ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Divorce and Separation: Commentary on Kline Pruett and McIntosh

Laura Backen Jones, PhD

Oregon Research Institute, USA

November 2011

Introduction

The dilemma

Kline Pruett and McIntosh describe the dilemma faced today by family courts in appropriately and sensitively supporting each parent's role in their child's life. At this time, no developmentally-sensitive standards exist to guide parents and professionals in making decisions about shared parenting time. Naturally, we look to the current body of evidence to help guide us in creating standards. Unfortunately, as the authors point out, there is a scarcity of research in this area. In this vacuum, considerable confusion exists about the optimal structure and nature of parenting time arrangements. McIntosh's call for a strong developmental framework for making decisions in matters of separation and divorce is laudable. It will be a number of years before we can lean on specific developmental studies to support specific parenting time decisions. In the absence of this evidence, we can look to developmental science and studies of parenting during separation and divorce to help guide us. However, we must be very cautious in drawing specific conclusions about parenting time from this more general research literature.

©2011-2026 ABILIO | DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

Research and Conclusions

Principles of healthy development

Children's development of fundamental competencies in the early years lays the foundation for all of their future adjustment.[1,2] And, as McIntosh points out, the remarkable growth that occurs during the early years brings with it great vulnerability to harm.[2] Parents play a key role in setting up this early development.[3] Children's mastery of important social, emotional and cognitive developmental tasks is influenced by the quality of parenting that the child receives on a daily basis. Parent-child interactions consistently characterized by warm, responsive, engaged and reciprocal exchanges between parent and child form the basis of the child's ability to control and direct behaviour, relate to and cooperate with other people, regulate emotions, communicate and form concepts about the world.[4,5,6] These early competencies set the stage for future developmental trajectories. Parents' knowledge, self-efficacy, personal adjustment and social support affect children's development to the extent that they influence specific parenting practices on a daily basis. These same parenting qualities remain significant as children grow into adulthood. Additional important parenting skills include supporting and encouraging children's growing autonomy and independence, while also monitoring their activities; all easier within the context of a strong parent-child relationship.

The important role of parents during separation and divorce

Evidence gained from studies of separating and divorcing parents suggest that divorce's negative impact on children's adjustment is mediated through problems in parenting. Daily stressors for divorced parents can accumulate and compromise their parenting. Healthy child adjustment depends in part on the parents' ability to use resources in their environment to manage these stressors.[7] Parenting in the first year following divorce is marked by increased irritability and coercion, diminished communication, affection, consistency, control and supervision;[8,9,10] and a decrease in positive parent-child interactions.[9] Compared with mothers in intact families, single mothers use more harsh discipline[8] are more critical of their children, use more commands when interacting with their children[11] and tend to show less affection.[8] Inconsistent discipline and harsh parenting can precipitate coercion in the parent-child relationship, a significant contributor to the development of children's antisocial behaviour.[12]

While disruptions in family functioning are a significant risk factor in children's development, healthy family functioning is a major protective factor.[13] Parents who parent authoritatively, are responsive to their children's needs, and maintain consistent and reasonable control, provide a buffer to the stress of divorce.[8,13,14]

Decisions about parenting time arrangements should take these bodies of evidence into account. Situations that support optimal expression of parenting qualities and maximal parental engagement are of particular importance.

Creating developmentally-sensitive parenting arrangements

Kline Pruett's suggestion that absolute amount of parenting time should be emphasized less than a plan that allows for a schedule that enables both parents to feel engaged and responsible is an excellent one. Professionals working with separating and divorcing parents can look for arrangements that optimize predictability in daily routines and warm, responsive parenting. Kline Pruett and McIntosh point to some areas to target in separation and divorce process, including the importance of building strong relationships. However, as described earlier, the disorganization and stress that comes with separation and divorce can make it difficult for parents to facilitate and maintain these relationships. Parents need tools and information to help them foster warm supportive relationships with their children. They also need support in negotiating contextual variables that impinge on their ability to offer optimal parenting, such as stress; and they need training in co-parenting skills that strengthen the co-parent relationship, encourage cooperation, and reduce inter-parental conflict.

Another important recommendation given by Kline Pruett and McIntosh is the importance of supporting frequent access by non-residential parents. Contact with non-custodial parents is typically limited in the short-term following divorce and becomes increasingly limited as time progresses.[15] Twenty-five percent of children have weekly visits with their non-custodial parents; 20% of children have no contact with their non-custodial parents or see them only a few times each year.[16] Currently, the majority of non-custodial parents are fathers. Kline Pruett noted that fathers make unique contributions to healthy child development and that parenting plans should be designed to support their involvement during the separation and divorce process. More frequent contact with the child is associated with more supportive perceptions of co-parenting for nonresident fathers.[17] A meta-analysis by Amato & Keith[18] suggested that children's close relationship with their fathers is linked to healthy development. In a study of single parent intact

families, children's perceptions of the degree of intimacy they have with their fathers explained more variance in their emotional, social and academic functioning than any other dyadic relationship.[19] In a longitudinal study of 341 children of divorce, a good relationship with the custodial parent predicted fewer child behavior problems, better communication skills, better grades and higher overall ratings of adjustment.[20] Active involvement from both parents can have benefits for children and the residential parent.

Little information to draw from

Many parents and practitioners seek information about children's attachment security to help them make informed decisions about shared parenting time. McIntosh asserts that the fundamental question is whether the proposed parenting plan and resultant activities will contribute to or detract from the emotional security of the infant. This is a good standard, and we can pull from the existing developmental literature to help guide us, but evidence to date is not sufficient to answer this question. As noted above, we know from the developmental research literature that consistent, warm and contingent care is important. However, attachment is a complex and flexible lifetime process that is affected by a wide array of variables, including parenting behaviour, family factors, co-parenting relationships, contextual factors, and individual child and parent characteristics. Recent studies of parenting time arrangements in separation and divorce have introduced some possibilities to explore, yet as McIntosh points out, the research base in this area is in its infancy. Much of the current separation/divorce research is based on small, non-representative samples and the majority of studies rely on mothers' self-report. Studies of co-parenting from the father's perspective are scarce. Very little research is available to inform us about the experience of separation/divorce among never-married parents and among racially/ethnically diverse and underserved populations. Moreover, much of the research discussed relies on measures of attachment status. Attachment has become an increasingly important construct to researchers and practitioners.[21] Yet research in attachment is still fraught with uncertainty with regard to validity of construct itself and methods of measurement.

Need for reliable and valid measures of attachment

If we are to rely on information gained about attachment, more valid and reliable measures are needed.[22] Attachment is assessed in a variety of ways, both observational and self-report. However these differing methods sometimes produce differing results. Studies that have applied

different methods for classifying attachment on the same sample, found significant differences in attachment classification among the different methods used.[23] Of equal concern, the construct of attachment needs to be strengthened. Some researchers have suggested that, in observational studies of children's attachment, such as the Strange Situation[24] temperamental variability among infants could influence interpretation of attachment status. For example, an infant prone to distress might experience distress at separation and then continue to show distress upon the reunion with mother and thus more likely is assigned to an insecure attachment status than a less distress-prone infant.[25] An alternative measure, the Q-sort,[26] suffers from the same potential for bias as other standard self-report measures. In addition, questions have been raised about when critical attachments are formed and whether primary attachments can be formed with more than one caregiver. Thus there is a need to sharpen the construct and strengthen methods used to measure it.

Implications

For many parents, the separation and divorce transition is marked by disorganization, stress and conflict. Parents and professionals want to do what is best for children, and decisions regarding parenting time can have important implications for children's long-term development. Current research to guide these decisions is limited. Because there are so many factors at play, there is no one single best course of action. Kline Pruett and McIntosh outline some helpful considerations. Perhaps the most significant factor in this decision will be choosing an arrangement that preserves and strengthens the child's relationship with both parents. As Kline Pruett so astutely observes, individual and family considerations should take precedence over any one-size-fits-all solution.

References

1. Ramey, C.T. & Ramey, S.L. (1998). Early intervention and early experience. *American Psychologist*, 53(2), 109-120.
2. Thompson, R.A. (2001). Development in the first years of life. *The Future of Children*, 11(1), 21-34.
3. Bornstein, M.H. (2002). Parenting infants. In M.H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting, Vol. 1: children and parenting* (2nd edition, pp. 3-43). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
4. Campbell, S.B. (1997). Behavior problems in preschool children: Developmental and family issues. *Advances in Clinical Child Psychology*, 19, 1-26.
5. Shaw, D.S., Owens, E.B., Giovannelli, J., & Winslow, E.B. (2001). Infant and toddler pathways leading to early externalizing disorders. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40, 36-43.
6. Stams, G.J.J.M, Juffer, F., & van-IJzendoorn, M.H. (2002). Maternal sensitivity, infant attachment, and temperament in early childhood predict adjustment in middle childhood: The case of adopted children and their biologically unrelated parents. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 38 (5), 806-821.

©2011-2026 ABILIO | DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

7. Simons, R. L., & Johnson, C. (1996). Divorced and intact families: Differences in stress, interaction, and child outcomes. In R. L. Simons (Eds.). *Understanding families, Volume 5*. (pp. 81-93). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
8. Hetherington, E. M. (2003). Social support and the adjustment of children in divorced and remarried families. *Childhood*, 10(2), 217-236.
9. Forehand, R., Thomas, A. M., Wierson, M., & Brody, G. (1990). Role of maternal functioning and parenting skills in adolescent functioning following parental divorce. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 99(3), 278-283.
10. Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1979). Play and social interaction in children following divorce. *Journal of Social Issues*, 35, 26-49.
11. Webster-Stratton, C. (1989). The relationship of marital support, conflict, and divorce to parent perceptions, behaviors, and childhood conduct problems. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 51(2), 417-430.
12. Dishion, T. J. (1995). The development and ecology of antisocial behavior. In D.Cicchetti and D.J. Cohen (Eds.).Wiley series on personality processes: *Developmental psychopathology, Vol. 2: Risk, disorder and adaptation*. (pp.421-471) New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.
13. Kelly, J. B., & Emery, R. E. (2003). Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations*, 52, 352-362.
14. Lengua, L. J., Wolchik, S. A., Sandler, I. N., & West, S. G. (2000). The additive and interactive effects of parenting and temperament in predicting problems of children of divorce. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 29(2), 232-244.
15. Braver, S. L. & Griffin, W. A. (2000). Engaging fathers in the post-divorce family. Marriage and Family Review, 29(4), 247-267. Campbell, S.B. (1997). Behavior problems in preschool children: Developmental and family issues. *Advances in Clinical Child Psychology*, 19, 1-26.
16. Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*,62(4), 1269-1287.
17. Bronte-Tinkew J, Horowitz A. (2010). Factors associated with unmarried, Nonresident fathers' perceptions of their coparenting. *Journal of Family Issues*, 31, 31-65.
18. Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110(1), 26-46.
19. Guttman, J. & Rosenberg, M. (2003). Emotional intimacy and children's adjustment: A comparison between single-parent divorced and intact families. *Educational Psychology*, 23, 457-472.
20. Guidubaldi, J., Cleminshaw, H., Perry, J., Nastasi, B. K., & Lightel, J. (1986). The role of selected family environment factors in children's post-divorce adjustment. *Family Relations*, 35(1), 141-151.
21. Byrne, J.G., O'Connor, T.G., Marvin R.S., Whelan W.F. (2005). Practitioner review: the contribution of attachment theory to child custody assessments. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46(2), 115-27.
22. Crittenden, P., Hartl Claussen, A., & Kozlowska, K. (2007). *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 28 (2), 78-87.
23. Rauh, H., Ziegenhain, U., Müller, B. & Wijnroks, L., (2000). Stability and Change in Mother–infant Attachment in the Second Year of Life: Relations to Parenting Quality and Varying Degrees of Daycare Experience. In P. M. Crittenden & A. H. Claussen (Eds.), *The Organization of Attachment Relationships: Maturation, Context and Culture*. London, Cambridge University Press.
24. Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M., Waters, E. & Wall, S., 1978. *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbaum.
25. Rothbart, M. K., & Bates, J. E. (1998). Temperament. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 105-176). New York: Wiley.

Temperament-Part 1 (pgs. 105-139) & Temperament-Part 2 (pgs. 140-176).

26. Waters, E., & Deane, K. E. (1985). Defining and assessing individual differences in attachment relationships: Q-methodology and the organization of behavior in infancy and early childhood. In I. Bretherton & E. Waters (Eds.), Growing points of attachment theory and research. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 50(1-2, Serial No. 209), 41-65.