Effects of Divorce on Very Young Children☆

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Introduction

Despite high divorce rates, there are relatively few studies on the effects of divorce on very young children in the United States. Despite this small body of research, existing studies have shown that young children face challenges linked to divorce including diminished parenting, exposure to parental conflict, and behavioral and emotional issues, as well as economic and residential instability. Although divorce can be detrimental to very young children, research has also shown that young children are resilient. Studies have reported that overnight stays with the noncustodial parent, joint custody arrangements, low conflict parenting relationships, parental planning, and some types of family interventions have the potential to assuage challenges faced by children. Thus, recent research has underscored the resilience of children following divorce. Even though many children face difficulties associated with divorce, families often restabilize with time, and most children move into adulthood without facing long-term problems.

Divorce in Families With Very Young Children in the United States

Divorce rates have declined across the United States, especially among younger couples who are also more likely to be in their childbearing years (Kennedy and Ruggles, 2014). Nonetheless, a number of young children will experience their parents' divorce. According to recent estimates from the 2017 American Community Survey, about 5.4% of children ages 0 to 3 live with a currently divorced parent. Moreover, out of all children living with a divorced parent, 15% of these children were between the ages of 0 and 3. Acknowledging the nuances in these numbers is also crucial for understanding changes to families in the United States over time. For example, these numbers do not capture children who have a divorced parent who later remarries. Further, these data do not assess children who are born to cohabiting parents, which according to recent estimates comprise about 20% of births. Moreover, cohabiting parents may later split, especially as researchers find that children in cohabiting unions are twice as likely to see their parents dissolve their union relative to children with married parents (Heuveline et al., 2003; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008). Thus, many children with married or cohabiting parents are susceptible to the consequences of their parents' divorce or union dissolution. Despite the prevalence of divorce among young children, there are still relatively few studies that have focused exclusively on the consequences of parents' breakup for this age group. Young children face difficulty in coping with marital dissolution and often experience stress as well as behavioral or emotional problems following their parents' divorce. Further, many children are disadvantaged after their parents' divorce because they often lose the same type and amount of access to one parent who was likely a crucial provider of both emotional and financial support to the child (Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). Divorce is also

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not a discrete event, meaning children's problems, such as the experience of parental conflict, often precede the actual date of the divorce. Likewise, children's adjustment to divorce does not occur overnight; it can often take children years to acclimate to a parental separation (Amato, 2010).

Unique Difficulties of Younger Children Versus Older Children

Studying very young children whose parents divorce presents a unique host of challenges relative to older children. It can be difficult to examine how very young children react and adjust to their parents' divorce because development during the first several years of life can be varied between children of the same chronological age. Development aside, not all children show distress or maladaptation in the same ways, making it difficult to discern how different children are faring following divorce. Finally, studying outcomes of young children following divorce can be challenging as the circumstances of every divorce are different (e.g., levels of parental conflict and distress, socioeconomic circumstances, custody decisions, and more) Therefore, even among researchers who study the effects of divorce on very young children, it can be problematic to specify interventions that will be appropriate for young children as a monolithic age group.

Even though it can be difficult to generalize the effects of divorce across different groups of young children, research has suggested younger children seem to be more emotionally disturbed by their parents' divorce relative to older children. There appear to be several reasons that account for the poorer adjustment of young children compared to older children. First, younger children often face more difficulty in coming to terms with their parents' divorce because they are unable to realistically assess the causes and consequences of the divorce. Often, this is because very young children put themselves at the center of the divorce. For instance, many young children assign self-blame to themselves as they adjust, believing they must have done something to prompt the dissolution (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Second, early childhood is a crucial time for social, emotional, and cognitive advancement. Divorce and its varied consequences can disrupt the child's overall development.

Children's Reactions to Parents' Divorce

Parents' divorce may initially go unrecognized by very young children, especially if the divorce is initiated when a child is in their infancy. Nonetheless, many young children often have a simple, but correct view of divorce although many parents believe their children are relatively unaware of their separation. For example, in one study of a clinical observation of 120 children between 1978 and 1992, researcher Alicia Lieberman (1993) encountered a mother who had not communicated with her 24-month-old about her divorce from the child's father because she thought her daughter could not comprehend the separation. However, the young girl had frequent nightmares and strong behavioral reactions to mentions of her father. When the mother began communicating more openly with her daughter about the divorce, the young girl's nightmares and problematic behaviors improved.

Sometimes, young children are forced to assume roles often played by adults in the wake of their parents' separation. Alicia Lieberman (1993) observed an 18-month-old who stood in front of his quarreling parents while he yelled at them to stop fighting with one another. Young children are also surprisingly in tune with their parents' emotional distress. In another study, Wallerstein and colleagues (2000) found that young children sitting in their distressed mothers' laps would sometimes reach out to stroke their mothers' cheeks when they sensed they were upset. In one circumstance, a 3-year-old offered comforting words to his mother who had just been left by her romantic partner. As the child consoled his grieving mother, he told her that it was not fair for the partner to have left her on her own.

Other times children react with anger as they struggle to make sense of their parents' divorce. Wallerstein and colleagues (2000) tell the story of Larry, a young boy who had not exhibited aggressive behavior prior to his parents' divorce. Following his parents' separation, Larry began to experience behavioral problems as well as anger toward his mother that lasted for several years postdivorce. Even though Larry's parents' divorce was partially out of necessity so that his mother could escape a violent relationship, small children often cannot grasp the difference between a high-conflict and low-conflict marriage.

During and after their parents' separation, young children may also worry about what will happen to them (Wallerstein et al., 2000). The rudimentary understanding that children have of parents' divorce often leaves children shouldering feelings of self-blame, wondering if they were the reason for their parents' divorce (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Moreover, many children also become concerned that their parents will stop loving them or that their parent will leave them, too. Judith Wallerstein and colleagues (2000) described observations of children's stress and reactions to their parent's departures. One toddler developed a postdivorce stutter although the child's speech was unimpeded before his father's departure. Another child stood in the middle of the living room floor—the last place he saw his mother before she left—and refused to move, seemingly worried that if he left that spot, he may never see his mother again.

Many children are unaware of the permanence or lack thereof of a divorce and many children hold out hope that their parents will get back together (Ebling et al., 2009). Such reunion fantasies are often disrupted when a parent enters a new romantic relationship. In *The Emotional Life of a Toddler*, Alicia Lieberman describes one 3-year-old who refused to allow their mother to introduce her new partner, replying, "You're not my daddy." Such fantasies of family reunions are particularly common among very young children and tend to dissipate as children age.

Attachment Research

Much of the research conducted regarding the effects of divorce on very young children incorporates children's attachment relationship to their primary caregivers. In essence, attachment research is based on two critical characteristics: availability of attachment figure(s) or the primary caretaker(s) as well as the ability for the attachment figure(s) to be sensitive and responsive to the child's needs (Bowlby, 1982; Waters et al., 1979; Wallerstein, 2008). Children who are securely attached to their primary caretaker(s) often appear to be better adjusted, as evidenced by their seemingly greater sense of security, self-confidence, and trust of other people (Bowlby, 1982, 1973, 1969). Research regarding children's attachment to their primary caregiver(s) is particularly relevant in research on young children as the first several years—especially the first year—of a child's life are most critical for developing secure attachments (Bowlby, 1969).

Attachment of a child to their primary caretaker(s) is not a static state (Faber and Wittenborn, 2010, p. 93). A parent's divorce can disrupt the child's secure attachment to their parents. Divorce means that parents often divide their households as well as their time with children (Hetherington and Kelly, 2002; Lamb and Kelly, 2009). Children need regular interaction with their primary attachment figure(s) to form and maintain strong relationships, thus, fostering healthy child development (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Parents' marital disruption may interrupt the time children spend with their attachment figures. Interruption of the child's attachment relationship with their primary attachment figure(s) is consequential. Even short separations may lead to intense distress for the infant or toddler that can endure long after the initial parent–child separation (Lamb and Kelly, 2009; Kelly, 2003a,b). Moreover, research has indicated that disrupted attachment may be negatively associated with the development of the ability to cope with certain stressors (Schore, 2001). Such findings further highlight the importance of secure attachments for the long-term maturation of very young children.

Disruption of secure attachment to a parent is not always directly linked to the divorce itself, but instead circumstances brought on by the parents' marital separation. For example, secure attachment may also be disturbed as a result of diminished parenting (Altenhofen et al., 2010). The child may reach out to a parent for reassurance in the wake of divorce, but the parent may not be emotionally stable enough to console the child. Moreover, seeing parents in conflict with one another can be jarring for the child and lead to less secure attachment with parents (Altenhofen et al., 2010). Overall, the challenge following divorce is figuring out how parents can work together toward maintaining and promoting the infant or toddler's attachment to each parent.

Diminished Parenting Following Divorce

Divorce is often associated with a parent's diminished or compromised parenting. Both prior to and after divorce, parents often deal with their own emotional fallout or conflict with their former spouse that disrupts their ability to parent. This is particularly consequential for very young children who are more reliant on parents than older children. Research has shown that parents—especially mothers—spend less time with their children, and are less attentive, less supportive, provide less affection, and are more likely to use coercive parenting following a divorce, particularly when the divorce is characterized by high levels of acrimony (Hetherington, 1999). Moreover, divorce tends to leave children with only one parent available to them at any given moment, also lending to diminished parenting. This may be especially true for fathers who are not only less likely to have custody of their children but may also face restrictive gatekeeping imposed by the mother (see section on "Maternal Gatekeeping" for more information). In a similar vein, the stability of the household often suffers following divorce, too, as important routines like mealtime, playtime, and bedtime are disrupted while single parents struggle to adjust to not having a second adult in the household (Hetherington, 1999; Lucas et al., 2013; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Diminished parenting may also relate to parents' reentrance into the dating pool as parents begin to invest their time into new partners rather than children (Kelly and Lamb, 2000). These issues are of consequence as diminished parenting is associated with children's slower adjustment to parents' divorce and is linked to fewer visits by the noncustodial parent.

Parental Conflict

In addition to diminished parenting, children are also often exposed to parental conflict before and after the divorce is finalized. Nearly 20% to 25% of children experience high levels of conflict during their parents' marriage and divorce (Hetherington, 1999). It is also worth noting that the conflict that characterizes some tumultuous marriages does not always end following a divorce. Parents may continue their combative relationships even after they are divorced as they continue to negotiate decisions regarding their shared children. Experiencing frequent conflict between parents is stressful for young children, sometimes even more stressful than parental conflict prior to the divorce (Booth and Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Lamb and Kelly, 2009). Children often react anxiously by either crying or becoming increasingly anxious when their parents fight (Lieberman, 1993; Wallerstein et al., 2000). When parental conflict is extremely tumultuous, children may worry about their own safety as well as the safety of their parents, and this fear may bleed into other areas of the child's life. For example, from her clinical case examinations, Judith Wallerstein describes the reaction of one child to her parents' divorce which was characterized by high discord. The 3-year-old girl discussed by Wallerstein became fearful that her mother would die, even though this fear did not seem to be based in reality. The

child was so fearful that she became panicked any time she would hear an ambulance siren. However, it should be noted that Wallerstein's data cannot be generalized to all young children, as her data were derived from clinical cases, not random sampling.

In one study, Pruett et al. (2009) found children were often aware of the conflict between their parents even if their parents thought they were not. Additionally, through 41 in-depth interviews, they discovered that conflict between parents hindered parent–child ties, especially among fathers with younger children. Similarly, in a different study, Hetherington (1999) showed mothers who are in high conflict situations are less affectionate toward their young children. On the other hand, there have been other researchers who have investigated the benefits reaped by children when parents are able to manage conflict well. Whiteside and Becker (2000) found that parents' positive and supportive co-parenting strategies help children cope and adjust to the divorce. Co-parenting is typically successful when both parents maintain a shared focus on promoting their children's success and adjustment to the separation. Furthermore, although parenting can be compromised as a result of the stress of a divorce, Feinberg and Khn (2008) found that positive co-parenting can even counteract diminished parenting following a divorce.

Maternal Gatekeeping

Following divorce, parents often serve as gatekeepers to their children. Although sole custody of fathers as well as shared or joint custody are becoming more common, mothers are often legally and socially designated as the primary caretaker of children. Thus, maternal gatekeeping is most common. In some situations, gatekeeping may be as restrictive when mothers either grant or deny a father's access to visit with children or their role in decision-making regarding children (Pruett et al., 2016). Mothers may engage in restrictive gatekeeping for several reasons. For instance, in one study, Pruett et al. (2007) found that a mother's retrospective perceptions of her partner such as his level of support as well as involvement with children during the marriage influenced her gatekeeping. This suggests gatekeeping was used as a type of payback following a divorce. Some researchers have identified types of mothers who may be more likely to engage in restrictive gatekeeping than others. In another study, Gaunt (2008) showed that mothers who feel a stronger tie to their identity as a mother, coupled with the presence of low self-esteem, are more likely to engage in restrictive gatekeeping. On a similar note, mothers who experience greater parenting stress and are fearful about anything that jeopardizes their closeness with their children, as well as emotional safety of children, are more likely to engage in restrictive gatekeeping (Pruett et al., 2016). Gatekeeping described as restrictive in nature has been associated with poorer parent–child relationships, overall. This is because gatekeeping limits a child's access to one of their parents and relationships with both parents are crucial for children's success and development (Faber and Wittenborn, 2010). However, when restrictive gatekeeping is protective in nature to fend off any potential dangers, it can benefit the child (Pruett et al., 2016). While maternal gatekeeping is most commonly restrictive, it can also be facilitative, meaning mothers actively incorporate the father into the parenting plan (Pruett et al., 2016).

Overnight Stays

Estimates suggest around 30% of children of divorce have had overnight stays with noncustodial parents (Altenhofen et al., 2010). Some studies have investigated whether overnight stays are indeed beneficial for very young children. Researchers acknowledge it is often not the overnight stays themselves that are problematic for young children, but rather, disrupted attachment patterns associated with spending nights away from the primary caretaker. Despite multiple studies focused on the effects of overnight stays, this topic remains of great interest as there is still little consensus among researchers about whether overnight stays are in the best interest of toddlers and infants. A few scholars have found that overnight stays are detrimental for young children whereas others claim that children who overnight do just as well as other children. In addition to discordant results across studies focused on overnighting, some scholars have critiqued the findings of this recent research, most commonly questioning the methods of studies that warn of poorer outcomes among overnighters.

Solomon and George (1999) conducted a study with a sample of 145 infants and their parents to investigate the association between attachment security and overnight visits away from the primary caretaker. Specifically, they focused on children of divorce who overnighted with their fathers sometimes (1 to 3 times per month), children of divorce who never overnighted, and children in intact families. They found children who had regular overnight visits with their father exhibited more disorganized or unclassifiable attachment behavior toward their mother relative to children from divorced families without overnight stays as well as children in intact families. However, this relationship was moderated by low parental conflict, suggesting it was not the overnights themselves, but also the relationship and communication style between both parents that mattered most. Although the findings from this study suggest overnighting can lead to insecure attachments among children, some researchers, including Solomon and George, have critiqued the applicability of the results from this study to a general population of young children. In particular, the nature of the relationship between the parents was often overlooked. Many parents in this study were not married and therefore, the child often did not have a relationship with the father before the overnighting began. Thus, it is unclear whether these results would be robust in a sample of children who had strong relationships with both parents prior to the divorce. Moreover, parents with children who overnighted often had hostile relationships with one another, which can also lead to attachment issues among young children. Finally, the overnighting observed in this study was often sporadic and was not typically a routine for these young children. This is an area that awaits additional research.

Two recent studies suggest there are likely differences by age even among the youngest children. McIntosh et al. (2013) found a greater number of overnight stays for children aged 0 to 3 predicted less settled and more poorly regulated behaviors. Similar findings did not emerge for children aged 4 to 5, suggesting older children cope better with overnight stays relative to younger children. In a similar vein, Altenhofen et al. (2010) examined attachment patterns of young children engaged in overnight stays away from their primary parent. All children who spent nights away from their primary caregiver manifested insecure attachment. In fact, they reported 54% of the children as insecurely attached. In a critique of Altenhofen et al., Nielsen (2014b) notes the attachment measure utilized in the study (called Attachment Q Sort) should only be assessed by trained observers. Yet, in these data, attachment was self-assessed by mothers, raising possible questions about the validity of these results. As aforementioned, Altenhofen et al. found more than half of the children in their study had attachments that were classified as insecure. Yet, Nielsen points out that although this percentage may seem high, a similar study (Andreassen and Fletcher, 2007) found 45% of young children in the general population are classified as having insecure attachments. On further examination, although these results showed that among children who experienced overnight stays, insecure attachments were tied to the lack of emotional availability and sensitivity by the mother, the authors did not compare these children to a group of children who did not experience overnight stays. Thus, it is unclear whether the overnight stays were the source of insecure attachment or whether attachment style was related to diminished parenting following a divorce (Nielsen, 2014b).

Another study used Fragile Family data to examine attachment security (Tornello et al., 2013). The Fragile Families and Child Well-being study is a longitudinal study that followed a cohort of 5000 children born in major US cities between the years of 1998 and 2000. These researchers concluded that frequent overnight visits were associated with greater attachment insecurity among infants, but this relationship was less clear for toddlers. Taken together, these findings suggest overnight visits may be more detrimental for infants, but this may not be the case for toddlers. However, in response to Tornello et al. (2013), Milar and Kruk (2014) pointed out several research flaws that call its conclusions into question. A principle issue pinpointed by Milar and Kruk was that the results in the study showed children with more frequent overnights were more securely attached than children with only some overnight visits during the year (this was also echoed in Nielsen's 2014 summary of empirical work on overnights). This finding directly contradicts their overall conclusions that overnights were associated with attachment insecurity. Similarly, another study by Sokol (2014) also employed the Fragile Families data and found no correlation between number of overnights and a child's attachment score. Thus, although there have been several studies regarding the benefits and consequences of overnight visits on young children, conflicting conclusions necessitate further research in this area.

Child Custody Arrangements

Following a divorce, parents typically form separate households and young children tend to have less access to at least one of their parents. Although mother sole custody has been most common in the past, joint custody and shared parenting plans are on the rise. Joint custody describes custody through which both parents have physical custody of their children and share time with their children with relative equality (Nielsen, 2014a). Under joint custody, both parents should also be involved in major decision-making involving the child. Shared parenting plans mean that the child spends roughly half of their time with each parent. In fact, in a recent study from Wisconsin, about one-third of parents had a shared parenting arrangement that split time 50/50 between parents. Moreover, there are nearly as many infants and toddlers in shared parenting households relative to older children in Wisconsin (42% versus 46%, respectively) (Bartfeld, 2011).

Both joint custody and shared parenting plans have enjoyed more popularity today than in the past as research has shifted from promoting sole custody toward valuing the child's continued, strong relationships with both of their parents. Many attachment researchers now assert shared parenting plans and joint custody benefit young children more than sole custody based on an evolution within attachment research. In the past, it was presumed children formed one strong attachment with their primary caregiver (usually the mother) and sole custody helped avoid disruption of this secure attachment. However, research today puts forth that children usually form strong and secure attachments with both parents (Kelly and Lamb, 2000). These attachments must be maintained following divorce as disruptions in frequency with which children see their parents can hinder their secure attachment (Kelly and Lamb, 2000). Thus, many researchers suggest joint custody where parents see young children (especially children under the age of two) every other day to best support children's overall adjustment (Lamb and Kelly, 2009; Nielsen, 2014a).

Focusing on parents' involvement in quality time with children such as mealtime, bedtime, and playtime also play an important role in children's development and continued well-being. In one study, Bauserman (2002) analyzed 33 different studies that examined well-being and outcomes of children in sole custody, joint custody, as well as children from intact families. Although these 33 studies did not exclusively focus on very young children, the overwhelming results suggest joint custody is better for the adjustment of children relative to sole custody. Furthermore, children in joint custody did not look much different from children living in intact families. However, it is important to acknowledge that joint custody may look different for every child and set of parents and may depend on interventions available, if there are any. On the one hand, when parents continue to have a highly conflicted relationship with one another even when they have joint custody, this can be detrimental for the young child's well-being (Kelly and Lamb, 2000). Such circumstances lead some researchers to suggest modifications may need to be made, such as having a babysitter deliver the child from one parent to the other (Kelly and Lamb, 2000). On the other hand, however, some studies have pointed toward the success of mediation-based intervention services, which not only reduce legal action but also promote the success of co-parenting and success of joint custody arrangements (McIntosh and Tan, 2017).

Gender Differences Among Children

Researchers have cited some gender differences between young boys and girls who have experienced their parents' divorce. Pruett et al. (2004) examined a sample of 161 children who were 6 years old or younger. These researchers discovered several gender differences in outcomes associated with overnight visits. Notably, young girls often benefitted from having access to multiple caretakers as well as overnight visits, but the findings were not mirrored among young boys. Echoing these findings, Clarke-Stewart et al. (2000) also found young boys who have experienced their parents' divorce exhibited poorer cognitive performance than young girls. Young boys and girls often manifest behavioral reactions to stressful situations in divergent ways, and this also rings true when applied to divorce. Based on findings from qualitative studies, it seems that young boys are also more likely to manifest anger and aggression regarding their parents' divorce including temper tantrums and emotional outbursts as well as anger or rejection toward their mothers relative to young girls (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Taken together, these findings suggest young boys may face more difficulty during and following their parents' divorce relative to girls.

Other Issues Affecting Young Children

There are other issues that young children who experience their parents' divorce might encounter, including economic difficulties as well as residential moves. Not only do children often lose the same type and amount of access to one parental figure following the parents' divorce, but many children also encounter residential moves after their parents split. Very young children seem to be most susceptible to residential moves following parents' divorce. More specifically, about 21.4% of children aged 1 to 4 experienced residential moves, higher than any other age group of children (Schachter, 2004). Residential moves present new difficulties for young children as moving often creates more physical distance between the noncustodial parent and the child with a recent study showing the median distance between children and the noncustodial parent was 160 miles while the mean distance was close to 400 miles (Austin, 2008; Schachter, 2004, p. 10). In addition, residential moves can be stressful for children through changing the social environment with which they have become accustomed (Austin, 2008).

Many families experience financial difficulties in the wake of a divorce. Based on a Census report, over a quarter of children are in poverty following divorce (United States Census Bureau, 2011). It is worth noting while divorce is a source of economic stress for many families, single parents tend to endure more economic strain than two-parent households. For instance, although custodial parents are paid child support by the noncustodial parent, the amount paid is often not close to equivalent to the cost of raising a child (Lamb et al., 1997). Financial challenges faced by divorced families are often not only experienced by the parent. Even very young children often intuit their parent's stress and face poorer adjustment in households reporting more financial strain (Lucas et al., 2013).

Resiliency of Young Children

Despite potential issues for young children who have experienced their parents' divorce, researchers suggest very young children who experience their parents' divorce are quite resilient (Lamb and Kelly, 2009). Many studies examine very young children during a divorce or immediately after; however, there are some scholars that have found children of divorce do not end up having long-term problems (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Following divorce, many families tend to adjust and eventually stabilize with time. This is supported through evidence derived from research on children's adjustment to their parents' divorce; about 75% to 80% of young children whose parents' divorce experience no major long-term psychological problems (Lamb and Kelly, 2009). Even though children of divorce experience stressors and risk that children from intact families do not encounter, children who had parents' divorce earlier in life are largely indistinguishable from their peers. In fact, a couple of studies found children who have parents with a high conflict relationship can benefit from their parents' divorce (Hetherington et al., 1998).

There are some family characteristics that lend themselves to young children's resiliency after a divorce. A low conflict relationship between parents can help children cope with the divorce (Lamb et al., 1997; Kelly, 2003a,b). Research has shown that even if the relationship is characterized as moderate to high in conflict, if parents are able to shield children from the conflict, children seem to adjust better (Kelly, 2003a,b). Parents (both residential and nonresidential) who continue to provide financially for children and manifest healthier psychological adjustment often have children who adjust better to divorce as well (Lamb et al., 1997). Moreover, traits of the custodial and noncustodial parent aid children's adjustment to a divorce. Custodial parent—often mothers—who are warm, practice authoritative discipline and parenting, as well as act encouraging and monitor their children may also aid in their children's adjustment. Active involvement and authoritative parenting from a noncustodial parent—typically fathers—can help children acclimate to the parents' divorce, too (Kelly and Emery, 2003b).

Researchers have found that simply speaking with children about the divorce can help them adjust to their parents' separation in the short term. Oftentimes, parents assume children are too young to fully understand their parents' divorce, and given this logic, it is best not to talk about it in depth with children (Lieberman, 1993). However, children often have simple, but correct understandings of their parents' divorce. Without their parents' help in navigating their reactions and expectations of the divorce process, children often fill in the blanks by developing their own fantasies about what their parents' divorce means. When parents speak to

children about the divorce, they can explain the divorce to their children and also reassure them that the parents will continue to love and protect them no matter what happens (Lieberman, 1993). In one example from Alicia Lieberman's research described in *The Emotional Life of the Toddler*, one mother felt awkward at first when she began speaking with her 24-month-old daughter about her divorce from the child's father, but when she saw it was helping her daughter's adjustment she became increasingly sure of herself and the decision to discuss the separation with her young child.

Despite findings supporting the resilience of young children in the face of parents' divorce, there are some researchers who maintain divorce creates problems for children that continue to ripple throughout their entire lives (Wallerstein, 2005; Wallerstein et al., 2000). Wallerstein et al. (2000) conducted a 25-year longitudinal study where they interviewed young children who experienced their parents' divorce, following them all the way into their adult years. They found that even into adulthood, many children were anxious, depressed, and fearful of commitment and potential relationship failure. Wallerstein et al. also found over half of these children had tried marriage, but without successful modeling, their marriages often dissolved. Moreover, many of these children of divorce in Wallerstein et al. study choose to forego having children of their own, citing their experience of their parents' divorce as a child as a main reason to remain childless. Despite the value of Wallerstein et al. study, researchers wonder if the results gleaned from this sample were overstated. More specifically, the sample used by Wallerstein et al. was not randomly selected, and thus the findings cannot be generalized to the population at large (Amato, 2003).

Even though researchers have produced conflicting arguments about the reach of divorce into adolescence and adulthood, practical steps can be taken to promote children's resilience following parents' divorce (Lamb and Kelly, 2009; McIntosh and Tan, 2017). For instance, some researchers have concluded education programs geared toward divorcing parents that can help educate them about the adverse effects of divorce on their young children as well as the difficulties that children may face. Types of interventions that have been particularly effective include skills-based training that seeks to enhance communication and reduce conflict as well as role-play-based experiences (Lamb and Kelly, 2009).

Conclusions and Future Directions

Many young children will experience the end of their parents' marriage. Both during the divorce proceedings and after, young children face several divorce-related consequences. Very young children often lack the coping skills to fully adjust to or understand their parents' divorce. Divorce almost always involves the loss of one parent from the child's daily routine, which may not only create worry for the child but may also threaten children's attachment to their parents. Additionally, both before and after divorce, children may be exposed to conflict between parents, which can be associated with adverse outcomes for children in some cases. Further, many parents face enormous emotional stress following a divorce, and thus, as a result, children often experience compromised parenting following a divorce. This may include less affection, support, and attention, as well as the tendency for some custodial parents to act more coercively when parenting their children. Despite their young age, children may go through role reversal where they assume the responsibility of the parental figure, offering comfort to their distressed mother or father. Young children often adjust to a host of new circumstances, such as new custody arrangements and potential overnight visits with the noncustodial parent as well as changes in their economic circumstances and residences. Even though divorce brings about numerous challenges that young children must encounter, a growing body of research suggests children are often quite resilient after divorce. Although initially compromising, children seem to adapt to divorce over time and tend to have similar outcomes as their peers from intact families years later.

Although recent scholarly work supports the resilience of children, there is still evidence warning of the adverse effects of divorce on young children that can sometimes extend into adulthood. To resolve these conflicting conclusions, more research is needed to fully understand the effect of divorce on very young children to inform ways through that parents and practitioners can work toward promoting children's adjustment, resilience, and overall well-being. There are several areas for continued research on the effects of divorce on very young children. First, research has examined gender differences in the experiences of divorce for young children as well as how socioeconomic status plays a role in the adjustment of young children to parents' divorce, but has neglected to study racial/ethnic variation in children's reaction and adjustment to divorce. This is likely an important avenue of research especially as scholars have noted divergent patterns in marriage and divorce, especially between Blacks and Whites. Specifically, Blacks are less likely to marry than their White counterparts, and when they do marry, those marriages are more likely to end in divorce (Raley et al., 2015). Moreover, Bulanda and Brown (2007) note that the lower quality of marriages among Blacks relative to Whites is associated with a greater risk of divorce for Blacks than Whites. These two trends may contribute to racial/ethnic differences in the experience of divorce by very young children.

Second, due to data constraints, some studies are only able to look at children's outcomes after they have had time to adjust to divorce. However, divorce is a process that takes time. Thus, studies that examine children prior to divorce, immediately following divorce, and at other time intervals after the parents' divorce would add to our knowledge of the details regarding children's adjustment processes. In a similar vein, although researchers have studied children's resiliency after divorce and its correlates, more work should be done to specifically identify programs, policies, as well as parent or child characteristics that promote adjustment and resiliency in the face of a parental separation. Divorce is often a stressful event for children, but recent research suggests divorce need not always be so detrimental for children. Thus, it is imperative to place an emphasis on research that continues to investigate ways to support the well-being of very young children.

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