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How Parents Can Help Children Cope With Separation/Divorce

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Introduction

Each year, millions of children around the globe face family disruption, and in many countries, divorce rates are rising.[1] Children experience divorce deeply and personally, and the potential for negative short- and long-term consequences is considerably higher for children whose parents divorce than for those from non-divorced families. While parental divorce poses significant risks for children that warrant concern, research shows that these outcomes are not the same for all children, nor are they inevitable. There are many factors that can reduce risks and promote children's resilience.[2,3]

The three biggest factors that impact children's well-being during and after their parents' separation or divorce are potentially within parents' control: the degree and duration of hostile conflict, the quality of parenting provided over time, and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Underlying these, of course, are parents' own well-being and ability to function effectively. By learning how to manage their conflict, parent effectively, and nurture warm and

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loving relationships with their children, parents can have a powerful, positive effect on their children, even as they undergo multiple difficult changes in their own lives.

Subject

The importance of parents' roles and skills in helping their children to cope with divorce cannot be overemphasized because it is primarily parents who can mitigate or reverse potentially serious negative outcomes for their children.

The impact of divorce on children is well documented. Most react to their parents' divorce with painful emotions including sadness, confusion, fears of abandonment, guilt, misconceptions, anger, loyalty conflicts, worry and grief. Many children experience feelings of loss when one parent moves out of the family residence, when a beloved pet is left behind, or even when they are with one parent and miss the other.[2] In situations of intense conflict and domestic violence, children may have a sense of relief. Their reactions may vary depending on their ages, but nearly all children share a universal worry: "What's going to happen to me?"

In addition to revealing these difficult emotions, research also has shown that negative short-term consequences for children after divorce include decreased academic achievement, poor psychological adjustment, social and emotional adjustment, and negative self concept.[4] Their physical health is compromised, too, especially in situations of high conflict.[5] Meta analyses show a heightened risk of long-term consequences for a significant minority of children into adulthood, including a poorer sense of well-being, lower socioeconomic status, poorer physical health, weaker emotional ties to their own parents – particularly their fathers – and a higher risk of divorce in their own marriage.[6]

Problems

Parenting through divorce presents particular challenges because it is often difficult for parents to know what their children really think or feel about the changes in their family. For a variety of reasons, most children talk very little about their parents' divorce and their own complex feelings surrounding it.[2]

Another challenge for most parents is to focus on achieving parenting goals when the multiple changes in their lives that precede and follow divorce cause enormous stress – indeed, divorce is second only to death of a spouse as a major source of stress.[7] In addition, for many parents,

grieving the end of their marriage and managing their own painful, raw emotions make it doubly difficult to focus on their children's expanded needs.

For some parents, continuing their hostility is a problem with enormous potential to damage their children. Unfortunately, this is sometimes fueled by adversarial legal procedures that focus on blame and retribution rather than on children's best interests. Ongoing conflict also erodes effective parenting, which in turn contributes to children's emotional and behavioural problems.

Despite these difficulties, many parents find ways to make their children's needs a top priority and learn to parent effectively so that their children can focus on the priorities of childhood – learning and growing – rather than on being their parents' caretakers or mediators.

Research Context

There are several valuable areas of research that contribute heavily to our understanding of how parents can help their children cope with separation and divorce. At the very heart of the issue is research on the risk and protective factors that put children in jeopardy of negative short- and long-term consequences or provide supportive buffers that help them thrive. Other fruitful studies focus on which strategies are most effective in managing conflict and which parenting skills contribute to children's growth and development. Studies of preventive intervention programs have yielded abundant data, not only about effectiveness of program models, but also in increased understanding of how children experience their parents' divorce, conflict and parenting processes. Recent advances in neuroscience and preventive interventions also contribute to approaches to parenting that are developmentally appropriate and foster children's resilience.[8,9]

Key Research Questions

Among the many areas of research that contribute to understanding how to parent effectively through divorce, these are some of the most critical questions:

1. What are the factors that put children at risk for negative short- and long-term outcomes, and what are those that help to protect them?
2. What constitutes effective parenting that helps children to thrive in the wake of divorce or separation?

3. Along with effective parenting, how can parents foster a warm, strong parent-child relationship?
4. How can parents learn to understand their children's hidden feelings and concerns?
5. How can parents best protect their children from damaging conflict?
6. What do evidence-based interventions for children and parents bring to our understanding of how parents can help children cope with divorce?

Recent Research Results

Much can be done to prevent long-term problems and foster resilience in children. Research provides a foundation that enables us to refine our understanding of exactly what parents can do and what guidance professionals can offer them.

1) Risk and protective factors. While individual and extra-familial factors are also important, these are the family factors that have been identified through research.[2]

Family Risk Factors

- Ongoing conflict between parents, especially when it is abusive and/or focused on children
- Diminished capacity to parent or poor parenting
- Lack of monitoring children's activities
- Multiple family transitions (divorce, remarriage, another divorce)
- Parent mental health problems
- Chaotic, unstable household
- Impaired parent-child relationships
- Economic decline

Family Protective Factors

- Protection from conflict between parents
- Cooperative parenting (except in situations of domestic violence or abuse)
- Healthy relationships between child and parents
- Parents' psychological well being
- Quality, authoritative parenting
- Household structure and stability
- Supportive sibling relationships
- Economic stability
- Supportive relationships with extended family

Evidence-based preventive interventions, such as Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and similar models,[10] have been shown to strengthen these protective factors and provide support and coping skills to enhance children's capacity to cope with family changes and promote better outcomes for children.[11]

2) Effective parenting. Clinical trials of an intervention for parents called the New Beginnings Project[12,13] found that quality parenting is a powerful protective factor and a modifiable source of childhood resilience. High quality is defined as a combination of warmth and nurturance with effective discipline and limit setting. This kind of parenting is shown consistently to relate to better outcomes for children.

One of the most important ways parents can reassure their children in these times of great uncertainty is to affirm their abiding love for them. Although at various developmental stages children may appear not to need this reassurance or even to reject expressions of strong emotion, they all benefit from frequent, genuine manifestations of their parents' love. In addition to words, parents can show their affection through physical gestures – snuggling with young children and bear hugs for older ones, for example – and through making the time to simply be with them. Creating routines of shared activities and being empathetic and responsive to verbal and nonverbal clues about children's feelings all help to show warmth and nurturance.

The other side of effective parenting is discipline, characterized by clear guidelines, limits and age-appropriate expectations. Effective discipline helps children by increasing the predictability of the environment and their own sense of control at the same time that it reduces coercive interactions between parent and child and prevents involvement with deviant peers. It requires parents not only to establish clear and appropriate rules and limits, but also to monitor their children's behaviour and enforce the rules.[2] Children need to understand that all feelings are ok, but that not all behaviours are ok.

A part of all these effective parenting practices is establishing open communication in which parents listen respectfully, acknowledge their children's feelings and stay connected. Family routines such as meals and work and play practices strengthen the structure that provides stability, fosters communication and reinforces expectations.[2]

There are numerous other aspects of effective parenting before, during and after divorce. Among them, parents can help children develop their own abilities (like empathy, problem solving and

coping skills), learn what is solvable and what is not, and gain an accurate understanding of marital conflict and divorce as their parents' problem, and not one that children cause or can fix. Parents can also influence external factors that impact children during the changes that occur with divorce by developing a support network, seeking legal procedures that focus on children's developmental needs, and seeking professional help and preventive services for themselves and their children.

3) Parent-child relationships. The quality of parent-child relationships is an important protective factor that predicts the long-term impact of divorce on children. Unfortunately, national surveys show a significant deterioration in relationships between children and their parents, especially fathers, over time.[14] The encouraging and empowering news is that there are many ways that parents can strengthen their relationships with their children.

Among these are quality parenting practices including committing to one-on-one time with each child, affirming their strengths, reinforcing positive behaviours, listening without judgment, accepting ambivalent feelings, reflecting understanding, connecting words to feelings, allowing silence and giving children space to not talk. All of these help children and parents alike to understand each other and deepen their connection.

Developing strong parent-child relationships depends on communicating well and frequently with children, especially listening to their feelings and responding with empathy. Research shows that healthy families regularly incorporate genuine expressions of appreciation and encouragement for one another. Taking the time to notice and express appreciation for acts of kindness or consideration creates goodwill that fuels hope, optimism and loving relationships.

Establishing new family rituals and routines is another way to strengthen the bonds between parents and children. These convey the message that we are still a family – a very reassuring message for children. Parents can also strengthen their bonds with their children at the same time that they are helping them to become resilient by conveying a positive sense of hope about the future and reinforcing a message of enduring, unconditional love for their children.

Another important way that parents can strengthen their relationships with their children is to avoid rushing into new relationships. While it is understandable that divorcing parents long to have a loving new partner, entering such relationships too quickly can come at great cost to their children. The issues are compounded when the new partner also has children. Many children

express an enormous sense of loss, and they may fear being replaced when their parent is suddenly focused on a new love. Their parents' new relationships inevitably bring still more profound changes into the lives of children who are already buffeted from those related to their parents' divorce. Taking new relationships slowly and allowing children time to adjust to the divorce before adding more changes benefits children and new relationships.

4) Understanding children's hidden emotions. The 2009 Stress in America survey conducted by the American Psychological Association reveals the disconnect between what children experience and what parents think they experience. One of their key findings was that "Parents and young people differ on several key measures related to how much stress or worry young people experience, what is causing the stress or worry and how their level of stress or worry has changed over the last year. For example, fewer parents than children believe that children's stress has increased in the past year, there is a disconnect between what parents believe causes stress in children and what children consider worrisome, and parents appear to be unaware of the degree to which children report physical symptoms like headaches and difficulties sleeping that are often associated with stress."[15]

One of the ways parents can understand their children's emotions is by helping them learn to identify and name their feelings. Recent neuroscience research has shown that naming emotions calms the amygdala, increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, and helps develop neural pathways for managing strong emotion, problem solving, rational thinking and good judgment.[16,17]

Parents are better able to understand their children's emotions when they make time for one-on-one interaction, listen empathetically, notice children's non-verbal signals and reflect their own understanding of what their children are feeling. Children often need time and space to share their hidden feelings, and they are most likely to do so if they believe their parents will listen to them openly and without judgment.

5) Managing conflict and strong emotions. How parents manage their own strong emotions and go about ending their marriage and creating a new way of life makes a major difference for their children. It is imperative that parents learn how to control conflict that is verbally or physically hostile, frequent, intense or focused on the children – the kinds of conflict that are most damaging to children. Exposure to domestic violence and abusive behaviour is especially toxic to children. Responsible parenting includes respectful behaviour toward the child's other parent.

There are a number of techniques that parents can use to protect children from the toxic effects of intense conflict. Among these are reframing their relationship into a respectful, business-like partnership for parenting. In so doing, parents agree to set clear boundaries and ground rules for interaction that include respecting the child's right to a healthy relationship with both parents, when it is safe to do so, establishing and abiding by an agenda for all meetings to discuss children and other matters pertaining to the divorce, not using the children as messengers or informants, and keeping children's transitions between parents safe and respectful. In high-conflict situations, parallel parenting in which parents have limited contact is often preferable to co-parenting in which parents interact and communicate frequently.[2]

Mediation has been shown to be an effective way to resolve conflict as an alternative to litigation in divorce proceedings. A follow up study found that 12 years after mediation, parents were better able to co-parent and contain and resolve conflict than a litigation control group. Moreover, nonresidential parents in mediation stayed more actively involved in their children's lives than those who litigated.[18]

For parents who are having great difficulty sharing parenting responsibilities without becoming embroiled in conflict, legal and mental health professionals may help to create detailed parenting plans that limit parents' interactions with each other and structure transitions with their children at a neutral site. Parenting plans are most effective when they are tailored to the children's developmental needs as well as parents' commitments and schedules, and are modified as parents are attuned to the child's changing needs.

6) Evidence-based interventions. Preventive interventions have been shown to have a positive impact on children and parenting. Programs for children are useful to researchers because they yield solid information about children's feelings and experiences at the same time that they offer multiple benefits for children. Programs such as the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) provide group support and skills that help children by reducing their sense of isolation, clarifying misconceptions, and teaching them how to communicate better with their parents, problem solve and develop other important life skills that are particularly important in times of uncertainty and change.[19] CODIP has shown multiple benefits to children of various ages and cultural backgrounds in their social and emotional adjustment, school engagement and reduced anxiety and complaints of physical symptoms.[20]

The benefits of this child-focused program are being replicated in countries worldwide. CODIP has been successfully translated, adapted and disseminated for children in the Netherlands in a program called Dappere Dinos. Using creative approaches such as puppet play and therapeutic games, this program was tailored to the cultural and developmental characteristics of young Dutch children and has shown positive results in replication studies.[21] Similar themes and divorce related concerns emerged for children in the US program and the Netherlands. These converging emotional responses underscore the universality of children's worries about themselves and their families, stress over parental discord and concerns that they may have caused the divorce or parents' conflicts. Results of the program in both countries show that children learned social and emotional skills to help them disengage from parent conflict, and correct misconceptions. Children in both programs report that the group was a safe space for them to share feelings and provided the supportive comfort of knowing they were not alone with their experiences.[22] Interventions for parents, including parent education programs, provide critical information for parents. They help parents understand that what they do matters greatly in shaping outcomes for children after divorce and encourage them to reframe their relationship into a respectful, business-like partnership for parenting. These sessions provide positive, empowering messages to parents, emphasizing what they can control, educating them about the benefits of containing conflict and collaborating when it is safe to do so, and teaching the powerful protective practices of quality parenting, with warmth and limits.

Research on in-depth interventions for parents shows better mental health outcomes for children six years after parents participated, compared with those whose parents did not participate in such a program.[23] Recent research demonstrates long-term benefits of the intervention on mental health outcomes in emerging adulthood.[24]

Beyond these six research areas, much has been established about how parents can help children weather divorce and the series of changes that it initiates – more than can be included in a brief article. These are among the additional areas that have a positive impact on children:

- Preparing children for changes by giving them accurate, age-appropriate information helps children to feel secure by addressing that all-important question: "What's going to happen to me?" Having specific information about what will change and what will remain the same also helps to reduce their worry about parents, their siblings, their pets, their friends and their extended family. As an advisor to the Sesame Street Resilience Project, we developed materials for parents and caregivers to help children understand divorce and family

changes. These materials are free and available at sesamestreet.org/divorce.

- Reducing the number of changes in children's lives is another important step parents can take to protect them in the aftermath of separation or divorce. It's easiest for children if they can maintain important relationships, go to the same school and activities, and keep their pets. Maintaining structures and routines that are least disruptive to children is important, too, and often their needs change over time. Parents need to stay attuned to how the transitions between them are impacting their children and make adjustments as needed to prevent giving children the sense that their lives are out of control.
- Underlying all that parents do to take care of their children is the important – and often difficult – task of taking good care of themselves. Stress often brings on a number of unwelcome changes in sleep, appetite and physical tension. These are generally compounded by additional pressures on the schedule created by sharing the parenting responsibilities from two different homes and the financial impact of splitting the same income to cover additional expenses. Parents need to make it a priority to find healthy ways to manage and reduce stress and take care of themselves so they can parent in the best way possible.

Research Gaps

More research is needed on the subject of parenting plans. In particular, it is important to learn how to address the needs of children of different ages, especially infants and preschool children, most effectively. Whether it is best for infants and toddlers to spend all their nights in one home or to share the overnight time between homes and parents is yet to be decisively determined. Ideally, parenting plans support healthy growth and development when they can be tailored over time to meet children's changing needs.[25]

Likewise, more research is needed to develop and evaluate effective interventions for parents entrenched in high conflict and appropriate parenting plans for children in high-conflict families. Studies designed to understand what types of interventions are most effective and tailored to specific populations and problems will certainly add important knowledge.

Conclusions

Since divorce is so prevalent worldwide, it is critical to understand its impact on children and to establish ways to protect them from its potentially damaging effects. Fortunately, a sizeable body

of research in multiple areas surrounding divorce and parenting has already yielded considerable information. We know how divorce impacts children in the short and long term. We know the major risk and protective factors that predict how they fare. We know specifically what factors within parents' control have the greatest impact on children, and what specific behaviours will have a lasting positive effect on them. Effective parenting encompassing both warmth and discipline, developing positive parent-child relationships and managing conflict are the three most important factors in protecting children. Developing the ability to listen for children's hidden emotions and help them articulate their feelings underlie parents' ability to parent effectively and develop strong relationships. Evidence-based interventions for children and programs that strengthen parenting skills are helping families at the same time that they are yielding valuable research.

Many children have benefitted from their parents' enduring love and determination to put them first – ahead of their own heartache and sleepless nights. But big challenges remain: How can we help all children come through family changes with resilience and healthy adjustment? How can we reach all the parents and help them develop the focus, skills and determination to give their children the best chance at leading fulfilling lives?

Implications for parents, services, and policy

Parents

The implications of this research provide an empowering message to parents: There is much you can do to foster better outcomes for your children. The risks are real, but so is the potential to help them grow through the changes, to become resilient, and to feel completely secure in knowing they are loved – and will be loved for a lifetime.

Services

Parents need this valuable information on ways to reduce the negative impact of divorce on their children early in the process of a breakup.[26] One of the challenges is how to reach parents with parent education programs, legal procedures and other preventive outreach before problems become entrenched. A triage system of support is needed in every community that includes parent education, alternative dispute resolution methods and preventive interventions for parents and children. Many of these services are cut due to financial constraints, yet research shows that early outreach programs are cost effective and help to prevent more complex

problems for parents and children. We need to find effective and cost-effective ways to widely disseminate evidence-based interventions so that they are easily accessed and available to all parents and their children.

Policy

The biggest implication for policy is to reframe the legal divorce process when children are involved so that it incorporates research on what is genuinely best for children. Decisions about custody and parenting time must be made in the context of child development research, not a uniform default toward any one particular schedule. Increasing the availability of alternatives such as collaborative law and mediation and providing evidence-based information for judges, legal and mental health professionals, and finding ways to structure legal proceedings to protect children are all changes that will benefit children and ultimately, the society they inherit and shape as adults.

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