revealed no significant association between the frequency of father-child contact and child outcomes, largely because of the great diversity in the types of 'father-present' relationships. We might predict that contacts with abusive, incompetent, or disinterested fathers are likely to have much different effects than relationships with devoted, committed, and sensitive fathers. As expected, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that children's well-being was significantly enhanced when their relationships with nonresident fathers were positive, when the nonresident fathers engaged in "active parenting," and when contact was frequent. Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, and Bridges (2004), Simons and Associates (1996), Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella (1998), and Clarke-Stewart and Hayward (1996) likewise reported that children benefited when their nonresident fathers were actively involved in routine everyday activities, and the conclusion was clearly supported in recent analyses by Carlson (2006) of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth. Carlson showed that father involvement was associated with better adolescent adjustment and that paternal involvement partially mediated the effects of family structure (notably divorce or single parenthood) on adolescents' behavioral outcomes. Similarly, higher levels of paternal involvement in their children's schools was associated with better grades, better adjustment, fewer suspensions, and lower dropout rates than were lower levels of involvement (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Active engagement in a variety of specific activities and on-going school-related discussions between fathers and their adolescents significantly lowered the probability of school failure when compared to adolescents with less actively engaged fathers.

Another meta-analysis indicated that, on multiple measures of emotional and behavioral adjustment and academic achievement by mothers, fathers, teachers, and clinicians, children in joint physical custody were better adjusted than children in sole custody arrangements. In fact, children in shared custody were as well adjusted as children whose parents remained married (Bauserman, 2002). Although joint physical custody parents reported less past and current conflict than did sole physical custody parents, conflict did not explain the superiority of the children in joint custody arrangements. Again, the clear implication is that active paternal involvement, not simply the number or length of meetings between fathers and children, predicts child adjustment. This suggests that post-divorce arrangements should specifically seek to maximize positive and meaningful paternal involvement rather than simply allow minimal levels of

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visitation. As in non-divorced families, in other words, the quality of continued relationships with the parents--both parents--is crucial (Kelly & Lamb, 2000). Stated differently and succinctly, the better (richer, deeper, and more secure) the parent-child relationships, the better the children's adjustment, whether or not the parents live together (Lamb, 2002a, 2002b).

A recent longitudinal study of representative samples of adolescents living in low income neighbourhoods in Boston, San Antonio, and Chicago nicely illustrated the associations over time between non-resident paternal involvement and adolescent delinquency after statistically controlling for the effects of influences such as demographic factors and the quality of mother-child relationships (Coley & Medeiros, 2007). As expected, non-resident paternal involvement was associated with less delinquency overall; importantly, higher paternal involvement was associated with declines in delinquency over time, particularly among adolescents who were more involved with delinquent activities. In addition, as delinquency increased, paternal involvement increased too, suggesting that fathers were responding to changes in their children's problem behaviour. Similarly, in another longitudinal study of adolescents, Menning (2006) showed that adolescents whose non-resident fathers were more involved were less likely to start smoking.

Given the demonstrated importance of fathers' active participation and effective parenting, the influence of maternal attitudes on the extent of paternal involvement in the marriage and following separation and divorce is important (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005; Pleck, 1997). Mothers can be influential gatekeepers of paternal involvement through attitudes and behaviors that limit or facilitate fathers' opportunities to parent and develop close relationships with their children. Mothers' traditional attitudes toward women's roles, identities linked primarily to caregiving, and perceptions that mothers are more competent at child care than fathers are associated with more active inhibitory gate-keeping, particularly following separation, and this is linked with lower levels of father involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

Overall, then, a number of factors help account for individual differences in the effects of divorce, and because they are inter-correlated, it is difficult to assess their relative importance. The ability to maintain meaningful relationships with both parents does appear to be of central importance, however, both in its own right and as a correlate of some of the other factors. As shown later, thoughtful interventions can take advantage of these inter-correlations, initiating processes that minimize the adverse effects on children's adjustment by striving to promote healthy relationships between children and both of their parents, whether or not they live together.

## MINIMIZING THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE

Even though children's best interests are usually served by keeping both parents actively involved in their children's lives, many custody and access arrangements may not foster the maintenance of relationships between children and their non-resident

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parents. The use of traditional “visiting guidelines” in many jurisdictions which prescribe every other weekend to the nonresident parent (with perhaps a brief midweek visit), or the reliance of mental health professionals on unsubstantiated beliefs that every other weekend is the best parenting plan for children, has caused great dissatisfaction and sense of loss among the majority of children in post-divorce arrangements. Research on children’s and young adults’ views of their post-divorce living arrangements indicates that the majority express strong wishes and longing for more time with their fathers, a desire for more closeness, and favorable views of shared physical custody as their preferred schedule (Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Smith & Gallop, 2001). Arbitrary and one-size-fits-all time restrictions on the amounts of time children spend with their fathers have been the norm regardless of the quality of the father-child relationship. It is no less important to maintain both child-parent attachments when the divorced parents had ‘traditional’ roles before divorce than when they shared parenting responsibilities more equitably. Our focus should remain on the children’s best interests, not “fairness” to the parents.

Writing on behalf of 18 experts on the effects of divorce and contrasting parenting plans, Lamb, Sternberg, and Thompson (1997, p. 400) observed more than a decade ago that: “To maintain high-quality relationships with their children, parents need to have sufficiently extensive and regular interactions with them, but the amount of time involved is usually less important than the quality of the interaction that it fosters. Time distribution arrangements that ensure the involvement of both parents in important aspects of their children’s everyday lives and routines...are likely to keep nonresidential parents playing psychologically important and central roles in the lives of their children.”

In order for parents to have a positive impact on their children’s development, it is important that parents be integral parts of their children’s lives. This remains especially important as children get older and greater portions of their time are occupied outside the family by virtue of friendships, extracurricular activities, sports, and the like. At all ages, it is important for parents to know teachers and friends, what’s happening at school or pre-school, how relationships with peers are going, what other activities are important or meaningful to the children, etc., and to be aware of daily ups-and-downs in their children’s lives. It is hard to do this without regular and extensive first hand involvement with their children in a variety of contexts.

As Kelly and Lamb (2000; Lamb & Kelly, 2001; Lamb, 2002b) reiterated, the ideal situation is one in which children with separated parents have opportunities to interact with both parents frequently in a variety of functional contexts (feeding, play, discipline, basic care, limit-setting, putting to bed, etc.). The evening and overnight periods (like extended days with naptimes) with nonresidential parents are especially important psychologically for infants, toddlers and young children. They provide opportunities for crucial social interactions and nurturing activities, including bathing, soothing hurts and anxieties, bedtime rituals, comforting in the middle of the night, and the reassurance and security of snuggling in the morning that 1 to 3 hour long visits cannot provide. According to attachment theory, as noted earlier, these everyday

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activities promote and maintain trust and confidence in the parents, while deepening and strengthening child-parent attachments, and thus need to be encouraged when decisions about access and contact are made.

One implication is that even young children should spend overnight periods with both parents when both have been involved in their care prior to separation, even though neo-analysts have long counseled against this (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Lamb & Kelly, 2001). As Warshak (2000) has pointed out, the prohibition of overnight “visitation” has been justified by prejudices and beliefs rather than by any empirical evidence. When both parents have established significant attachments and both have been actively involved in the child’s care, overnight ‘visits’ will consolidate attachments and child adjustment, not work against them. Consistent with this reasoning, the results of recent research by Pruett and her colleagues (2005) show that regular overnight visits were associated with better adjustment on the part of toddlers and young children. Parents who have been actively involved before divorce but are then denied overnight access to their children are thereby excluded from an important array of activities, and the strength or depth of their relationships suffer as a result.

Solomon and Biringen (2001) challenged Kelly and Lamb’s (2000) conclusions regarding the beneficial effects of overnight visits for many young children, citing the results of a study by Solomon and George (1999a, 1999b). Contrary to their assertions, however, these researchers did not find that overnight visits with non-custodial fathers adversely affected the security of infant-mother attachment, or that overnights were more problematic for preschoolers than for infants and preschoolers. In addition, many of the infants and toddlers they studied had never lived with their two parents and may thus not have formed attachments to their fathers before the overnight visits commenced; their situation is much different than that of infants and toddlers who have established attachments to two involved parents prior to separation/divorce which was the context explicitly addressed by Kelly and Lamb (2000). Different steps are needed when promoting the formation rather than the maintenance of attachments, as Kelly and Lamb (2003) pointed out in another paper concerned with young children whose parents live too far apart for children to have regular contact with both of them. Solomon and George (1999a, p. 27) also noted that some of the infants in their study had experienced extended and repeated separations from their fathers, which, as noted above, would have stressed these relationships further.

To minimize the deleterious impact of extended separations from either parent, furthermore, attachment theory tells us there should be more frequent transitions than would perhaps be desirable with older children (Kelly & Lamb, 2000). To be responsive to young children’s psychological needs, in other words, the parenting schedules adopted for children under age two or three should actually involve more transitions, rather than fewer, to ensure the continuity of both relationships and to promote the children’s security and comfort. Although no empirical research exists testing specific parenting plans following separation, it is likely, for example, that infants and toddlers would remain most comfortable and secure with a schedule that allowed the child to see his or

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her father at least three times a week, including at least one overnight extended stay (assuming father is adequate), so that there is no separation of greater than 2-3 days. From the third year of life, the ability to tolerate longer separations begins to increase, so that most toddlers can manage two consecutive overnights with each parent without stress.

Interestingly, psychologists have long recognized the need to minimize the length of separations from attachment figures when devising parenting plans, but they have typically focused only on separations from mothers, thereby revealing their presumption that young children are not meaningfully attached to their fathers, or that paternal involvement is a peripheral influence. The lingering resistance to overnights among professionals working with divorcing families appears to view fathers as essential strangers to their infants and toddlers, rather than as important attachment figures. To the extent that children are attached to both of their parents, however, separations from both parents are stressful and at minimum generate psychic pain. As a result, parenting plans that allow children—especially very young children—to see their fathers every other Saturday for a few hours, or every other shortened weekend (with perhaps a brief mid-week visit) clearly fail to recognize the adverse consequences of weeklong separations from non-resident parents. It is little wonder that such arrangements lead to attenuation of the relationships between non-resident parents and their children. Instead, it is desirable to promote continued involvement by both parents, striving when necessary to increase the participation of those parents (typically fathers) whose limited prior involvement may initially make overnight contact inappropriate (Kelly & Lamb, 2003).

Recently, Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that the more time a group of university students had lived as children with their fathers the better were their relationships with their fathers, independent of amount of parent conflict. More time with fathers appeared to be beneficial in both high and low conflict families, and more exposure to parent conflict appeared to be detrimental (poorer health status and more distress) at both high and low levels of amount of time with fathers. Inter-parental conflict should thus be avoided wherever possible, but its presence should not be used to justify restrictions on children's access to either of their parents.

#### RESTRICTING CONTACT IN RESPONSE TO MARITAL CONFLICT

Of course, there are some cases in which the possible benefits of keeping both parents involved are outweighed by the costs of doing so. Conflict-filled or violent relationships between the parents are most likely to trigger such cost-benefit analyses because, as noted earlier, continuing high conflict is reliably associated with poorer child outcomes following divorce (Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 2000; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Children in high conflict families who have frequent contact with their fathers are more poorly adjusted than those in low conflict families (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Hetherington, 1999; Johnston, 1994; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Inter-parental conflict should thus be avoided wherever possible, but litigation-related conflict and conflict triggered by the high levels of stress around the time of divorce do

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not appear to have enduring consequences for children. As a result, their occurrence should not be used to justify restrictions on children's access to either of their parents.

Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) cautioned that minor or isolated instances of domestic violence should not affect decisions regarding custody and visitation. The high conflict found harmful by researchers such as Johnston (1994; Johnston & Roseby, 1997) typically involved repeated incidents of spousal violence and verbal aggression between parents with substantial psychiatric problems and personality disorders that continued after divorce at intense levels for extended periods of time, often in front of the children. As a result, Johnston has emphasized the importance of continued relationships with both parents except in those relatively uncommon circumstances in which intense, protracted conflict or violence occurs and persists. According to Maccoby and Mnookin (1992), somewhere around a quarter of divorcing families experience high levels of conflict around the time of divorce, and perhaps 10% of them may have conflict that is sufficiently severe and intractable that it may not be beneficial for the children concerned to have contact with their non-resident parents (see also Johnston, 1994). Not all entrenched post-divorce conflict involves both parents' participation, however, because in a significant number of cases, one parent has essentially disengaged emotionally from the other parent, and is not promoting or instigating the conflict, but is a victim of the other parent's rage and vindictiveness, intransigence, and/or failure to comply with parenting and financial orders, and therefore may need to return to court for assistance (Friedman, 2004; Kelly, 2003, 2005).

Significant numbers of children have warm and supportive relationships with parents who have highly conflicted and/or violent relationships with one another, so we must be careful when reports of parental conflict are allowed to influence decisions about parent-child contact (Holden, Geffner, & Jouriles, 1998; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Sternberg & Lamb, 1999). According to Appel and Holden (1998), 60% of the children whose parents were violent with one another were not themselves victims of physical child abuse, suggesting that decision-makers need to assess the relationships with parents directly and not simply assume that children must have been abused because their parents were violent with one another. Unfortunately, however, mere allegations of conflict or even marital violence can be powerful tools in an adversarial system, frequently resulting in reduced levels of court-approved contacts between fathers and children (Sternberg, 1997). Disagreements about the occurrence, nature, and perpetrators of violence are quite common, furthermore, and do not always reveal self-serving biases (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Sternberg, Lamb, & Dawud-Noursi, 1998).

Newer research which differentiates among types of intimate partner violence is directly relevant to these issues of custody and access. Types of partner violence identified include Situational Couple Violence, instigated by both men and women in fairly equal numbers, characterized most often by more minor forms of violence (pushing, shoving, grabbing). Injuries are not as common, and fear of the partner is not typical. Situational couple violence typically arises from arguments that spiral upward and poor conflict management skills, rather than power, coercion and control as central

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dynamics (Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004; Johnson, 2005; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Johnston & Campbell, 1993; Kelly & Johnson, in press; Stets & Straus, 1992). In contrast, Battering (also called Intimate Terrorism), seen primarily in shelter and hospital samples, is primarily male perpetrated, accounts for most of the injuries seen in women, and has coercion, control, and emotional abuse as the primary dynamics. Separation Instigated Violence has also been identified in couples whose prior history together did not include any violence or coercion and control (Johnston & Campbell, 1993; Kelly, 1982). Although the experience of parental violence is always distressing, if not traumatic, for children, these differences among types of partner violence have implications for various post-separation interventions, screening, and the development of appropriate parenting plans for children (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, in press; Kelly & Johnson, in press).

Research on the impact of post- as opposed to pre-divorce conflict on children's adjustment has yielded mixed results. Some investigators have found that marital conflict is a more potent predictor of post-divorce adjustment than post-divorce conflict (Booth & Amato, 2001; Buehler, Krishnakumar, Stone, Anthony, Pemberton, Gerard, & Barber, 1998; King & Heard, 1999; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991), whereas Hetherington (1999) found that post-divorce conflict had more adverse effects than did conflict in married families. Booth and Amato (2001) reported no association between the amount of post-divorce conflict and later adjustment in young adults. The varied findings may reflect the use of different measures, a failure to differentiate between types of conflict after divorce, differing parental styles of resolution, and/or variations in the extent to which children are directly exposed to anger and conflict. High conflict is more likely to be destructive post-divorce when parents use their children to express their anger, and are verbally and physically aggressive on the phone or in person. By contrast, when parents continue to have conflict, but encapsulate it and do not put their children in the middle, children appear unaffected (Buchanan et al., 1991; Hetherington, 1999). Buffers have also been identified which may protect children from the harmful effects of high parent conflict, including a good relationship with at least one parent or caregiver, parental warmth, and emotional support from a sibling (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

In addition, most experts agree that conflict localized around the time of separation and divorce is of less concern than conflict that was and remains an intrinsic and unresolved part of the parents' relationship and continues after their divorce (Cummings et al., 2004; Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Similarly, conflict from which children are shielded also does not appear to affect adjustment (Hetherington, 1999) whereas conflict that includes physical violence is more pathogenic than high conflict without violence (Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent, & Mahoney, 1996; McNeal & Amato, 1998).

The quality of the relationships between non-residential parents and their children is also crucial when determining whether to sever or promote relationships between divorced parents and their children. Regardless of the levels of violence, there are many

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families in which non-resident fathers and children have sufficiently poor relationships-- perhaps because of the fathers' psychopathology, substance or alcohol abuse -- that "maintenance" of interaction or involvement may not be of net benefit to the children, but we do not know how many relationships are like this. Unrepresentative data sets, such as those collected by Greif (1997) in the course of research designed to study fathers and mothers who lose contact with their children after divorce, suggest that perhaps ten to fifteen percent of parents do not have either the commitment or individual capacities to establish and maintain supportive and enriching relationships with their children following divorce. Taken together, Johnston's and Greif's estimates suggest that, at most, 15% to 20% (depending on how greatly the two groups of parents overlap) of the children whose parents divorce might not benefit from regular and extended contact with their non-resident parents. Stated differently, of course, this suggests that more than three-quarters of the children experiencing their parents' divorce could benefit from having and maintaining relationships with their non-resident parents. Instead of 'standard' parenting plans, therefore, individual circumstances should be examined to ensure that the arrangements made are sensitive to the parents' and children's strengths, schedules, and needs (Kelly, 2005, 2007; Smythe & Chisholm, 2006).

#### INTERVENTIONS WHICH PROMOTE CHILDREN'S RESILIENCY

In response to empirical research demonstrating the factors associated with risk in children whose parents have separated, a number of different interventions and best practices have been developed that focus on parents' conflict and communication, quality of parenting, children's reactions to separation and divorce, development of appropriate parenting plans, and sustainable agreements. Among the hierarchy of interventions available in the court system and community, both public and private, are education programs for separating parents, custody and divorce mediation programs, judicial settlement conferences, collaborative lawyering, specialized programs for parents with continuing high conflict post-divorce, and Parenting Coordination. While many programs have face validity, and generally receive high ratings on parent satisfaction and self-reports of reduced parent conflict, only a small percentage have been empirically evaluated (Kelly, 2002; Trinder & Lamb, 2005).

The most widespread and inexpensive interventions are education programs for separating parents which explain to parents the effects of divorce on children, the impact of parent conflict, the particular risk when parents use their children to express their anger and disagreement, the need to separate children's needs from adult needs, parenting skills, and often provide skill-based training to minimize conflict and promote more effective communication. At least in the short term, these courses appear to be effective (e.g., Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Ellis & Anderson, 2003; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, & Montes, 2001), particularly when the content is empirically-based and includes skill-based training and role-play experiences. More extensive research-based parent education programs appear to bring about meaningful behavioural changes in both mothers and fathers (for review, see Haine, Sandler, Wolchik et al., 2003; Braver, Griffin, Cookson et al., 200?).

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Of all the divorce-related interventions implemented to date, custody and divorce mediation enjoys the most empirical support regarding the benefits to divorcing and divorced families (Emery, 1994; Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, et al, 2001; Kelly, 1996, 2002, 2004). The potential benefits are substantial in both the short term (e.g., earlier settlement of parenting disputes, reduced parental conflict, improved parental support), and the longer term (e.g., more sustained contact between fathers and children 12 years later), relative to parents using the traditional adversarial system (Emery et al, 2001; Kelly, 2004).

The increasing use of Parenting Coordinator over the past two decades in the United States represents an effort to address the needs of children in situations of very high conflict. Parenting Coordination is a child-focused dispute resolution process designed to assist parents with a continuing history of high conflict to settle disputes regarding their children in a timely manner, and to facilitate compliance with parenting plans and related court orders. A non-adversarial intervention, the Parenting Coordination role combines case and conflict management, relevant parent education, mediation, and, when specified, arbitration of certain child-related disputes which the parents cannot settle on their own. Parenting Coordination is generally viewed as a post-decree process for parents who have demonstrated a continuing inability to settle child-specific disputes through other means, including private negotiations, mediation, specialized parent education groups, settlement conferences, or following trial. Most Parenting Coordinators serve by stipulation of the parents and court order, or by private consent agreements. In general, the judiciary has been supportive and enthusiastic; other professionals involved with these families have also indicated in surveys that parent coordinators can be very effective, especially in reducing the frequency and intensity of disputes (Coates et al., 2004). Parenting Coordinators in jurisdictions with the most experience have revised and refined the role more precisely, which is reflected in the Guidelines for Parenting Coordination developed by an AFCC task force (2006), and the need for specialized training for mental health and legal professionals undertaking this role has been further articulated (Guidelines, 2006; Kelly, in press). While there is as yet no systematic research on the long-term effectiveness, dramatic decreases in the rates of litigation (court appearances) in the first year after Parent Coordinators were appointed was reported in one unpublished dissertation (Johnson, 1994). Several articles in a recent special issue of *Family Courts Review* (2001, Volume 39, issue 3) on the most problematic post divorce families make clear that parent coordinators are among the most important interventions available to smooth the post-separation and divorce transitions, and this point was underscored in the recent article by Coates and her colleagues (2004).

There are a number of best practices that mental health professionals can provide to help separating parents reduce the risk that their children potentially face. First, they can prepare parents to talk to their children about those aspects of the separation and divorce that directly affect their children. Most children are not informed about the details and meaning of the parental separation for them, are not invited to ask questions nor allowed an opportunity to give suggestions regarding their new living arrangements,

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and not consulted regarding schedule changes (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; Smart, 2002; Smart & Neale, 2000), which leaves children to cope with these major changes in their lives without either emotional support or cognitive clarity.

Secondly, professionals can become familiar with and promote awareness of various models for parenting plans which have been developed partly in response to research such as that described in this chapter. Instead of one standard visiting pattern, a menu of different time-sharing options for children of different ages encourages parents, professionals, and courts to consider children's ages and developmental needs and achievements; the quality of parent-child relationships, parents' interest and capacity to be involved in their children's lives, and children's voices and input when appropriate. Parenting plan models typically include multiple options for various living arrangements that range from traditional visiting, expanded access involving more midweek and weekend time, and variations of shared physical custody arrangements. Many of the parenting plan models available include highly detailed templates to guide parental choices with respect to legal decision-making and parental responsibilities (see Note 1 for examples). It is important that agreements and court orders are sufficiently detailed so that both parents know when, where, and how their children will make the transitions between households, eliminating the ambiguity that angry parents exploit and which often cause one or both parents to argue in front of their children. Orders that use the vague language of 'liberal visitation' invite sustained argument, and, when mothers remain angry, do not sufficiently protect children's relationships with their fathers. Even in legal cultures that emphasize 'private ordering,' lawyers, therapists, and custody evaluators should help parents develop specific schedules for children's time with each parent, and courts should routinely expect such language and detail.

Thirdly, because transitions between households provide opportunities for discussion and argument, it is important when parents have a history of conflict to ensure that these exchanges take place in neutral settings and at times that limit contact between the parents. Parenting plans that extend weekends to Monday morning and use mid-week overnights (assuming adequate parenting skills) rather than brief 3 hour visits have been used extensively by mediators, lawyers, and Parenting Coordinators in the past decade in the United States. In such plans, one parent drops the children off at school, and the other parent picks them up at the end of the school day or from day care. Parenting Coordinators report that many children benefit from the elimination of face-to-face parent confrontations at the family residence or other meeting places, and conflict becomes a much less frequent experience. Increasing number of locations now have visitation exchange centers where children can be brought by one parent to reunite with the other without making it necessary for the parents to encounter one another directly. Such arrangements may be especially helpful when either the parents or children are fearful, and have been shown to increase the frequency of contact between non-resident parents and their children while reducing levels of conflict between the parents (Flory, Dunn, Berg-Weger, & Milstead, 2001).

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Fourth, custody evaluators should become familiar and stay current with the empirical literature regarding attachment, child development, parent-child relationships, separation and divorce and children's adjustment. If they are to make recommendations to the court, a subject currently generating some controversy (Tippins & Wittman, 2005), these recommendations should be grounded in and supported by the current research literature, rather than theory or subjective bias (Kelly & Johnston, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

In all, basic research on early social development and descriptive research on the multifaceted correlates of divorce have together yielded a clearer understanding of the ways in which divorce affects children and of how the welfare of many children could be enhanced by changes in common practices. Most importantly, we know that children benefit from supportive relationships with both of their parents, whether or not those parents live together. We also know that relationships are dynamic and are thus dependent on continued opportunities for interaction. In order to ensure that both adults become or remain parents to their children, post-divorce parenting plans need to encourage participation by both parents in as broad as possible an array of social contexts on a regular basis. Brief dinners and occasional weekend visits do not provide a broad enough or extensive enough basis for such relationships to be fostered, whereas weekday and weekend daytime and nighttime activities are important for children of all ages. In the absence of sufficiently broad and extensive interactions, many fathers drift out of their children's lives, and children see their fathers as increasingly peripheral, placing these children at risk psychologically and materially. It is not clear exactly how much time is necessary to ensure that both parents stay involved in their children's lives, and undoubtedly this will vary from family to family and the age of the children. Braver and O'Connell (1998) have suggested that at least one-third of the non-school hours should be spent with the non-resident parent and most experts would agree that 15% (every other weekend) is almost certainly insufficient.

To date, unfortunately, policy makers, judges, and lawyers in many jurisdictions have not been very attentive to the importance of promoting children's relationships with both of their parents. Representative statistics are not readily available (see Smyth, 2004), although there is general satisfaction in many countries and jurisdictions (and among mothers) with post-separation arrangements that ensure 'regular contact' without sufficient effort made to ensure that the contact is sufficient for children to be able to maintain meaningful relationships with their non-resident parents, who are of course overwhelmingly fathers. The default arrangements recommended by most lawyers or solicitors typically involve 'every other weekend' visits, rather than arrangements that allow non resident fathers to really be involved in their children's lives. Furthermore, reasoned discussion about the potential benefits of greater involvement by non resident parents has been drowned out by poisonous rhetoric from groups and individuals mired in gendered concerns about fairness for parents rather than children's best interests. On the other hand, as we have made clear in the previous section, many innovative practices and

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programmes have been developed over the last few decades as increasing numbers of professionals have come to recognise the importance of promoting continued relationships between children and both of their separating parents. These trends augur well for the future.

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#### Note 1

For examples of parenting plan models, see Alaska Court System, Model Parenting Agreement, [www.state.ak.us/courts/forms/dr-475.pdf](http://www.state.ak.us/courts/forms/dr-475.pdf); American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, Model for a Parenting Plan; State Bar of Arizona, Model Parenting Time Plans—for Parent/Child Access, [http://www.supreme.state.az.us/dr/Pdf/Parenting\\_Time\\_Plan\\_Final.pdf](http://www.supreme.state.az.us/dr/Pdf/Parenting_Time_Plan_Final.pdf); Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, Planning for Shared Parenting, [www.afccnet.org](http://www.afccnet.org); [jbkellyphd@mindspring.com](mailto:jbkellyphd@mindspring.com) ( for research annotated schedules.)

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