

# *THE IMPACT OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FAMILY CHANGE ON CHILD OUTCOMES: A PERSONAL READING OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE*

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## **Abstract**

The paper provides a brief overview of the research literature on the impacts of family structure and family change on child outcomes, with a particular focus on parental separation. It takes as a starting point the existence of pervasive associations between family change and child outcomes and addresses a range of issues that are examined in the research literature. Do family changes primarily have short-term impacts on children, or do they also have more enduring impacts? How does remarriage affect child outcomes? What impact do frequent changes of family structure have on child outcomes? What are the mechanisms that link family structure and family change to child outcomes? How much of the impact is attributable to income changes consequent on parental separation? How much is attributable to the absence of a parent figure? How much is attributable to poorer mental health of lone parents following a parental separation? How much is attributable to the conflict between parents which often accompanies a parental separation? And how much of the association between family change and child outcomes is due to non-causal mechanisms, such as selection effects? The paper will sketch out answers to these questions, as far as these can be determined from the published results of research.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades or so, a significant literature has developed on the impact of family structure and family change on child wellbeing. This literature documents an accumulating body of evidence that children raised in different family contexts display differential patterns of outcomes across a wide range of developmental domains. In particular, children raised in lone-parent families have been found, on average, to do less well across a range of measures of wellbeing than their peers in two-parent families, while parental separation has been found to be associated with an array of adverse outcomes for children. Behind these patterns of associations between family contexts and child outcomes, however, lies a complex web of overlapping and interacting influences, which means that interpreting these results is far from straightforward. It is the aim of this paper to throw some light on the reasons why child outcomes are contingent on family contexts.

The paper provides a brief overview of the research literature in this field. For reasons of space, the paper focuses rather narrowly on the impact of parental separation on child outcomes, although it also briefly examines the impact of remarriage and multiple family transitions on child wellbeing. Within this constrained purview, however, the paper examines a range of issues that are canvassed in the research literature. It takes as a starting point the existence of pervasive associations between family change and child outcomes and considers a range of questions that follow from this: Do family changes such as parental separation primarily have short-term impacts on children, or do they also have more enduring impacts? How does remarriage affect child outcomes? What impacts do frequent changes of family structure have on child outcomes? What are the mechanisms that link family structure and family change to child outcomes? Are there causal connections between family change and child outcomes or are there other reasons for these associations? The paper also examines an exemplar intervention that has been shown to ameliorate the adverse impacts of family change on children's wellbeing.

The literature on these questions is large, complex and growing so fast that it is no longer possible even to keep abreast of new papers produced each year, let alone master everything that has been published in the past two decades. This poses a challenge for a brief survey of the literature such as this. It needs to be said that this paper is not based on a systematic review of the literature in this field. Although I have tried to read widely and without bias, the portion of the literature I have been able to read is necessarily selective – and the portion I can reference in this paper is much more constrained – while the very act of selection has, no doubt, been shaped by my own views and interests. The paper should thus be regarded as no more than a personal reading of the literature.

## PARENTAL SEPARATION AND CHILD OUTCOMES

Parental separation has been reported in the literature as being associated with a wide range of adverse effects on children's wellbeing, both as a short-term consequence of the transition and in the form of more enduring effects that persist into adulthood. Effects reported include adverse impacts on cognitive capacity (Fergusson, Lynskey and Horwood 1994), schooling (Evans et al. 2001), physical health (Dawson 1991), mental and emotional health (Chase-Lansdale et al. 1995), social conduct and behaviour (Morrison and Coiro 1999), peer relations (Demo and Acock 1988), criminal offending (Hanson 1999), cigarette smoking (Ermisch and Francesconi 2001), substance use (Fergusson, Horwood and Lynskey 1994), early departure from home (Mitchell et al. 1989), early-onset sexual behaviour (Ellis et al. 2003) and teenage pregnancy (Woodward et al. 2001).

A further range of impacts in early adulthood and beyond include higher rates of early childbearing (McLanahan and Bumpass 1994), early marriage (Keith and Finlay 1988), marital dissolution (Amato and DeBoer 2001), lone parenthood (McLanahan and Booth 1989), low occupational status (Biblarz and Gottainer 2000), economic hardship (McLanahan and Booth 1989), poor-quality relationships with parents (Aquilino 1994), unhappiness (Biblarz and Gottainer 2000), discontentment with life (Furstenberg and Teitler 1994), mistrust in others (Ross and Mirowsky 1999), and reduced longevity (Tucker et al. 1997).

On the face of it, this seems like a long and forlorn listing, which suggests that parental separation bears down heavily on children and blights their lives to a significant degree across all domains of functioning. Yet the picture is not as bleak as this litany of problems might suggest. In most cases the size of the reported effects is small; a minority of children are negatively affected, generally only in the presence of other exacerbating factors; and in many cases the existence of a causal connection is contested and other competing explanations for these associations have been put forward. In other words, it is important to be cautious in interpreting the meaning of these patterns of association.

Many scholars who have identified associations between family structure and family change and child outcomes have drawn attention to the relatively small size of the effects. Joshi et al. (1999) describe the effect sizes they measured as “modest”, while Burns et al. (1997) refer to effects that were “very weak”. Allison and Furstenberg (1989) report that the proportion of variation in outcome measures that could be attributed to marital dissolution was generally small, never amounting to more than 3%.

The modest nature of the associations between separation and children’s outcomes means that knowing that a child comes from a separated family, and knowing nothing else about the child, has little predictive power in terms of the child’s wellbeing. There is a wide diversity of outcomes among both groups of children from divorced and intact families, and the adjustment of children following divorce depends on a wide range of other factors.

Demo and Acock (1996) note that “the differences in adolescent well-being *within* family types are greater than the differences *across* family types, suggesting that family processes are more important than family composition”. Indeed, O’Connor et al. (2001) showed that differences in adjustment between children *within the same family* are as great as, and even slightly greater than, differences between children in different families. Demo and Acock (1996) note further that measures of family relations explained the largest proportion of variance in adolescent wellbeing.

The majority of children whose parents have divorced function within normal or average limits in the years after divorce (Kelly 1993). As a group, they can not be characterised as “disturbed”. Furthermore, there is a considerable range of functioning within both groups of children from divorced and intact families. Among children whose parents have divorced are many who are functioning quite well, while among children from intact families are many with major adjustment problems. In short, there is no one-to-one relationship between divorce and psychological adjustment problems in children.

In fact, not only do some children do well despite the divorce of their parents, but some children actually benefit from the divorce. Demo and Acock 1988 note that adolescents living in single-parent families can “acquire certain strengths, notably a sense of responsibility, as a consequence of altered family routines”. It is likely, however, that such benefits will accrue only where the altered routines are structured and predictable. Changes that involve the emergence of more chaotic patterns of family life are unlikely to be beneficial for children, even if some strive to furnish a sense of order where their parents fail to do so. Butler et al. (2002) note that the children in their study demonstrated “an active role helping their parents cope with divorce, even in circumstances where parents did not seem able to contain their more negative emotions and impulses”.

Children also benefit where a parental separation provides release from an aversive family situation; for example, where the parental relationship is highly conflicted and the children are drawn into the conflict (Booth and Amato 2001, Jekielek 1998) or where the child’s relationship with a parent figure is of poor quality (Videon 2002). Videon (2002) notes that:

The prophylactic effects of parental separation are amplified as adolescents’ satisfaction with the parent-adolescent relationship decreases. When adolescents are residentially separated from an unsatisfying same-sex parent relationship ... their level of delinquent behaviour is lower than adolescents who continue to reside with a same-sex parent with whom they have a poor relationship.

A further circumstance where children may benefit from a parental separation is where a parent exhibits antisocial behaviour. Jaffee et al. (2003) found that the less time fathers lived with their children, the more conduct problems the children had, but only if the fathers exhibit low levels of antisocial behaviour. In contrast, when fathers exhibit high levels of antisocial behaviour, the longer they lived with their children the more conduct problems the children exhibited. In such cases, children are likely to be receiving a double whammy of genetic and environmental factors that heighten the risk of conduct problems.

Nevertheless, despite all these caveats and qualifications, it remains true that children whose parents separate do less well, on average, across a range of measures of wellbeing. A pressing question that follows from this is why these associations arise. Before examining this question, I will consider briefly whether remarriage changes the outlook for children who have experienced a parental separation, what impact multiple family transitions have on child wellbeing and whether the effects of parental separation are primarily short-term or whether it also has more persistent and enduring consequences for children's wellbeing.

## REMARRIAGE AND CHILD OUTCOMES

Remarriage does not generally improve outcomes for children, despite the potential gains from both improved economic circumstances and the presence of an additional adult to help with parenting tasks. Indeed, some studies have shown children to be worse off after a parent's remarriage. Elliott and Richards (1991) found that having a stepfather<sup>1</sup> had a deleterious effect on children's behaviour scores. Fergusson et al. (1986) found that, among children who had experienced a parental separation, those whose parents reconciled or whose mother remarried exhibited more behavioural difficulties than children who remained in a single-parent family. Baydar (1988) found that, although divorce was not negatively related to mothers' reports of children's behavioural and emotional problems, remarriage was.

It appears, then, that there is something about the complexity of family life in stepfamilies that hinders them from benefiting from the additional resources that are available when a lone mother remarries. Relationships within stepfamilies are complex and need time and goodwill on all sides to work well. Unlike the relationship between mother and stepfather, that between stepfather and stepchild is not a relationship of choice, which means that goodwill may sometimes be in short supply, at least in the early stages of establishing a stepfamily. Children are often suspicious of their mothers' new partners and slow to open up to the benefits the new relationship might confer on them, while stepfathers are often uncertain about how to respond to the children of their new partner (Amato 1987). Typically, this uncertainty results in lower levels of involvement: as Fine et al. (1993) note, stepfathers appear to actively refrain from becoming involved with their stepchildren, engaging in both fewer positive and fewer negative behaviours. Perhaps as a result, cohesion remains lower among stepfamilies than among intact families (Pryor & Rodgers 2001). Even so, improvements in stepfamily functioning are evident over time (Amato 1987), which suggests that many families manage to master the challenges they face.

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1 Much of the research literature on stepfamilies focuses on stepfather families, because, following a separation, most children live with their mother

## MULTIPLE FAMILY TRANSITIONS

Several studies have found that multiple family transitions are especially damaging for children. Dunn et al. (1998) reported that the number of transitions impacted both on children's adjustment problems and on levels of prosocial behaviour. Kurdek et al. (1994) found that, although the effects of the number of parenting transitions were significant, these accounted for a relatively small percentage of the variation of adjustment, ranging between 5% and 8% across three separate samples.

Aquilino (1996) reported that the experience of multiple transitions and multiple family types, among a sample of children not born into an intact biological family, was associated with lower educational attainment and greatly increased the likelihood that children would try to establish an independent household and enter the labour force at an early age.

One possible explanation is that having multiple transitions presents children with a succession of caregivers ... and this experience may weaken children's attachment to any particular caregiver, making early autonomy seem more attractive. Similarly, having a variety of caregiving arrangements and multiple separations from caregivers may weaken both parents' and children's sense of mutual obligation and thus reduce the exchange of support across generations.

The evidence on this, however, is not entirely consistent. A range of other studies failed to turn up any evidence that multiple transitions are more damaging to children's wellbeing (Booth and Amato 2001, Carlson and Corcoran 2001, Teachman 2002). It may be that the impact of multiple transitions depends to some extent on the circumstances associated with transitions. Where transitions are well managed and conducted with goodwill, they may do little damage, while transitions that are chaotic, unpredictable and infused with rancour and disputation may have malign effects on children's wellbeing.

## SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM IMPACTS

Many of the reported effects of parental separation on child wellbeing are based on observations that are taken in the short term. However, other studies have examined effects over longer-term durations, some into adulthood. While there is evidence that many of the difficulties that children encounter as a result of parental separation decline as time passes, there is also evidence that some effects are persistent and enduring.

Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington (1990) found that during the first two years after a divorce both children and adults experienced pragmatic, physical and emotional

problems as well as declines in family functioning. By two years after the divorce the majority of families had made significant adjustments, although among children there were variations by age and gender. While girls seemed to recover fully during the primary school years, boys in mother-custody homes exhibited behaviour problems for as long as six years.

However, Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995) found that parental divorce had negative consequences for the mental health of some offspring that persisted into adulthood. Parental divorce was associated with a moderate increase in the average score on a measure of mental health (indicating deterioration) and a 39% increase in the risk of psychopathology. Despite this significant effect, it is important to note that only a minority of people were at such risk: 82% of women and 94% of men whose parents divorced were predicted to fall below the clinical cut-off for psychopathology.

Amato and Keith (1991), in a meta-analysis of studies that examined long-term consequences of parental divorce, reported adverse impacts on a range of domains of adult wellbeing, including psychological adjustment, use of mental health services, behaviour and conduct, educational attainment, material quality of life and divorce.

The last effect implies that the risk of a failed marriage is transmitted intergenerationally, a finding that is supported by other studies (Mueller and Pope 1977, Amato and DeBoer 2001, Teachman 2002). Amato and DeBoer (2001) found that parental divorce approximately doubled the odds that children's own marriages would end in divorce. These increased odds appear to be the end result of a longer chain of effects. Children whose parents separated have been found to be more likely to engage in early-onset sexual activity, to leave home at an early age, to enter into an intimate partnership at an earlier age and to become parents at an early age. Early entry into marriage is known to heighten the risk of separation and divorce. In addition, Mueller and Pope (1977) hypothesised that these effects arise in part because youthful marriages involve less socially and emotionally mature individuals, are subject to greater economic hardship and receive less social support, both normatively from wider society and from family and kin.

Even though the majority of children of divorced families are functioning within normal ranges or better on a variety of objective measures of adjustment, Kelly (2003) notes that divorce can create lingering feelings of sadness, longing, worry and regret. Perhaps as many as half of young adults recall distress and painful memories and experiences caused by their parents' behaviours and post-divorce custody arrangements. Even if many children do not experience mental health disorders according to a clinical diagnosis, there is no doubt that for most it causes pain and sadness in their lives.



Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) draw attention to the period of late adolescence as a time when delayed responses to an earlier parental divorce emerge in young women, giving rise to anxieties in the domain of their relationships with young men. They also point to adolescence as a period when young women are more sensitive to the relationship between their parents:

It is the relationship between the parents, after all, that forms the template for heterosexual relationships and provides the young woman with a basis for her own hopes and expectations ... Thus, it may not suffice for divorced parents to refrain from angry fighting. It may be equally important to their daughters for parents to treat each other fairly and with continued kindness.

### MECHANISMS THAT LINK PARENTAL SEPARATION TO CHILD OUTCOMES

A range of mechanisms has been postulated to explain the link between parental separation and adverse child outcomes. Five mechanisms will be considered in the following discussion:

- income changes consequent on parental separation
- paternal absence
- poor maternal mental health following a separation
- interparental conflict
- compromised parenting practices and child-parent relations.

Each of these mechanisms implies a causal connection between associations between parental separation and adverse child outcomes. A range of alternative explanations for the associations that do not involve causal connections has also been proposed. These non-causal explanations are examined in the following section.

#### Income Changes Consequent to Parental Separation

The economic circumstances of families decline after divorce, especially among mother-headed families. Amato (1993) outlined a range of ways in which the economic position of a family might exert effects on child wellbeing:

Financial hardship may negatively affect children's nutrition and health; it reduces parental investment in books, educational toys, computers, private lessons; it constrains choice of residential location, which means that the family may have to live in a neighbourhood where school programmes are poorly financed, services are inadequate and crime rates are high; children are more likely in such neighbourhoods to associate with delinquent peers.

As well as having a direct impact on child outcomes, economic factors are also likely to have impacts through indirect pathways. The stress associated with economic hardship



can have negative impacts on parental mental health, which in turn can have consequences for children's wellbeing.

A number of studies have found that when controls for income are applied, the effects of parental separation decline significantly (Carlson and Corcoran 2001) or even vanish entirely (e.g. Blum et al. 1988), which implies that post-separation economic circumstances account for much of the deficit in wellbeing among children in separated families. However, other studies show that the post-separation economic situation of families is not fully responsible for adverse outcomes among children and, moreover, that this has varying impacts on different outcomes. Wu (1996) found that the impact of a change in family structure on the probability of a premarital birth was largely unaffected when controls for income measures were applied, and noted that this suggested that family instability and income have largely independent effects on the probability that a young woman would bear her first child outside marriage.

Hetherington et al. (1998) also found only modest support for the economic deprivation hypothesis. They cite a number of studies that found that even when income is controlled, children in divorced families exhibit more problems than do children in non-divorced families. They also note that although the income in stepfamilies is only slightly lower than that in non-divorced families, children in these families show a similar level of problem behaviour to that in divorced mother-custody families. They conclude that the effects of income do not seem to be primary and are largely indirect.

Overall, it might be concluded that declines in economic circumstances following separation may explain part, but by no means all, of the poorer outcomes among children who have experienced a parental separation.

### Paternal Absence

Following a parental separation, most children live in the primary custody of one parent, although joint custody arrangements have become increasingly common over recent years. In most cases, the custodial parent is the mother, which means that a significant aspect of the experience of post-separation family life, for most children, is the absence of their father. Although other custody arrangements are increasingly common, the research in this area has still tended to focus on "father absence".

There are a range of *a priori* reasons to hypothesise that the absence of the father from the home might have a negative impact on children's wellbeing. As Amato (1993) notes, the absence of one parent means a deficit in terms of parental time available to do the work of parenting (and all the other work in the household, which further restricts the available time for parenting). Children will also lack exposure both to an

adult male role model and to the skills and processes involved in a committed adult relationship, including such things as communication, negotiation, compromise and expression of intimacy (although it must be said that many couples in intact relationships model such things imperfectly at least part of the time). In addition, children are likely to suffer where the absence of their father from the home means that they have lost effective contact with him.

Despite these hypothetical grounds for expecting a “father absence” effect, research studies have generally failed to find evidence to show that this plays a strong role in explaining the differential outcomes experienced by children from divorced and intact families. Two pieces of evidence, in particular, weigh against it.

First, children whose parents separated do worse than children who have experienced a parental bereavement. Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) found that, compared with children of widowed mothers, children of divorced mothers had significantly lower levels of education, occupational status and happiness in adulthood. They found no evidence that divorced mothers were less competent parents than widowed mothers and speculated that the contrasting positions in the social structure of different types of single-mother families may account for observed differences in child outcomes. In particular, they note that widows occupied an advantaged position in the social structure, in terms of employment, financial position and occupational status, compared with divorced mothers. This suggests that the absence of the father, if it has an effect, has a much weaker effect than that of these economic factors.

Secondly, as has already been noted, remarriage does not generally improve the wellbeing of children, despite the gain of another adult to help with the task of parenting. As a number of studies have noted, outcomes for children in remarried families are generally little different from those of children in sole-parent families. It is important to note also that remarriage generally results in an improvement in economic circumstances. As noted above, there appears to be something associated with stepfamilies – perhaps the complexities of the new pattern of relationships that need to be established and worked at before the family can settle down into new comfortable ways of living together – that weighs against both the economic gain and the gain of an additional adult figure. Once again, this suggests that the absence of the father, by itself, does not play a strong role in explaining the differences between children from divorced and intact families.

There are various reasons why the impact of the father’s absence might be less than expected. Other adults may be filling the gap by providing adult role models and support to lone parents, and many fathers continue to make significant contributions to their children’s wellbeing after separation. It is not just the father’s presence in the home that is important; it is his presence in the child’s life.

## Maternal Mental Health

Maternal mental health is another mechanism through which parental separation exerts effects on children's wellbeing. The pathways that connect separation, maternal mental health and child wellbeing are somewhat complex and are likely to operate via the route of impairments to parenting. The process of separation can take a toll on the mental health of separating parents, which can in turn impair the quality of parenting.

Block et al. (1988) note that divorced mothers describe themselves in terms indicating low self-esteem and that a failed or failing marriage affects mothers more strongly than fathers. Hetherington et al. (1982, cited in Amato 1993) showed not only that separation took a toll on the mental health of custodial mothers, in the form of higher rates of anxiety, depression, anger and self-doubt, but also that this in turn impacted on their parenting, exemplified by less affectionate, less communicative, more punitive and more inconsistent disciplinary interactions with their children. Such sub-optimal parenting behaviours, in turn, have adverse consequences for children's wellbeing.

On the other hand, where custodial mothers are psychologically able to provide a loving, effective parent-child relationship, children will be buffered from the stress divorce engenders and will tend to prosper developmentally (Kalter et al. 1989). However, when economic deprivation, interparental hostility and the burdens of single parenting take their toll on the mental health of custodial mothers, children will tend to fare less well.

## Interparental Conflict

The connection between marital separation and marital conflict is complex. Clearly the two factors are interrelated, in that at the time of a marital dissolution the separating partners are likely to be at odds and many are involved in serious conflict. Hanson (1999) reported that about half of all couples who divorced exhibited high levels of conflict beforehand, compared with about one-quarter of families who remained continuously married.

However, the connection between marital separation and marital conflict is not at all straightforward, since some partners manage to separate on relatively amicable terms, while many marriages survive for long periods despite the presence of ongoing conflict. Hanson (1999) found that approximately 75% of high-conflict couples chose not to divorce, indicating that, for the vast majority of children exposed to high levels of parental conflict, divorce is not an avenue through which their exposure to conflict is reduced, at least in the short term.

To understand the relationship between marital conflict and separation, it is important to distinguish between conflict that precedes the separation and conflict that follows the separation. Many families experience conflict both before and after separation, so it is not possible to draw a clear demarcation in this way. Nevertheless, in some cases a prolonged period of conflict is terminated when parents separate, while in other cases the separation itself provokes a round of conflict which may persist for years afterward.

The evidence about the impact of separation and pre-separation conflict is somewhat complex. First, both marital conflict and separation have been found to be independently associated with child outcomes. Peterson and Zill (1986) found that marital conflict in intact homes, especially if persistent, was as harmful as separation. Indeed, they found that scores on measures of overcontrolled and undercontrolled behaviour of children living amid persistent conflict were even higher than for those living with one biological parent.

However, many studies have also reported the presence of an interaction between separation and conflict, so that in high-conflict families children benefit when their parents divorce, while in low-conflict families children do worse when their parents divorce (Amato et al. 1995). Other studies show similar results, although with a twist. Hanson (1999) found that children exposed to low levels of parental conflict appeared to suffer disadvantages when their parents separated, although he also found that children exposed to high levels of parental conflict were neither better nor worse off, on average, when their parents divorced. Morrison and Coiro (1999) found that while their results did not indicate a benefit for children exiting high-conflict marriages (problem behaviours among children increased after separation regardless of the level of conflict that predated the separation), nevertheless the greatest increase in behaviour problems was observed among children whose parents remained married, despite very frequent quarrels.

All of these results indicate a complex relationship between marital conflict, separation and child outcomes. Taken together, they suggest that children in high-conflict families are likely to be better off, while children in low-conflict families are likely to be worse off, if their parents separate. Booth and Amato (2001) note that:

while escape from a high-conflict marriage benefits children because it removes them from an aversive, stressful home environment, in contrast a divorce that is not preceded by a prolonged period of overt discord may represent an unexpected, unwelcome, and uncontrollable event, an event that children are likely to experience as stressful.

On the other hand, the evidence about post-separation conflict is much more straightforward. The more conflict there is, and the more this involves the children, the more damaging it is to children's wellbeing.

Bream and Buchanan (2003) found that, among a sample of children whose parents could not agree on arrangements for them, high proportions had significant adjustment problems: about half of both boys and girls immediately after the proceedings, and around two-thirds of boys and one-third of girls a year later. Children aged under seven were particularly vulnerable to such difficulties. Where half of such children were distressed at the time of the first interview, this had risen to 80% at the second. This equates to four times the rate that would be expected in the general population. Indeed, the rate of difficulties among these children was similar to that among a sample of children who were subject to care proceedings.

Johnston et al. (1985) report that children who are the subject of lengthy post-separation disputes between their parents have been identified as the most at-risk among the divorcing population. For this group the major benefit of the divorce – the cessation of parental hostilities – does not accrue. Johnston (1994) notes that children of high-conflict divorces scored as significantly more disturbed, and were two to four times more likely to have the kinds of adjustment problems typically seen in children being treated for emotional and behavioural disturbance, when compared with national norms.

Conflict takes different forms and some types of conflict are especially damaging for children. Hetherington (2003) found that parental conflict that is about the child or directly involves the child, conflict that is physically violent, threatening or abusive, and conflict in which the child feels caught in the middle between two warring parents have the most adverse consequences for children.

Even from this small selection of studies it seems clear that post-separation conflict between parents carries the risk of significant levels of adverse impacts on children.

### Parenting and Parent–Child Relationships

Various studies have shown that separation and divorce lead to disruptions in parenting practices. Simons et al. (1999) found that the quality of the mother's parenting mediated much of the association between divorce and child adjustment. In addition, the level of the father's involvement in parenting explained part of the association between divorce and the externalising problems of boys. Compared with fathers in intact families, non-custodial fathers were less likely to provide their children with help in solving problems, to discuss standards of conduct or to enforce discipline. This reduced involvement in parenting was associated with an increased probability that a boy would display conduct problems. This suggests that a divorced father who

remain actively involved as a parent may significantly reduce his son's chances of conduct problems. Indeed, Simons et al. (1999) note that boys with divorced parents, where both parents exhibit competent parenting behaviours, are at no greater risk of involvement in delinquent behaviour than boys living in an intact family.

McLanahan and Bumpass (1994) investigated several hypotheses for the adverse childbearing and marital outcomes of children of divorced parents and concluded that parental role models and parental supervision were the major factors in determining the future family-formation behaviour of offspring. As they note, "it seems obvious that single parents would have more difficulty maintaining authority and control over daughter's dating, which, in turn, is directly related to early family-formation behaviour".

Holdnack (1993) notes that parental divorce interrupts the emotional closeness between parents and children, leading to negative impacts on children's self-esteem. An unresolved issue is whether poor-quality family relationships arise as an effect of the divorce or whether these may have pre-dated (and perhaps given rise to) the divorce. This raises the possibility that the results reflect selection into divorce rather than demonstrating the effects of divorce. Sun (2001) found that, indeed, families on the verge of breakup are characterised by less intimate parent-parent and parent-child relationships, as well as less parental commitment to children's education and fewer economic resources. Prior to the marital disruption, families that broke down showed consistent signs of dysfunction on every indicator of family environment examined. Sun (2001) concludes that this suggests that "a dysfunctional family environment serves as an important mechanism by which marital disruption process affects children". However, it is also possible that this reflects selection effects. I turn now to an examination of such effects.

## SELECTION EFFECTS

The discussion so far has assumed that the associations between parental separation and child outcomes are brought about through causal connections that link the former to the latter. However, it is also possible that the associations arise through non-causal mechanisms; in particular, through selection effects. The discussion now turns to an examination of such effects.

Several studies have demonstrated that many of the presumed effects of parental separation on children are evident many years in advance of the actual separation. Block et al. (1986) found the behaviour of boys as early as 11 years prior to parental separation to be characterised by undercontrol of impulse, aggression, and excessive energy. Elliott and Richards (1991) report that children whose parents divorced when they were between seven and 16 years old had worse scores on a range of measures of

wellbeing than children whose parents remained married, not only at age 16 (after the separation) but also at age seven.

A question that arises is whether these results reflect the fact that the process of parental separation can take place over a long period (while some families break down quickly, often in spectacular ways with much heat, in other families the process is a longer and slower burn), or whether they result from selection effects (that is to say, some parents bring into a marriage a set of characteristics that are likely both to raise the possibility that the marriage will break down and to heighten the risk of adverse outcomes for their children). There are a number of characteristics that might perform such a role, such as poor mental health, antisocial behaviour and substance dependencies. Parents with such personal difficulties are likely to have greater difficulties both in maintaining stable and enduring intimate relationships and in providing their children with a family environment that is likely to promote their wellbeing. Part of the patterns of association between parental separation and child outcomes might therefore simply reflect the fact that some adults are not well equipped either to perform well as a marriage partner or as a parent. Furstenberg and Teitler (1994) note that:

Families that eventually divorce may be different in a variety of ways from those that do not long before marital disruption occurs. They may be more likely to exhibit poor parenting practices, high levels of marital conflict, or suffer from persistent economic stress ... exposure to these conditions may compromise children's economic, social and psychological wellbeing in later life whether or not a separation takes place.

Sun (2001) found that, compared with parents that remain continuously married, parents who later divorce are more likely to have personal, sexual, psychological or financial problems throughout their marriage, and these problems continue to affect children negatively. Given the persistence of these problems, a separation may actually reduce the stress associated with such problems, resulting in relatively little further damage to child wellbeing.

Emery et al. (1999) found that while children from never-married and divorced families had higher rates of externalising behaviour problems, much of this could be explained by their mothers' histories of delinquent behaviour in adolescence. In fact, delinquent behaviour reported when future mothers were single, childless adolescents prospectively predicted behaviour problems among their offspring 14 years later.

Thus, it appears that the contribution of divorce and its aftermath to children's problems in later life is not nearly as great as might be inferred from findings that do not take adequate account of family conditions prior to the separation. Parental



separation does not occur randomly, and the causes that underlie it may also be part of the explanation for the apparent impacts on children.

### GENETIC TRANSMISSION MECHANISMS

One means by which selection effects might arise is via genetic transmission of characteristics and behaviours between parents and children. Studies of the impact of parental separation on children in adopted and biological families provide a window on this issue, since parents and children in biological families share both genes and environment, while parents and children in adoptive families share their environment but not their genes.

O'Connor et al. (2000) report some suggestive findings from such a study. They found that, while biological and adopted children who had experienced a parental divorce displayed similarly elevated rates of behavioural problems and substance use compared with their peers in intact families, a different pattern was found for academic and social competence outcomes. While children from biological families also had lower levels of academic achievement and social competence than their peers in intact families, there were no differences between adopted children in divorced and intact families. They note that "the findings for psychopathology are consistent with an environmentally mediated explanation for the association between parents' divorce and children's adjustment [while] the findings for achievement and social adjustment are consistent with a genetically mediated explanation". These results show that if genetic mechanisms are involved they have differential effects in different spheres of development.

In a subsequent paper, O'Connor et al. (2003) reported that the association between genetic risk (as reflected in a measure of negative reactivity in the biological parents) and child adjustment among a sample of adopted children was moderated by parental separation. While genetic risk was uncorrelated with the adjustment of adopted children in intact families, among children who had experienced a parental divorce there were substantial and significant associations between genetic risk and poor adjustment. This result indicates a complex interplay between genetic and environmental factors: genetic risk only poses a problem for children's wellbeing in the presence of an environmental stressor such as parental divorce.

It appears, then, that genetic factors do play a role in the association between parental separation and child outcomes, although their impact varies across different outcome domains and interacts with environmental triggers.

## AN EXEMPLAR INTERVENTION: THE NEW BEGINNINGS PROGRAM

A large question raised by the above results for policy makers and their advisers is what, if anything, might be done to alleviate the distress that parental separation causes in children's lives. While consideration of this question is beyond the scope of the present paper, it will be useful to sketch out the promising results that have been achieved through one particular intervention, which indicates that there is indeed scope for effective action.

The exemplar intervention I have chosen to highlight is the New Beginnings Program in the United States, an intervention for custodial mothers following a separation, which was subject to a true experimental trial (Wolchik et al. 2002). The programme involved randomised assignment to one of two treatment conditions (a mother-only programme, involving 11 group sessions with other custodial mothers, plus two structured individual sessions and a dual component mother-plus-child programme, which also included 11 group sessions for the children) or a control condition. Participants who were assigned to the control condition were issued with books on adjustment to divorce. The sample was randomly drawn from divorce court records. Children in the study were followed up six years after the intervention.

Wolchik et al. (2002) reported that both treatments were found to yield significant benefits for the children who participated in them, compared with children in the control group. In particular, they exhibited reduced rates of mental disorders, reduced levels of externalising problems, reduced rates of substance abuse and reduced numbers of sexual partners. It appears, then, that it is possible to design interventions that afford children with significant protection from the adverse consequences of their parents' divorce, at the expense of a dozen or so sessions of group treatment for mothers.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this brief survey of the literature on parental separation and child outcomes. First, there is an abundance of evidence that children who experience a parental separation are, on average, worse off than their peers in intact families, on a number of measures of wellbeing. However, the scale of the differences in wellbeing between the two groups of children is not large and most children are not adversely affected. Parental separation then bears down most heavily on a minority of children, generally in the presence of other exacerbating factors.

Underlying these effects are multiple mechanisms: income declines following separation, declines in the mental health of custodial mothers, interparental conflict and compromised parenting. These mechanisms do not operate independently, but are related in complex ways. For example, income declines following separation place

mother-headed households at risk of material and economic deprivation, which can take a toll on mothers' mental health. This in turn can lead to compromised parenting behaviours. All of these factors can impact adversely on child wellbeing.

Part of the effects also arise from non-causal mechanisms: that is to say, not all of the adverse child outcomes following separation can be laid at the door of the separation itself. Many of the difficulties have deeper roots that date from many years prior to the separation and are due to the fact that some parents bring into a marriage characteristics and behaviours – such as poor mental health, antisocial behaviour or substance addictions – that are likely both to jeopardise the success of the marriage and heighten the risk of poor child outcomes. Furthermore, some of the associations between separation and child outcomes are due to genetic inheritance.

One factor that plays a more complex role is interparental conflict. Conflict between parents plays a dual role, both as part of the explanation for the link between parental separation and child outcomes and as an independent influence on child outcomes. It is clear, nevertheless, that post-separation conflict which is bitter and ongoing and which places the children at the centre of disputation has highly malign effects on child wellbeing.

Yet this is a factor which is surely amenable to treatment. If separating couples can be helped to reduce levels of conflict following a separation, or at least to understand the importance of conducting their affairs out of the way of the children and in ways that do not implicate them, then this is likely to have significant benefits for the wellbeing of the children. As Moxnes (2003) notes, "extensive parental cooperation is ... the most important means by which to reduce the negative effects of divorce for children."

The evidence from the evaluation of the New Beginnings Program shows that it is possible to design programmes aimed at ameliorating the negative fallout from a parental separation that yield real benefits for children, in terms of their mental health, behaviour and general wellbeing. This suggests it would be useful to conduct further investigations to identify promising approaches that afford children protection from a parental separation that could be considered for trial in the New Zealand context.

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