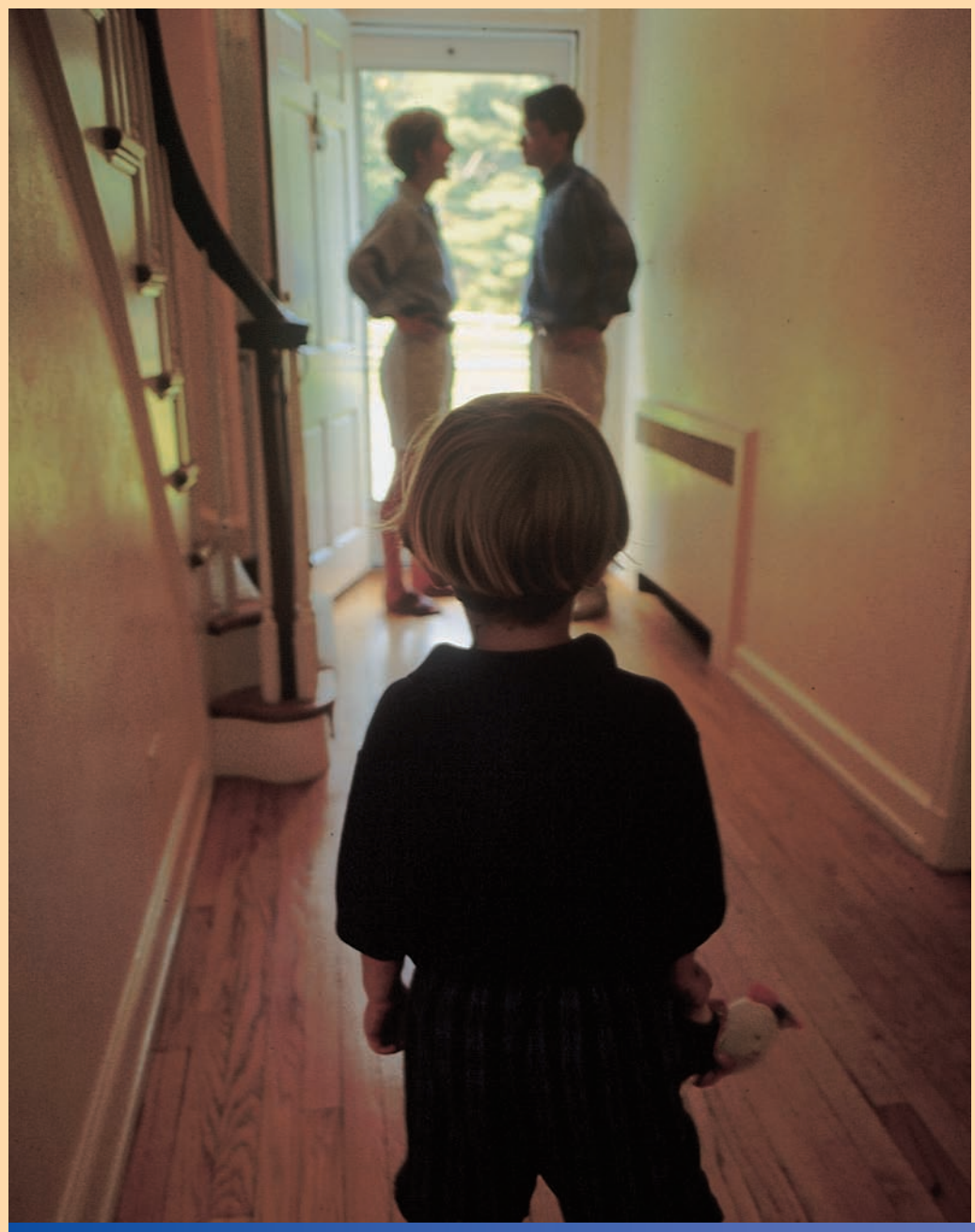


# CHAPTER 14

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# Coming Apart: Separation and Divorce

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## What Do YOU Think?

Are the following statements **TRUE** or **FALSE**?

You may be surprised by the answers (see answer key on the bottom of this page).

- T** **F** 1 More than 40% of couples who enter marriage are projected to end up divorcing within 7 years.
- T** **F** 2 Divorce occurs as a single event in a person's life.
- T** **F** 3 Americans have one of the highest marriage, divorce, and remarriage rates among industrialized nations.
- T** **F** 4 The critical emotional event in a marital breakdown is separation rather than divorce.
- T** **F** 5 Age at marriage is the best predictor of the likelihood of divorce.
- T** **F** 6 Divorce is an important element of the contemporary American marriage system because it reinforces the significance of emotional fulfillment in marriage.
- T** **F** 7 The higher an individual's employment status, income, and level of education, the greater the likelihood of divorce.
- T** **F** 8 Many problems assumed to be caused by divorce are present before marital disruption.
- T** **F** 9 Those whose parents are divorced have a significantly greater likelihood of divorcing themselves.
- T** **F** 10 Marital conflict in an intact two-parent family is generally more harmful to children than living in a tranquil single-parent family or stepfamily.

**A**s one woman told sociologist Joseph Hopper (2001), there was nothing she and her husband could do:

It's something that had to happen, and it wasn't something that either one of us really controlled. It was just an awful situation that we had to get out of, and I recognized it and he didn't.

A second person offered the following:

I had wanted that forever—the white picket fence and the whole dream. But it didn't come true. But I was at least smart enough to realize it wasn't happening and no matter what I did it wasn't going to.

Are Americans pro-marriage? Are we too soft on divorce? Do we believe in the importance of marriage and the commitment we make when we exchange wedding vows? Or when we say “I do” are we really adding, perhaps not under our breath but in our heads, “at least for now”? Americans' feelings about marriage and divorce are paradoxical. Consider the following generalizations (Ganong and Coleman 1994; White 1991):

- Americans like marriage: they have one of the highest marriage rates in the industrialized world.
- Americans don't like marriage: they have one of the highest divorce rates in the world.
- Americans like marriage: they have one of the highest remarriage rates in the world.

What sense can we make out of being one of the most marrying, divorcing, and remarrying nations in the world? What does our high divorce rate tell us about how we feel about marriage? In this chapter, we hope to explain the paradox of high rates of marriage and divorce as we examine the divorce process, marital separation, divorce consequences, children and divorce, child custody, and divorce mediation. This exploration will help you better understand what parents, children, and families experience and how they

## Answer Key for What Do You Think

- 1 True, see p. 492; 2 False, see p. 500; 3 True, see p. 490; 4 True, see p. 501; 5 True, see p. 496; 6 True, see p. 491; 7 False, see p. 493; 8 True, see p. 511; 9 True, see p. 498; 10 True, see p. 508.

cope with what increasingly has become part of our marriage system—divorce.

Some scholars suggest that divorce represents not a devaluation of marriage but an idealization of it. They reason that we would not divorce if we did not have so much hope about marriage fulfilling our various needs. According to Frank Furstenberg and Graham Spanier (1987), divorce may well be a critical part of our contemporary marriage system, which emphasizes emotional fulfillment and satisfaction.

Our high divorce rate also tells us that we may no longer believe in the permanence of marriage. Norval Glenn (1991) suggests that there is a “decline in the ideal of marital permanence and . . . in the expectation that marriages will last until one of the spouses dies.” Instead, marriages disintegrate when love goes or a potentially better partner comes along. Divorce is a persistent fact of American marital and family life and one of the most important forces affecting and changing American lives today (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

Before 1974, the view of marriage as lasting “till death do us part” reflected reality. However, a surge in divorce rates that began in the mid-1960s did not level off until the 1990s. In 1974, a watershed in American history was reached when more marriages ended by divorce than by death. Today approximately 50% of all new marriages are likely to end in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau 1996).

Divorce not only ends marriages and breaks up families, it also creates new forms from the old ones. It creates remarriages (which are different from first

marriages). It gives birth to single-parent families and stepfamilies. Today about one out of every five American families is a single-parent family; more than half of all children will become stepchildren (U.S. Census Bureau 1996). Within the singles subculture is an immense pool of divorced men and women (most of whom are on their way to remarriage). Or consider the numbers of marriages that are truly remarriages for one or both spouses. As seen in Table 14.1, for 8.4% of currently married couples the marriage is a second marriage for *both wife and husband*. Nearly one in ten marriages in the United States consists of two people who have both been married before to other spouses.

The greatest concern that social scientists express about divorce is its effect on children (Aldous 1987; Wallerstein 1997; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989). But even in studies of the children of divorce, the research may be distorted by traditional assumptions about divorce being deviant (Amato 1991). For example, problems that children experience may be attributed to divorce rather than to other causes, such as personality traits. Although some effects are caused by the disruption of the family itself, others may be linked to the new social environment—most notably poverty and parental stress—into which children are thrust by their parents’ divorce (McLanahan and Booth 1991; Raschke 1987). Some therapists suggest that we begin looking at those factors that help parents and children successfully adjust to divorce rather than focusing on risks, dysfunctions, and disasters (Abelsohn 1992).

**Table 14.1 ■ Number of Times Married, for Those Currently Married\***

Number of times wife has been married	Number of times husband has been married			
	Total	Married once	Married twice	Married three or more times
<b>Number (in thousands)</b>				
Total	57,728	44,965	10,274	2,489
Married once	45,389	40,288	4,421	681
Married twice	10,232	4,107	4,866	1,259
Married three or more times	2,106	571	987	549
<b>Percentage of marriages</b>				
Total	100.0	77.9	17.8	4.3
Married once	78.6	69.8	7.7	1.2
Married twice	17.7	7.1	8.4	2.2
Married three or more times	3.6	1.0	1.7	1.0

\*This table includes only married people whose spouse is present.  
SOURCE: Kreider 2005.

## Measuring Divorce: How Do We Know How Much Divorce There Is?

How common is divorce and how likely is it to happen to us? The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) shows that there are nearly 20 million divorced people age 15 and older in the United States, representing more than 9% of the population. And many of you have probably heard the gloomy news that *one out of two marriages ends in divorce*. What exactly do those statistics mean and on what are they based? There are a variety of ways to measure and represent the prevalence of divorce in the United States. Look briefly at the most common measures.

### Ratio Measure of Divorces to Marriages

The **ratio measure of divorce** is calculated by taking the number of divorces and the number of marriages in a given year and producing a ratio to represent how often divorce occurs relative to marriage. In 1998, for example, there were 1.13 million divorces and 2.24 million marriages—a ratio of 1 divorce for every 1.98 marriages. But recognize the difference between that statistic and a statement indicating that one of every two marriages *will end* in divorce. What the ratio measure truly reflects is the relative popularity or commonality of marriage and divorce.

### Crude Divorce Rate

The **crude divorce rate** represents the number of divorces in a given year for every 1,000 people in the population. From November 2004 to November 2005, there were 3.6 divorces for every 1,000 Americans. There were also 7.5 marriages per 1,000 people in the population, returning us to right around our “one divorce for every two marriages” (Munson and Sutton, 2006).

Crude divorce or marriage rates have certain problems. Obviously, when calculating the crude divorce rate, counting every 1,000 people in the population means including many unmarried people, children, the elderly, the already divorced, and so on. These people cannot become divorced. It is therefore a statistic that is highly susceptible to the age distribution, proportions of married and single people in the

population, and to changes in such population characteristics.

### Refined Divorce Rate

Considered the most useful measure of divorce, the **refined divorce rate** measures the number of divorces that occur in a given year for every 1,000 marriages (as measured by married women age 15 and older). In 1998, the refined rate was 19 to 20 divorces per 1,000 married women, meaning that 2% of marriages ended in divorce.

Note that the range of available statistics produces different impressions about the reality of divorce in the United States. The ratio measure gives the most alarming impression, the one most closely approximating “one out of two marriages,” or 50% of marriages, ending in divorce. When we use the refined rate of 2% of marriages ending in divorce annually, the picture seems much less bleak. The reality represented by each statistic is the same, but the meanings we attach to each statistic, and therefore the understanding it creates, vary significantly.

### Predicting Divorce

Another divorce statistic worth mentioning is the **predictive divorce rate**. This calculation (too complicated for our purposes) allows researchers to estimate how many new marriages will likely end in divorce. The prevailing estimate is that somewhere between 40% and 50% of marriages entered into in a year are likely to become divorces, but some put the estimate as high as 60%.

Estimating future trends is a tricky business. Because this estimate is based on experience of prior birth cohorts (people born between specific years), we cannot be confident that current and future cohorts will make the same choices or face the same circumstances as their predecessors.

But even these predictions need to be more carefully assessed. As we show in subsequent sections describing factors associated with divorce, not everyone faces the same risk of divorce. As articulated by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe (2004), “The background characteristics of people entering a marriage have major implications for their risk of divorce.” They go on to report the decreases in vulnerability to divorce during the first 10 years of marriage that are shown in Table 14.2.

**Table 14.2 ■ Vulnerability to Divorce in First 10 Years of Marriage**

Factor in Risk of Divorce	Percentage of Decrease
Annual income over \$50,000 (versus under \$25,000)	-30
Having a baby 7 months or more after marriage (versus before marriage)	-24
Marrying after 25 years of age (versus under 18)	-24
Own family of origin intact (versus divorced parents)	-14
Religious affiliation (versus none)	-14
Some college (versus high school dropout)	-13

Ultimately, Dafoe Whitehead and Popenoe (2005, 19) offer the following, more reassuring assessment of the likelihood of experiencing divorce: “So if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after age twenty-five without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are low indeed.”

## Divorce Trends in the United States

If we look at long-term divorce trends, the unmistakable conclusion is that the twentieth century saw dramatic increases in marital breakups. If we look, instead,

over the past 25 years, a different picture emerges. In more recent decades, the divorce rate dropped (see Table 14.3). Divorce rates in the United States have “plateaued” and then leveled off after reaching their peak in 1979. As we show shortly, this did not occur equally for all groups.

Both marriage and divorce rates have declined. The marriage rate is at its lowest point since the 1930s, and the 2.22 million marriages in 2005 reflect a recent decline from the 2.38 million marriages performed in 1997 (Munson and Sutton 2003). As to divorce, we can see that after three-quarters of a century of increases (minus, of course, the “time-out” of the 1950s), in more recent years the rate has declined. Most recently, there were 2% fewer divorces in 1998 than in 1997 (when there were 1.16 million divorces) and 7% fewer than the 1.22 million divorces occurring in 1992, which represented the all-time high in numbers of divorce. In addition, the 2005 crude divorce rate of 3.6 per 1,000 people is lower than it has been since the 1970s. There are multiple stories to tell about trends in divorce and causes of divorce.

## Factors Affecting Divorce

Sometimes it is easy to point to the cause of a particular divorce. Perhaps one spouse was unfaithful or abusive and the marriage was brought to a quick end. In other instances, even the divorcing parties can’t identify the exact cause or causes that led to divorce. Researchers have looked at factors affecting wider divorce

**Table 14.3 ■ Divorce and Marriage through the Twentieth Century and Beyond**

Year	Marriages	Rate per 1,000	Divorces	Rate per 1,000	Rate per 1,000 married women
1900	709,000	9.3	55,751	0.7	3
1920	1,274,476	12.0	170,506	1.6	8
1940	1,595,879	12.1	264,000	2.0	9
1960	1,523,000	8.5	393,000	2.2	9.2
1970	2,158,802	10.6	708,000	3.5	14.9
1980	2,406,708	10.6	1,189,000	5.2	22.6
1985	2,413,000	10.2	1,178,000	5.0	21.7
1990	2,448,000	9.8	1,182,000	4.7	20.9
1995	2,336,000	8.9	1,169,000	4.4	19.8
1998	2,244,000	8.4	1,135,000	4.2	NA*
2001	2,327,000	8.4	NA	4.0	NA

\*NA means data not available.

rates, as well as divorce decisions. Some analyses address the complex sets of changes that make divorce rates hard to predict. For example, Heaton (2002) notes that there have been increases in the prevalence of premarital sex, premarital births, cohabitation, and both racial and religious intermarriage. All of these tend to be associated with higher likelihood of marital instability, especially divorce. Yet there have been increases in age at marriage and in educational attainment, which tend to be associated with higher rates of stable marriage. These latter trends are among the factors that have counterbalanced the former trends, leading to declining rates of divorce. In this section, we look at both the larger societal or demographic factors and the individual and couple characteristics that may be related to the likelihood of divorce.

## Societal Factors

As seen earlier, even the reduced divorce rates starting in the late 1990s were *six times* the rate at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were twice as high as the rates in 1960. In addition, divorce rates in the United States are higher than rates elsewhere in the industrialized world (see Tables 14.4).

### Changed Nature of the Family

The shift from an agricultural society to an industrial one undermined many of the family's traditional functions. Schools, the media, and peers are now important sources of child socialization and childcare. Hospitals and nursing homes manage birth and care

for the sick and aged. Because the family pays cash for goods and services rather than producing or providing them itself, its members are no longer interdependent.

As a result of losing many of its social and economic underpinnings, the family is less of a necessity.

It is now simply one of many choices we have: We may choose singlehood, cohabitation, marriage, or divorce—and if we choose to divorce, we enter the cycle of choices again: singlehood, cohabitation, or marriage and possibly divorce for a second time. A second divorce leads to our entering the cycle for a third time, and so on.

### Social Integration

**Social integration**—the degree of interaction between individuals and the larger community—is a potentially important factor related to the incidence of divorce. The social integration approach regards such factors as urban residence, church membership, and population change as especially important in explaining divorce rates (Breault and Kposowa 1987; Glenn and Shelton 1985; Glenn and Supancic 1984).

Among African Americans, the lowest divorce rate is found among those born and raised in the South; African Americans born and raised in the North and West have the highest divorce rates. Similarly, those who live in urban areas, where the divorce rate is higher than in rural areas are less likely to be subject to the community's social or moral pressures. They are more independent and have greater freedom of personal choice.

### Individualistic Cultural Values

American culture has traditionally been individualistic. We highly value individual rights, we cherish images of an individual battling nature, and we believe in individual responsibility. It should not be surprising that many view the individual as having priority over the family when the two conflict. Since the 1950s, perhaps as a reaction to the alienation and stifling conformity of the time, we have increasingly valued self-fulfillment and personal growth (Guttman 1993).

As marriage and the family lost many of their earlier social and economic functions, their meaning shifted. Marriage and family are viewed as paths to *individual* happiness and fulfillment. We marry for love and then expect marriage and our partners to bring us happiness. When individual needs conflict

**Table 14.4** ■ International Variation in Refined Divorce Rate

Divorces per 1,000 Married Women			
Country	1980	1990	1995
United States	23	21	20
Canada	10	11	11
Denmark	11	13	12
France	6	8	9
Germany	6	8	9
Italy	1	2	2
Japan	5	6	6
Sweden	11	12	14
United Kingdom	12	13	13

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau 1998, Table 1,346.

with family demands, however, we no longer automatically submerge our needs to those of the family. We often struggle to balance individual and family needs. But if we are unable to do so, divorce has emerged as an alternative to an unhappy or unfulfilling marriage and as an escape from a mean-spirited or violent marriage.

## Demographic Factors

A number of demographic factors appear to have a correlation with divorce, including employment status, income, education level, ethnicity, and religion.

### Employment Status

Among Caucasians, a higher divorce rate is more characteristic of low-status occupations, such as factory worker, than of high-status occupations, such as executive (Greenstein 1985; Martin and Bumpass 1989). Unemployment, which contributes to marital stress, is also related to increased divorce rates. Studies conflict as to whether employed wives are more likely than nonemployed wives to divorce; overall, however, the findings seem to suggest that female employment contributes to the likelihood of divorce since the wife is less dependent on her husband's earnings (White 1991). Wives' employment may also lead to conflict about the traditional division of household labor, childcare stress, and other work spillover problems that, in turn, create marital distress.

Employment also creates more opportunities for spouses to meet someone else and to embark on an extramarital sexual relationship. The presence and numbers of attractive alternative partners positively influences the risk of divorce. Scott South, Katherine Trent, and Yang Shen (2001) call this the *macrostructural opportunity perspective*, calling attention to the importance of attention to the opportunities for spouses to form potentially destabilizing opposite-sex relationships that are embedded within macrosocial structures, such as the workplace.

Also related to employment effects are the hours worked. Harriet Presser (2000) estimated that among men married less than 5 years and with young children, working night shifts increased their likelihood of divorce or separation by six times compared to men with similar families who worked days. Women with similar families who work nights face three times the

likelihood of separation and divorce compared to those who work days. In the absence of children, the same effects are not found.

### Income

The higher the family income, the lower the divorce rate for both Caucasians and African Americans. It is interesting, however, that the higher a woman's individual income, the greater her chances of divorce, perhaps because with greater incomes women are not economically dependent on their husbands or because conflict over inequitable work and family roles increases marital tension.

Each spouse's income alone does not explain divorce, nor does the relative income earned by each spouse. Stacy Rogers (2004) found that the highest risk of divorce occurred in marriages in which wives contributed between 50% and 60% of the family's resources if spouses were at low or moderate levels of happiness. However, "happier spouses have little incentive to divorce, irrespective of spouses' relative economic contributions" (Rogers 2004, 71). Thus, neither higher-earning wives nor lower-earning husbands are automatically prone to divorce.

### Educational Level

The decline in divorce that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s happened mostly for college-educated women and men (Martin, 2004). The positive effect of education appears to be greatest in early marriage. During the first 3 years of marriage, the predicted risk of divorce among married women with less than 12 years of education is more than twice that for high school-educated women, and nearly four times the risk faced by women who have been to college (South 2001).

Of course, educational attainment is usually linked with other factors that affect marital success. For example, men and women pursuing higher education tend to delay marriage and children until they're older. Plus, increased education may lead to acquiring values more conducive to marital success (Heaton 2002).

One way in which education can affect divorce is by shaping attitudes toward divorce. One study concluded that college graduates had the most restrictive attitudes toward divorce, believing that "it should be more difficult to obtain a divorce than it is now." Women who haven't completed high school have the least restrictive attitudes (Martin and Parashar 2006).



## Ethnicity

About a third of first marriages end in separation or divorce within the first ten years of marriage for white (32%) and Hispanic (34%) women, for non-Hispanic black women the figure reaches nearly half of first marriages (47%) (Phillips and Sweeney, 2005). Bulanda and Brown (2004) estimate that blacks face a risk of divorce nearly 1.5 times that of whites (Bulanda and Brown, 2004).

In Julie Phillips and Megan Sweeney's (2005) carefully controlled, multivariate analysis of the risk of divorce among a sample of more than 4,500 white, black, and Mexican American women, black women have a 54% greater risk of experiencing a marital separation or divorce than do white women. Foreign-born Mexican women have a 76% reduced risk compared to white women. U.S.-born Mexican American women had risks of divorce that fell between those of Caucasian and African American women. These differences persist even when comparing women with similar experience in premarital cohabitation, with similar family backgrounds, and of similar education, employment, and age at marriage.

## Religion

According to sociologists Vaughn Call and Timothy Heaton (1997, 391), "No single dimension of religion adequately describes the effect of *religious* experience on marital stability." Both *religiosity* (strength of religious commitment and participation) and religious affiliation have been linked to risk of divorce. Frequency of attendance at religious services (not necessarily the depth of beliefs) tends to be associated with the divorce rate. The greater the involvement in religious activities, the less the likelihood of divorce. But interestingly, a difference between spouses in frequency of attendance is a risk factor, too. Marriages in which wives attend services weekly and husbands don't attend have a greater risk of divorce than those marriages in which neither spouse attends religious services. The lowest risk is found among couples in which both spouses attend services regularly (Call and Heaton 1997).

Since all major religions discourage divorce, highly religious men and women are less likely to accept divorce because it violates their values. It may also be that a shared religion and participation in organized religious life affirms the couple relationship (Guttman 1993; Wineberg 1994; Call and Heaton

1997). Religiosity even seems to influence the likelihood of divorce when marital problems arise, suggesting that religion plays a role in the decision of whether or not to seek a divorce (Lowenstein 2005).

By religion, the lowest divorce rate is for Jews, followed by Catholics and then Protestants. The highest rates are found among those with no religious affiliation and those couples in religious intermarriages. However, compared with attendance, the effect of religious affiliation on divorce is a modest one, especially among marriages in which spouses are of the same religious affiliation (Call and Heaton 1997). Because the Roman Catholic Church only "allows" divorce through the use of annulments and no longer excommunicates divorced people by refusing them the sacraments, the annulment rate increased greatly over the last decades of the twentieth century (Woodward, Quade, and Kantrowitz 1995).

## Life Course Factors

Different aspects of the life course may affect the probability of divorce for some individuals, including age at time of marriage, premarital pregnancy and childbirth, cohabitation, remarriage and intergenerational transmission.

### Age at Time of Marriage

The age at which people marry is "the most consistent predictor of marital stability identified in social science research" (Heaton 2002). Young, especially adolescent, marriages are more likely to end in divorce than are marriages that take place when people are in their 20s or older. Close to 50% of those who marry before age 18 and 40% of those who marry before turning 20 divorce. Younger partners are less likely to be emotionally mature, younger marriages may be more likely to involve premarital pregnancy, and marrying "young" may be associated with curtailment of education, which has economic consequences that can undermine marital stability. Only 25% of those who marry when older than 25 end up divorced. The effect of age at marriage is not the same for all ethnic groups, however. Marrying in their teens has a "destabilizing effect" on Caucasian and African American women, but not on Mexican American women (Phillips and Sweeney 2005).

■ *Marrying young, especially in one's teens, significantly increases one's risk of divorce.*



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### Premarital Pregnancy and Childbirth

Premarital pregnancy or birth significantly increases the likelihood of divorce, the risks being 1.2 to 1.3 times greater than for women without such experiences (Kposowa). Risks are especially high if the pregnant woman is an adolescent, drops out of high school, and faces economic problems following marriage. If a woman gives birth before marriage, the likelihood for divorce in a subsequent marriage increases, especially in the early years. This negative, “destabilizing” effect of a premarital conception on marriage is stronger for African Americans than for Caucasians (Phillips and Sweeney 2005).

### Cohabitation

As shown in an earlier chapter, premarital cohabitation is associated with a higher risk of a later divorce. Whether this is an effect of cohabitation—say, by altering people’s attitudes toward marriage and divorce—or a reflection of the less traditional attitudes toward marriage and family, including attitudes toward divorce, that cohabitants bring with them into cohabitation is unclear.

### Remarriage

You might expect that having been married and divorced (at least) once would make people better at making a subsequent marriage succeed. That may seem

as intuitively sensible as would an expectation that cohabitation would create more successful marriages, yet the assumption that cohabitation would lead to success turned out to be quite off the mark. So would the expectation that people learn from and avoid the same mistakes the second (or third, or fourth, or . . .) time around. The divorce rate among those who remarry is *higher* than it is for those who enter first marriages.

It is not entirely clear why there is a higher divorce rate in remarriages. Some researchers suggest that the cause may lie in a “kinds-of-people” explanation. The probability factors associated with the kinds of people who divorced in first marriages—everything from low levels of education to unwillingness to settle for unsatisfactory marriages—are present in subsequent marriages, increasing their likelihood of divorce. Similarly, people bring their same personality problems to any new relationship. Others argue that the unique dynamics of subsequent marriages, especially the presence of stepchildren, increase the chances of divorce. In fact, subsequent marriages that involve stepchildren have twice the likelihood of divorce as first marriages (Schoen 2002).

### Intergenerational Transmission

Those whose parents divorce are subject to **intergenerational transmission**—the increased likelihood that divorce will later occur to them (Raschke 1987; Amato 1996). It is now estimated that parental divorce

increases the chance of a daughter's marriage ending within the first 5 years by as much as 70%. If both the husband's and the wife's parents have been divorced, the odds of divorce increase by 189%. How can we explain this intergenerational cycle?

Paul Amato (1996) notes that children of divorced parents are more likely to marry younger, cohabit, and experience higher levels of economic hardship. They become more pessimistic about lifelong marriage and develop more liberal attitudes toward divorce. In addition, females whose parents divorce develop less traditional attitudes about women's family roles, value self-sufficiency, and possess stronger attachments to paid employment. Each of these could raise susceptibility to divorce. Interestingly, parental "marital discord" in the absence of divorce has been found to have little consequence for their children's risk of divorce. Furthermore high-discord marriages that ended in divorce only minimally raised their children's risk of divorce. However, where low-discord marriages ended in divorce the children were especially vulnerable to divorce themselves (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

Using survey data from more than 1,300 individuals from the Study of Marriage over the Life Course, Amato examined the relative role of these factors. He found that the major effects of parental divorce that led to later divorce were acquired "problematic behaviors" (such as anger, jealousy, infidelity) and life course variables (such as age at marriage). On the other hand, the intergenerational connection was not well explained by people's attitudes toward divorce.

Amato (1996) draws other interesting conclusions:

- The increased risk of divorce holds in second marriages, as well as first marriages.
- The effects are especially pronounced in "offspring marriages" (marriages by children of divorced parents) of short duration but are not present in marriages of long duration.
- The effects are strongest when parents divorce early in their children's lives (age 12 or younger).

Keep in mind that, as with intergenerational cycles of family violence, this relationship is neither automatic nor inevitable. It is, however, an important factor that can undermine marital success. Perhaps children of divorce need to more consciously guard against behaviors that might undermine their marriages.

One way in which parental divorce may be assumed to affect children's risk of divorce is in shaping their attitudes toward divorce. Children of divorced parents,

especially daughters of divorced parents, are more likely to possess pro-divorce attitudes (Kapinus 2004). Research that examined the effect of parents' attitudes on more than 400 children of divorce (Kapinus 2004) concludes:

- There appears to be a "critical period," namely, the late teens, when parents' attitudes toward divorce have special salience to their children.
- Parental divorce affects sons' and daughters' attitudes toward divorce differently. Daughters of divorce are more likely to express "pro-divorce attitudes" than are sons of divorce.
- Diminished relationships with fathers after divorce and continued postdivorce conflict between parents may lead sons toward negative attitudes toward divorce. Yet postdivorce conflict between parents does not have the same effect on daughters.

## Family Processes

The actual day-to-day marital processes of communication—handling conflict, showing affection, and other marital interactions—may be the most important factors holding marriages together or dissolving them (Gottman 1994).

## Marital Happiness

Although it seems reasonable that there would be a strong link between marital happiness (or, rather, the lack of happiness) and divorce, this is true only during the earliest years of marriage. Low levels of liking and trusting a partner are associated with long-term outcomes such as reduced satisfaction and elevated risk of divorce. The strength of the relationship between low marital happiness and divorce decreases in later stages of marriage, however (White and Booth 1991).

Eventually, alternatives to marriage and barriers to divorce appear to influence divorce decisions more strongly than does marital happiness. With nothing better to leave for, or if there are too many obstacles to overcome in leaving, a couple might stay married even if unhappy. Although the opposite is also true—even if happy one partner might leave for a more attractive alternative—it is probably less common. The presence of alternatives to a spouse has an effect on marital stability that can be observed among both

high- and low-risk couples (that is, among those with other predisposing factors and those without).

The importance of the availability of attractive alternatives to a spouse has sometimes been overlooked as a factor accounting for divorce. Scott South, Katherine Trent, and Yang Shen (2001, 753) note that “satisfied and dissatisfied spouses alike remain, consciously or not, in the marriage market.” As explained earlier, the workplace is a central component of such a market.

### Children

Although 60% of divorces involve children, couples with children divorce less often than couples without children. The birth of the first child reduces the chance of divorce to almost nil in the year following the birth (White 1991). Furthermore, couples with two children divorce less often than couples with one child or no children (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2004). This does not mean that having children will spare parents from a divorce or that troubled spouses should become parents so that their troubles will disappear. It may well be that troubled spouses hold off having children or, if they have a child, resist having more because of their troubles. Thus, the quality of the marriage may lead to childbearing more than vice versa.

There are some situations in which the presence of children may be related to higher divorce rates. Premaritally conceived (during adolescence) children and physically or mentally limited children are associated with divorce, as are children from prior marriages or relationships. Children in general can contribute to marital dissatisfaction and possibly divorce, according to one researcher (Raschke 1987): “It could be expected that normal children at least contribute to strains in an already troubled marriage, given the consistent findings that children, especially in adolescent years, lower marital satisfaction.” At the same time, however, women without children have considerably higher divorce rates than women with children.

### Marital Problems

If you ask divorced people to give the reasons for their divorce, they are not likely to say, “I blame the changing nature of the family” or “It was demographics.” They are more likely to respond, “She was on my case all the time” or “He just didn’t understand me”; if they are charitable, they might say, “We just weren’t right for each other.” Personal characteristics leading to con-

flicts are important factors in the dissolution of relationships.

Studies of divorced men and women cite such problems as alcoholism, drug abuse, marital infidelity, sexual incompatibility, and conflicts about gender roles as relationship factors leading to their divorces. They also often cite external events—problems with in-laws or the effect of jobs (Amato and Previti 2003). Paul Amato and Denise Previti (2003) found the most common reasons given by their sample to be infidelity, incompatibility, alcohol or drug use, growing apart, personality problems, lack of communication, and abuse (physical or mental).

Gender differences in reasons for divorce indicate that, in general, women cite emotional or relationship reasons, incompatibility, infidelity, unhappiness, and insufficient love, as well as aspects of their former husband’s personality or behaviors (such as abusiveness, neglect of children or home, and substance use). They are less likely to blame themselves. Men more often cite external factors or claim ignorance—they say they do not know what happened (Amato and Previti 2003).

People of high socioeconomic status are more likely to stress communication problems, incompatibility of or changes in values or interests, and their former spouse’s self-centeredness. People of low socioeconomic status more often mention such things as financial problems, physical abuse, going out with the boys or girls, employment problems, neglect of home responsibilities, and drinking.

We know from studying enduring marriages that marriages often continue in the face of such problems. Recent research (Amato and Rogers 1997) on the connections between marital problems and divorce reveals that reports of marital problems in 1980 were associated with later divorce between 1980 and 1992. Based on interviews with almost 2,000 people, Paul Amato and Stacy Rogers (1997) found the following:

- Although men’s and women’s reports differed in the particular problems they emphasized, both predicted divorce equally well.
- Certain problems such as jealousy, moodiness, anger, poor communication, and drinking increased the odds of later divorce; sexual infidelity was an especially strong predictor of divorce.
- People who later divorce report a higher number of problems as early as 9 to 12 years before their divorce. Thus, their assessments of problems are not after-the-fact justifications concocted to account for or justify their divorce.

- Marital problems are **proximal causes** of later divorce. They are features of the relationship that directly raise the probability of divorce. There are also background characteristics, such as age at marriage, prior cohabitation, education, income, church attendance, and parental divorce that operate as more **distal causes**. These are brought by each spouse to the relationship and raise the likelihood that marital problems will later arise.

## No-Fault Divorce

Since 1970, beginning with California's Family Law Act, all 50 states have adopted **no-fault divorce**—the legal dissolution of a marriage in which guilt or fault by one or both spouses does not have to be established. It is unclear exactly how or how much no-fault divorce has affected divorce rates. Some contend that liberalization of divorce law led to increases in the divorce rate in both the United States and in other countries (for example, Scotland, England, and Wales) (Lowenstein 2005). It is debatable that this has, by itself, affected the divorce rate. Unambiguously, however, liberalization of divorce law has altered the process of divorce by decreasing the time involved in the legal process and it has altered the grounds for determining postdivorce financial responsibility.

## The Stations of the Divorce Process

Divorce is not a single event. You don't wake up one morning and say, "I'm getting a divorce," and then leave. It's a far more complicated process (Kitson and Morgan 1991). It may start with little things that at first you hardly notice—a rude remark, thoughtlessness, an unreasonable act, a "closedness." Whatever the particulars may be, they begin to add up. Other times, however, the sources of unhappiness are more blatant—yelling, threatening, or battering. For whatever reasons, the marriage eventually becomes unsatisfactory; one or both partners become unhappy.

We know less about the process of marital breakdown and divorce than we ought to, especially given its prevalence in the United States. We understand

more about falling in love and courtship than we do about falling out of love and divorce (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

Anthropologist Paul Bohannan (1970b) developed one of the more influential descriptive models of the divorce process. (For a discussion of other models, see Guttman 1993.) Bohannan's model consists of six **stations of divorce**: emotional, legal, economic, coparental, community, and psychic. As people divorce, they undergo these stations, or "divorces," although they neither have a particular order nor begin and end simultaneously. The level of intensity of these different divorces varies at different times and for different couples.

- *The emotional divorce.* The emotional divorce, when one spouse (or both) begins to disengage from the marriage, to feel "something isn't quite right," begins well before the legal divorce. But even as divorce papers are filed, the partners may find themselves feeling ambivalent. Because the emotional divorce is not complete, they may try to reconcile. The partners may undermine each other's self-esteem with indifference or destructive criticism. From the outside, the marriage may appear to be functioning adequately, but its heart is missing.
- *The legal divorce.* The legal divorce is the court-ordered termination of a marriage. Although we tend to associate "divorce" with the legal divorce, by the time someone is "officially" legally divorced much has happened. Furthermore, long after the legal decree couples may still be working their way through the other dimensions of divorce. The legal decree permits divorced spouses to remarry and conduct themselves in a way that is legally independent of each other. The legal divorce also sets the terms for the division of property and child custody, issues that may lead to bitterly contested divorce battles. Many of the unresolved issues of the emotional divorce, such as feelings of hurt and betrayal, may be acted out during the legal divorce. No-fault divorce was intended to minimize these issues.
- *The economic divorce.* The economic basis of marriage often becomes most painfully apparent during the economic divorce. Most property acquired during a marriage is considered joint property and is divided between the divorcing spouses. The property settlement is based on the assumption that each spouse contributes to the estate. This contri-

bution may be nonmonetary, as in the case of traditional homemakers whose “moral assistance and domestic services” permitted their husbands to work outside the home. As part of the economic divorce, alimony and child support may be ordered by the court. As the partners go their own ways, husbands and wives often experience different consequences in their standards of living as they set up separate households and no longer pool their resources. Women usually experience a decline in their standards of living, men sometimes see theirs increase.

- *The coparental divorce.* Marriages end, but parenthood does not. Spouses may divorce each other, but they do not divorce their children. (Even those parents who never see their children remain fathers and mothers.) This may be the most complicated aspect of divorce, because it also gives rise to single-parent families and, in most cases, stepfamilies, considered in more detail in Chapter 15. As parents divorce, issues of child custody, visitation, and support must be dealt with. The effect of divorce on children must be understood, negative consequences must be minimized as much as possible, and new ways of relating to the children and former spouses must be developed, keeping the children’s best interest foremost in mind.
- *The community divorce.* When people divorce, their social world changes. In-laws become ex-laws; often they lose (or stop) contact. (This is particularly troublesome when in-laws are also grandparents.) Old friends may choose sides or drop out; they may not be as supportive as desired. New friends may replace old ones as divorced men and women begin dating again. They may enter the singles subculture, where activities center on dating. Single parents may feel isolated from such activities because childrearing often leaves them no leisure and diminished income leaves them no money.
- *The psychic divorce.* The psychic divorce is accomplished when a former spouse becomes irrelevant to a sense of self and emotional well-being. For example, people are psychically divorced when they learn that an ex-spouse has gotten a promotion; married someone smarter and better looking; bought a 4 × 4; and received an honorary doctorate—and they don’t care. As part of the psychic divorce, each partner develops a sense of independence, completeness, and stability. Navigating through the psy-

chic station may be more difficult and take a good deal longer than it does to experience the other stations of divorce.

The divorce process, as you can see, is complex. It takes place on many different levels. Those who go through divorce experience both pain and liberation but eventually emerge as new women and men living a dramatically different life.

### Reflections

*From what you know about divorce*, either from your own experience as a child or partner or from the experiences of friends or other family members, how well does Bohannon’s six-station model describe the experience? Are some stages more difficult than others? Why?

## Uncoupling: The Process of Separation

Perhaps the crucial event in a marital breakdown is the act of separation. Although separation generally precedes divorce, not all separations lead to divorce. Furthermore, those that do may first involve attempts at reconciliation, in that about one-third of the divorced women become divorced after attempting at least one marital reconciliation (Wineberg 1999). A statistic now more than a decade old indicates that perhaps 1 in 10 marriages experiences a separation and reconciliation (Wineberg and McCarthy 1993). Those who reconcile may have separated to dramatize their complaints, create emotional distance, or dissipate their anger (Kitson 1985).

People do not suddenly separate or divorce. Instead, they gradually move apart through a set of fairly predictable stages. Sociologist Diane Vaughan (1986) calls this process *uncoupling*. The process appears to be the same for married or unmarried couples and for gay or lesbian relationships. The length of time together does not seem to affect the process.

“Uncoupling begins,” Vaughan observes, “as a quiet, unilateral process.” Usually one person, the **initiator**, is unhappy or dissatisfied but keeps such feelings to himself or herself. Because the dissatisfied partner is unable to find satisfaction within the relationship, he

■ *In the early phases of the process of separation, estrangement can grow before both parties are fully aware of what has happened.*



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or she begins turning elsewhere. This is not a malicious or intentional turning away; it is done to find self-validation without leaving the relationship. In doing so, however, the dissatisfied partner “creates a small territory independent of the coupled identity” (Vaughan 1986).

Eventually, the initiator decides that he or she can no longer go on. She or he may go through a process of mourning the demise of what is still an intact marriage (Emery 1994, cited in Amato 2000).

After the relationship ends, initiators have better adjustment to divorce and carry less postdivorce attachment to their former spouses (Wang and Amato 2000).

### Reflections

*From your experience*, how well does “uncoupling” describe the process of separating from someone you care about? Are there missing elements or elements that should be emphasized? What about separation distress? In your experience, what was it like? What things were you able to do to alleviate it? What advice would you give others about it?

Uncoupling does not end when the end of a relationship is announced or even when the couple physically separates. Acknowledging that the relationship cannot be saved represents the beginning of the last stage of uncoupling. Diane Vaughan (1986) describes the process:

Partners begin to put the relationship behind them. They acknowledge that the relationship is unsalvageable. Through the process of mourning they, too, eventually arrive at an account that explains this unexpected denouement. “Getting over” a relationship does not mean relinquishing that part of our lives that we shared with another but rather coming to some conclusion that allows us to accept and understand its altered significance. Once we develop such an account, we can incorporate it into our lives and go on.

## The New Self: Separation Distress and Postdivorce Identity

Examining the experiences of those who divorce may be as good a way as any to see how much our married self becomes part of our deepest self. When people separate or divorce, many feel as if they have “lost an arm or a leg.” This analogy, as well as the traditional marriage rite in which a man and a woman are pronounced “one,” reveals an important truth of marriage: The constant association of both partners makes each almost a physical part of the other. This dynamic is true even if two people are locked in conflict; they, too, are attached to each other (Masheter 1991).

## Separation Distress

Most newly separated people do not know what to expect. There are no divorce ceremonies or rituals to mark this major turning point. Yet people need to understand divorce to alleviate some of its pain and burden. Except for the death of a spouse, divorce is the greatest stress-producing event in life (Holmes and Rahe 1967). The changes that take place during separation are crucial because at this point a person's emotions are at their rawest and most profound. Men and women react differently during this period. Many people experience **separation distress**, situational anxiety caused by separation from an attachment figure. Researchers have considerable knowledge about the negative consequences accompanying marital separation, some of which we discuss here. In looking at this negative effect, however, we need to keep in mind that eventually the negative aspects of separation may be balanced by positive aspects, such as the possibility of finding a more compatible partner, constructing a better (or different) life, developing new dimensions of the self, enhancing self-esteem, and marrying a better parent for the children. These positive consequences may follow, or be intertwined with, separation distress. In the pain of separation, we may forget that a new self is being born.

Almost everyone suffers separation distress when a marriage breaks up. The distress is real but, fortunately, does not last forever (although it may seem so). The distress is situational and is modified by numerous external factors. About the only men and women who do not experience distress are those whose marriages were riddled by high levels of conflict. In these cases, one or both partners may view the separation with relief (Raschke 1987).

During separation distress, almost all attention is centered on the missing partner and is accompanied by apprehensiveness, anxiety, fear, and often panic. "What am I going to do?" "What is he or she doing?" "I need him . . . I need her . . . I hate him . . . I love him . . . I hate her . . . I love her."

Sometimes, however, the immediate effect of separation is not distress but euphoria. This usually results from feeling that the former spouse is not necessary, that the old fights and the spouse's criticism are gone forever, and that life will now be full of possibilities and excitement. That euphoria is soon gone. Almost everyone falls back into separation distress.

Whether a person had warning and time to prepare for a separation affects separation distress. An

unexpected separation is probably most painful for the partner who is left. Separations that take place during the first 2 years of marriage, however, are less difficult for the husband and wife to weather. Those couples who separate after 2 years find separation more difficult because it seems to take about 2 years for people to become emotionally and socially integrated into marriage and their marital roles (Weiss 1975). After that point, additional years of marriage seem to make little difference in the spouses' reaction to separation.

As the separation continues, separation distress slowly gives way to loneliness. Eventually, loneliness becomes the most prominent feature of the broken relationship. Old friends can sometimes help provide stability for a person experiencing a marital breakup, but those who give comfort need to be able to tolerate the other person's loneliness.

## Establishing a Postdivorce Identity

A person goes through two distinct phases in establishing a new identity following marital separation: *transition* and *recovery* (Weiss 1975). The transition period begins with the separation and is characterized by separation distress and then loneliness. In this period's later stages, most people begin functioning in an orderly way again, although they still may experience bouts of upset and turmoil. The transition period generally ends within the first year. During this time, individuals have already begun making decisions that provide the framework for new selves. They have entered the role of single parent or noncustodial parent, have found a new place to live, have made important career and financial decisions, and have begun to date. Their new lives are taking shape.

The recovery period usually begins in the second year and lasts between 1 and 3 years. By this time, the separated or divorced individual has already created a reasonably stable pattern of life. The marriage is becoming more of a distant memory, and the former spouse does not arouse the intense passions she or he once did. Mood swings are not as extreme, and periods of depression are fewer. Yet the individual still has self-doubts that lie just beneath the surface. A sudden reversal, a bad time with the children, or doubts about a romantic involvement can suddenly destroy a divorced person's confidence. By the end of the recovery period, the distress has passed. It may take some people longer than others to recover because each person experiences the process in his or her own way. But



## Issues and Insights Gender- and Divorce-Related Stressors



To some degree, gender influences how individuals respond to divorce. Research indicates that divorced men experience greater emotional distress and report more suicidal thoughts than do women (Riesman and Gerstel 1985; Rosengren, Wedel, and Wilhelmsen 1989; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980). Because women are more likely to initiate divorce, research suggests that they experience fewer postdivorce psychological problems. This may be because they have begun the detachment process earlier than men (Lawson and Thompson 1996). Furthermore, divorced men exhibit higher rates of auto accidents, alcohol abuse, diabetes, heart disease, and mental illness than do divorced women. Higher rates of mortality have been found to exist among divorced men and women, especially if they have remarried or are cohabiting (Hemstrom 1996).

The immediate effect of divorce on women is economic. This is especially true if they become the primary custodial parent. Many women who are granted child support do not receive the full amount, and as many as one in four receive nothing. A combination of lowered earning power, increased expenses, and lack of financial support results in a decreased standard of living for the divorced mother and her children.

The psychological responses experienced among partners are numerous, ranging from anger to depression to ambivalence. Although some men suffer little distress following divorce (Albrecht 1980), generally men seem to experience the greater emotional distress, possibly because of their more frequent social isolation (Reismann 1990). In addition, men report greater attachment to their former spouses and are more likely to desire to rekindle the marriage (Bloom, and Kindel 1985).

Almost 60% of divorces involve children (Kitson and Morgan 1991), and because most children of

divorced parents end up in the physical custody of their mothers, fathers must face new emotional territory regarding these issues and their relationships with their children.

Single parenting for the mother involves added responsibility to an already overburdened workload. Noncustodial parenting raises new role expectations concerning the quality of the parent-child relationship, normative behaviors, and discipline.

Social support is positively correlated with lower distress and positive adjustment. Additionally, as with other stressors in a person's life, it is often the individual's perception of the event, not the stress itself that influences how a person adjusts to change. If those experiencing separation and divorce can begin to view and accept their changing circumstances as presenting new challenges and opportunities, there is a greater likelihood that the physiological and psychological symptoms of stress that follow divorce can be reduced.

most are surprised by how long the recovery takes—they forget that they are undergoing a major discontinuity in their lives.

### Dating Again

A new partner reduces much of the distress caused by separation. A new relationship prevents the loneliness caused by emotional isolation. It also reinforces a person's sense of self-worth. It will not necessarily eliminate separation distress caused by the disruption of intimate personal relations with the former partner, children, friends, and relatives, but it "often produces a decline in depression, health complaints, and visits to the doctor, and an increase in self-esteem. When

someone loves you and values you, you begin thinking that you are worth caring about" (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, 78–79).

Initiating this process may be stressful. A first date after years of marriage and subsequent months of singlehood evokes some of the same emotions felt by inexperienced adolescents (Spanier and Thompson 1987).

For many divorced men and women, the greatest problem is how to meet other unmarried people. They believe that marriage has put them "out of circulation," and many are not sure how to get back in. Because of the marriage squeeze, separated and divorced men in their 20s and 30s are at a particular disadvantage: considerably fewer women are available than men. The squeeze reverses itself at age 40 when there are

significantly fewer single men available. The problem of meeting others is most acute for single mothers who are full-time parents in the home because they lack opportunities to meet potential partners. Divorced men, having fewer childcare responsibilities and more income than divorced women, tend to have more active social lives.

Several features of dating following separation and divorce differ from premarital dating. First, dating does not seem to be a leisurely matter. Divorced people are often too pressed for time to waste it on a first date that might not go well. Second, dating may be less spontaneous if the divorced woman or man has primary responsibility for children. The parent must make arrangements about childcare; he or she may wish not to involve the children in dating. Third, finances may be strained; divorced mothers may have income only from low-paying or part-time jobs or TANF benefits yet have many childcare expenses. In some cases, a father's finances may be strained by paying alimony or child support. Finally, separated and divorced men and women often have a changed sexual ethic based on the simple fact that there are few divorced virgins (Spanier and Thompson 1987).

Sexual relationships are often an important component in the lives of separated and divorced men and women. Engaging in sexual relations for the first time following separation may help people accept their newly acquired single status. Because sexual fidelity is an important element in marriage, becoming sexually active with someone other than an ex-spouse is a dramatic symbol that the old marriage vows are no longer valid.

## Consequences of Divorce

Most divorces are not contested; between 85% and 90% are settled out of court through negotiations between spouses or their lawyers. But divorce, whether it is amicable or not, is a complex legal process involving highly charged feelings about custody, property, and children (who are sometimes treated by angry partners as property to be fought over).

### Economic Consequences of Divorce

Probably the most damaging consequences of the no-fault divorce laws are that they systematically impoverish divorced women and their children. Following

divorce, women are primarily responsible for both childrearing *and* economic support (Maccoby et al. 1993). As a result, women are at a greater risk for poverty than they were during their marriage. Even if a woman is not plunged into poverty, she often experiences a dramatic downward turn in her economic condition (Garrison 1994; Morgan 1991). A single mother's income shows about a 27% decline (Peterson 1996; Smock 1993).

Husbands typically enhance their earning capacity during marriage. In contrast, wives generally decrease their earning capacity because they either quit or limit their participation in the workforce to fulfill family roles. This withdrawal from full participation limits their earning capacity when they reenter the workforce. Divorced homemakers have outdated experience, few skills, and no seniority. Thus, they may not be "equal" to their former husbands at the point of divorce. Rules that treat a woman as if she is equal to her husband simply serve to deprive her of the financial support she needs (Weitzman 1985).

Although it is often claimed that unlike women, men experience enhanced financial well-being following divorce, this outcome depends on the division of wage earning that characterized the failed marriage. For white men who contributed less than 60% of their marital standard of living, divorce precipitates a decline in their living standards. On the other hand, men whose share of the household income was greater than 80% experience significant increases in their living standards after their marriages end (McManus and DiPrete 2001).

Another factor that leads to women's economic slide is lack of child support. When marriage ends, many women face the triple consequences of gender, ethnic, and age discrimination as they seek to support themselves and their children. Because the workplace favors men in terms of opportunity and income, separation and divorce does not affect them as adversely. Whereas the disparities in income between Caucasian and African American women are significant during marriage, following a divorce Caucasian women suffer a relatively greater decline in their standards of living and the income levels of Caucasian and African American women converge (Morgan 1991). Mexican American women suffer relatively less decline in economic status than do Anglo American women because Latinas are already more economically disadvantaged. But because their lives have prepared them for greater economic adversity, Latinas' emotional well-being appears to suffer less than does that of Anglo American women following divorce (Wagner 1993).

## Alimony and Child Support

**Alimony** is the money payment a former spouse makes to the other to meet his or her economic needs. It is *not* intended to be punitive. It is instead designed to address the economic vulnerability that a spouse may find himself or herself in after the end of the marriage. Alimony is paid until the receiving spouse remarries or dies. Death of the paying spouse may not end alimony obligations, however. The deceased's estate may be required to continue to honor the alimony decision even after the paying spouse dies (<http://www.answers.com/topic/alimony>).

Alimony is different from **child support**—the monetary payments made by the noncustodial spouse to the custodial spouse to assist in childrearing expenses. For many women, their source of income changes upon divorce from primarily joint wages earned during marriage to their own wages, supplemented by child support payments, alimony, help from relatives, and welfare.

The legal criteria around both alimony and child support have undergone some notable changes in the past two decades. The Child Support Enforcement Amendments, passed in 1984, and the Family Support Act of 1988 require states to deduct delinquent support from fathers' paychecks, authorize judges to use their discretion when support agreements cannot be met, and mandate periodic reviews of award levels to keep up with the rate of inflation. In addition, all states implemented automatic wage withholding of child support in 1994. Chien-Chung Huang and colleagues (2005) contend that nearly every year for the past two decades, Congress has passed new laws designed to strengthen child support enforcement. Furthermore, spending by both state and federal governments on child support enforcement increased from less than \$1 billion a year in 1978 to \$5.2 billion in 2002 (Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005). Recent research has shown that enforcement has had a beneficial effect on compliance with child support orders (Meyer and Bartfeld 1996).

Data also indicate that most children entitled to child support from their fathers do not receive it (Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005). One determinant of fathers' compliance with their support obligations is their ability to pay. When child support obligations exceed 35% of a father's income, he is less likely to comply (Meyer and Bartfeld 1996). In general, lower-income fathers are required to pay greater shares of their income in child support. Compliance

by these fathers would “moderately improve” if their child support obligations were in line with those of higher-earning fathers. Yet, reducing the amount fathers have to pay would result in a “net loss” of about 38% to children (Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005).

People are generally more approving, at least in principle, of child support, than they are of alimony. In the past, alimony represented the continuation of the husband's responsibility to support his wife. Currently, laws determine that alimony be awarded on the basis of need to those women or men who would otherwise be indigent. At the same time, some assert that alimony represents the return of a woman's “investment” in marriage (Oster 1987; Weitzman 1985). Lenore Weitzman (1985) argues that a woman's homemaking and childcare activities must be considered important contributions to her husband's present and future earnings. If divorce rules do not give a wife a share of her husband's enhanced earning capacity, then the “investment” she made in her spouse's future earnings is discounted. According to Weitzman, alimony and child support awards should be made to divorced women in recognition of the wife's primary childcare responsibilities and her contribution to her ex-husband's work or career. Such awards will help raise divorced women and children above the level of poverty to which they have been cast as a result of no-fault divorce's specious equality.

### Reflections

**Why are alimony** and child support often such emotional issues in divorce? On what basis should alimony be awarded? Child support? Why do many noncustodial parents fail to pay child support? What could be done to improve their likelihood of supporting their children?

## Employment

The economic effect of divorce on women with children is especially difficult because their employment opportunities are often constrained by the necessity of caring for children (Maccoby et al. 1993). Childcare costs may consume a third or more of a poor single mother's income. Women may work fewer hours because of the need to care for their children.

Separation and divorce dramatically change many mothers' employment patterns (Morgan 1991). If a mother was not employed before separation, she is

## Issues and Insights Lesbians, Gay Men, and Divorce



Although there are no reliable studies, it is estimated that about one-fifth of gay men and one-third of lesbians have been married to someone of the opposite sex. Estimates of bisexual men and women who are married run into the millions. Relatively few gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are consciously aware of their sexual orientation at the time they marry. Those who are aware may not disclose their feelings to their prospective partners. When married lesbians and gay men acknowledge their gayness to themselves, they often feel that they are “living a lie” in their marriage. Although they may deeply love their spouses, most eventually divorce.

How is it that lesbians and gay men marry heterosexuals in the first place? As shown in Chapter 6, the gay or lesbian identity process is difficult and complex. Because of fear and denial, some gay men and lesbians are unable to acknowledge their sexual feelings. They believe or hope they are heterosexual and do their utmost to suppress their same-sex fantasies or behaviors. They often believe that their homosexuality is

just a “phase.” Typically they hold negative stereotypes about homosexuality and cannot bring themselves to believe or accept that they might be “one of them.” Marriage is one way of convincing themselves that they are heterosexual. In addition to “curing” or denying their gayness, their motivations to marry are no different from heterosexuals (Bozett 1987). Like heterosexuals, gay men and lesbians marry because of pressure from family, friends, and fiancé, genuine love for the fiancé, the wish for companionship, and the desire to have children.

When husbands or wives discover their partner’s homosexuality or bisexuality, they may initially experience shock; others experience temporary relief. Mysteries are explained: why the spouse disappears for periods of time, why mysterious phone calls occur, the spouse’s lack of sexual interest. But whether shocked or relieved, inevitably the heterosexual spouse feels deceived or stupid. Many feel shame (Hays and Samuels 1987). One woman, who felt ashamed to tell anyone of her distress, recalled, “His coming out of the closet in some ways put the family in the closet” (Hill 1987). At the same time, the gay, lesbian, or bisexual spouse often feels deeply grieved (Voeller 1980): Many people date, marry, and be-

come parents, only to realize too late the error they made. They then find themselves deeply pained, fearful of losing their children through lawsuits, of losing spouses they care for but are ill suited to, of depriving their spouses and themselves of more deeply appropriate and meaningful relationships, and of causing their friends and other relatives deep pain.

When gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals disclose their orientation to their spouses, separation and divorce are the usual outcomes. Many gay men and lesbians are also parents when they separate from their spouses. It is generally important for them to affirm their identities both as gay or lesbian and as a parent (Bozett 1989c). This is especially important because negative stereotypes portray gay men and lesbians as “antifamily.” Men and women begin to fuse their identities as gay or lesbian with their parental role.

A study of gay fathers reported that gay men usually do not reveal their orientation to their children unless the parents are separating or the gay father develops a gay love relationship (Bozett 1989c). As with divorced fathers in general, gay fathers usually do not have custody of the children, but lesbians, like other divorced women, are more likely to have custody (Bozett 1989b).

likely to seek a job following the split-up. The reason is simple: if she and her children relied on alimony and child support alone, they would soon find themselves on the street. Most employed single mothers are still on the verge of financial disaster, however. On the average, they earn less than married fathers. This is partly because women tend to earn less than men and partly because they work fewer hours, primarily because of childcare responsibilities (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986). The general problems of women’s lower earning capacity and lack of adequate childcare are

particularly severe for single mothers. Gender discrimination in employment and lack of societal support for childcare condemn millions of single mothers and their children to poverty.

### Noneconomic Consequences of Divorce

In comparison to married people, the picture of divorced individuals is fairly bleak. Reviewing the research literature of the 1990s, Paul Amato (2000) notes

the following: Compared with married people, divorced individuals experience more psychological distress, poorer self-concepts, lower levels of psychological well-being, lower levels of happiness, more social isolation, less satisfying sex lives, and more negative life events. They also have greater risks of mortality and report more health problems. Compared to married women and men, major depression is three times higher for separated or divorced women and *nine times higher for separated or divorced men*. British data reveal a similar story. Marital separation is accompanied by significant increases in heavy drinking during the period of separation (Power, Rogers, and Hope 2000). Also, Terrance Wade and David Pevalin (2004) found that for those exiting a marriage through separation and divorce there is a much higher prevalence of mental health problems. Of note, they also found that such problems are evident before the marital disruption, indicating that the relationship between mental health and divorce goes both ways.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, in their book *The Case for Marriage* (2000), take on the question of whether being married makes people happier or whether it is happier people who get married and *stay* married. Citing research that compared the emotional health of a sample of people over time—some who married and stayed married, some who never married or remained divorced, and others who married and divorced—they report the following: “When people married, their mental health improved—consistently and substantially. Meanwhile, over the same period, when people separated and divorced, they suffered substantial deterioration in mental and emotional well-being, including increases in depression and declines in reported happiness. . . . Those who dissolved a marriage also reported less personal mastery, fewer positive relations with others, less purpose in life, and less self-acceptance than their married peers did.”

Waite and Gallagher (2000) also note that compared to married people, divorced (and widowed) women and men were three times as likely to commit suicide. Among the divorced, as among the general population, more men than women commit suicide. However, divorced women are “the most likely to commit suicide, followed by widowed, never-married and married, in that order.” As parents, divorced individuals have more difficulty raising children. They display more role strain, whether they are custodial or noncustodial parents, and they display less authoritative parenting styles (Amato 2000).

Despite the stark picture that surfaces, for some people divorce is associated with positive consequences. These include higher levels of personal growth, greater autonomy, and—for some women—improvements in self-confidence, career opportunities, social lives, and happiness, as well as a stronger sense of control (Amato 2000). In addition, we would be remiss if we didn’t point out evidence suggesting that remaining unhappily married is worse than divorcing. People who find themselves in “long-term low-quality marriages” are less happy than those who divorce and remarry. They also have lower overall life satisfaction, lower overall health, and lower self-esteem than those who divorce and remain single (Hawkins and Booth 2005).

## Children and Divorce

Slightly more than half of all divorces involve children. Popular images of divorce depict “broken homes,” but it is important to remember that an intact nuclear family, merely because it is intact, does not guarantee children an advantage over children in a single-parent family or a stepfamily. A traditional family wracked with spousal violence, sexual or physical abuse of children, alcoholism, neglect, severe conflict, or psychopathology creates a destructive environment likely to inhibit children’s healthy development. Living in a two-parent family with severe marital conflict is often more harmful to children than living in a tranquil single-parent family or stepfamily. Children living in happy two-parent families appear to be the best adjusted, and those from conflict-ridden two-parent families appear to be the worst adjusted. Children from single-parent families are in the middle. The key to children’s adjustment following divorce is a lack of conflict between divorced parents (Kline, Johnston, and Tschann 1991).

Telling children that their parents are separating is one of the most difficult and unhappy events in life. Whether or not the parents are relieved about the separation, they often feel extremely guilty about their children. Many children may not even be aware of parental discord (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Even those that are may be upset by the separation, but their distress may not be immediately apparent.

Qualitative research by Heather Westberg, Thorana Nelson, and Kathleen Piercy (2002) indicates that

■ *Notifying children of a decision to divorce is difficult for both the parents and children.*



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children's reaction is influenced by how the news is disclosed and is shaped by the perception that life will be relatively better or relatively worse afterward. For those to whom the news was disclosed long before the divorce occurred, by the time it "finally" happened it was experienced as relief.

As psychologist Judith Wallerstein suggested in her book, *Second Chances* (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989), divorce is differently experienced within the family. For at least one of the divorcing spouses, divorce is welcomed as an escape from an unpleasant or unfulfilling relationship. Both spouses may come to appreciate the "second chance" they receive with divorce: the opportunity to make a better choice and build themselves a better relationship. Children may not see the breakup of their parents' marriage as an "opportunity." However, under certain circumstances—especially "in households where parents engage in a long-term process of overt, unresolved conflict," children are at risk of developing emotional and developmental problems so long as their parents stay together (Booth and Amato 2001). For such children, divorce may, indeed, come as a relief.

Lisa Strohschein (2005) found that children's antisocial behaviors such as bullying and lying were reduced after divorce of parents who had been experiencing high levels of dysfunction. The stress relief that comes with divorce may, however, become apparent only after enough time passes (Strohschein 2005).

Conversely, when parental conflict is limited and kept from the children, the risk of developmental and

emotional problems is low. But for those children from low-conflict parental marriages, divorce may represent "an unexpected, unwelcome, and uncontrollable event." They face the loss of one parent, the emotional distress of the remaining parent, and perhaps a decline in standard of living (Booth and Amato 2001).

## The Three Stages of Divorce for Children

Part of the difficulty in determining the effect of divorce on children is a failure to recognize that, just as it is for adults, divorce is a process as opposed to a single event. Divorce comprises a series of events and changes in life circumstances. Many studies focus on only one part of the process and identify that part with divorce itself. Yet at different points in the process, children are confronted with different tasks and adopt different coping strategies. Furthermore, the diversity of children's responses to divorce is the result, in part, of differences in temperament, gender, age, and past experiences.

A study by psychologist Judith Wallerstein (1997) found that children from divorced families suffered both emotionally and developmentally. Young children fared worse than older children. Depending on the point in the process, boys tend to do less well than girls. In the "crisis period" of the 2 years following separation, boys' suffering is especially evident. This may be because they must internalize different gendered styles of reacting to distress. It is also the case,

however, that after separation most boys live with their mothers and not their fathers. This, too, can exacerbate their suffering (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

According to Wallerstein, children experience divorce as a three-stage process. Studying 60 California families during a 5-year period, she argued that divorce consisted of the initial, transition, and reestablishment stages:

- *Initial stage.* The initial stage, following the decision to separate, was extremely stressful; conflict escalated, and unhappiness was endemic. The children's aggressive responses were magnified by the parents' inability to cope because of the crisis in their own lives.
- *Transition stage.* The transition stage began about a year after the separation, when the extreme emotional responses of the children had diminished or disappeared. The period was characterized by restructuring of the family and by economic and social changes: living with only one parent and visiting the other, moving, making new friends and losing old ones, financial stress, and so on. The transition period lasted between 2 and 3 years for half the families in the study.
- *Restabilization stage.* Families had reached the restabilization stage by the end of 5 years. Economic and social changes had been incorporated into daily living. The postdivorce family, usually a single-parent family or stepfamily, had been formed.

■ *Children react differently to divorce depending on their age. Most feel sad, but the eventual outcome for children depends on many factors, including having competent and caring custodial parent, siblings, and friends and their own resiliency. The postdivorce relationship between parents and the custodial parent's economic situation are also important factors.*



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## Children's Responses to Divorce

Decisive in children's responses to divorce are their age and developmental stage (Guttman 1993). A child's age affects how the response to one parent leaving home, changes (usually downward) in socioeconomic status, moving from one home to another, transferring schools, making new friends, and so on.

### Developmental Tasks of Divorce

Judith Wallerstein suggested that children must undertake six developmental tasks when their parents divorce (Wallerstein 1983). The first two tasks need to be resolved during the first year. The other tasks may be worked on later; often they may need to be reworked because the issues often recur. How children resolve these tasks differs by age and social development. The tasks are as follows:

- *Acknowledging parental separation.* Children often feel overwhelmed by feelings of rejection, sadness, anger, and abandonment. They may try to cope with them by denying that their parents are "really" separating. They need to accept their parents' separating and to face their fears.
- *Disengaging from parental conflicts.* Children need to psychologically distance themselves from their parents' conflicts and problems. They require such distance so that they can continue to function in

their everyday activities without being overwhelmed by their parents' crisis.

- *Resolving loss.* Children lose not only their familiar parental relationship but also their everyday routines and structures. They need to accept these losses and focus on building new relationships, friends, and routines.
- *Resolving anger and self-blame.* Children, especially young ones, often blame themselves for the divorce. They are angry with their parents for disturbing their world. Many often “wish” their parents would divorce, and when their parents do, they feel responsible and guilty for “causing” it.
- *Accepting the finality of divorce.* Children need to realize that their parents will probably not get back together. Younger children hold “fairy tale” wishes that their parents will reunite and “live happily ever after.” The older the child is, the easier it is for him or her to accept the divorce.
- *Achieving realistic expectations for later relationship success.* Children need to understand that their parents' divorce does not condemn them to unsuccessful relationships as adults. They are not damaged by witnessing their parents' marriage; they can have fulfilling relationships themselves.

**YOUNGER CHILDREN.** Younger children react to the initial news of a parental breakup in many different ways. Feelings range from guilt to anger and from sorrow to relief, often vacillating among all of these. Preadolescent children, who seem to experience a deep sadness and anxiety about the future, are usually the most upset. Some may regress to immature behavior, wetting their beds or becoming excessively possessive. Most children, regardless of their age, are angry because of the separation. Very young children tend to have more temper tantrums. Slightly older children become aggressive in their play, games, and fantasies—for example, pretending to hit one of their parents.

A recent study using longitudinal data collected over a 12-year period examines parent–child relationships before and after divorce. Researchers found that marital discord may exacerbate children's behavior problems, making them more difficult to manage (Amato and Booth 1996). Because discord between parents often preoccupies and distracts them from the tasks of parenting, they appear unavailable and unable to deal with their children's needs. This study reinforced a growing body of evidence showing that many

problems assumed to be caused by divorce are present before marital disruption.

School-age children may blame one parent and direct their anger toward him or her, believing the other one innocent. But even in these cases the reactions are varied. If the father moves out of the house, the children may blame the mother for making him go or they may be angry at the father for abandoning them, regardless of reality. Younger schoolchildren who blame the mother often mix anger with placating behavior, fearing she will leave them. Preschool children often blame themselves, feeling that they drove their parents apart by being naughty or messy. They beg their parents to stay, promising to be better. It is heartbreaking to hear a child say, “Mommy, tell Daddy I'll be good. Tell him to come back. I'll be good. He won't be mad at me anymore.” A study of 121 white children between the ages of 6 and 12 found that about 33% initially blamed themselves for their parents' divorce. After a year, the figure dropped to 20% (Healy, Stewart, and Copeland 1993). The largest factor in self-blaming was being caught in the middle of parental conflict. Children who blamed themselves displayed more psychological symptoms and behavior problems than those who did not blame themselves.

When parents separate, children want to know with whom they are going to live. If they feel strong bonds with the parent who leaves, they want to know when they can see him or her. If they have brothers or sisters, they want to know if they will remain with their siblings. They especially want to know what will happen to them if the parent they are living with dies. Will they go to their grandparents, their other parent, an aunt or uncle, or a foster home? These are practical questions, and children have a right to answers. They need to know what lies ahead for them amid the turmoil of a family split-up so that they can prepare for the changes.

Some parents report that their children seemed to do better psychologically than they themselves did after a split-up. Children often have more strength and inner resources than parents realize. The outcome of separation for children, Robert Weiss (1975) observes, depends on several factors related to the children's age. Young children need a competent and loving parent to take care of them; they tend to do poorly when a parenting adult becomes enmeshed in constant turmoil, depression, and worry. With older, preadolescent children, the presence of brothers and sisters helps because the children have others to play with and rely on in addition to the single parent. If they have good



friends or do well in school, this contributes to their self-esteem. Regardless of the child's age, it is important that the absent parent continue to play a role in the child's life. The children need to know that they have not been abandoned and that the absent parent still cares (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980b). They need continuity and security, even if the old parental relationship has radically changed.

**ADOLESCENTS.** Many adolescents find parental separation traumatic. Studies indicate that much of what appear to be negative results of divorce (personal changes, parental loss, economic hardships, and psychological adjustments) are often more likely the result of parental conflict that precedes and surrounds the divorce (Amato and Keith 1991; Morrison and Cherlin 1995; Amato and Booth 1996). A study by Youngmin Sun found that such problems as poor psychological well-being, academic difficulties, and behavioral problems are present among adolescents from divorced families *at least a year before* the divorce (Sun 2001).

### Reflections

**As you look** at the adjustments that children must make when their parents divorce, are there others you would add? Which ones do you believe are the most important? Most difficult? If you were a divorcing parent, what strategies would you use to help your children adjust to divorce? How would your strategies differ according to the age of the child or adolescent? What do you think the experience might be of adult children whose parents divorce?

Adolescents may try to protect themselves from the conflict preceding separation by distancing themselves. Although they usually experience immense turmoil within, they may outwardly appear cool and detached. Unlike younger children, they rarely blame themselves for the conflict. Rather, they are likely to be angry with both parents, blaming them for upsetting their lives. Adolescents may be particularly bothered by their parents' beginning to date again. Some are shocked to realize that their parents are sexual beings, especially when they see a separated parent kiss someone or bring someone home for the night. The situation may add greater confusion to the adolescents' emerging sexual life. Some may take the attitude that if their mother or father sleeps with a date, why can't they? Others may condemn their parents for acting "immorally."

Kathleen Boyce Rodgers and Hillary Rose (2002) assert that the negative effects of divorce on adolescents can be tempered. They suggest that strong peer support, a strong attachment to school, and high levels of support and monitoring by parents can lessen the negative consequences adolescents otherwise encounter.

### Helping Children Adjust

Helen Raschke's (1987) review of the literature on children's adjustment after divorce found that the following factors were important:

- Before separation, open discussion with the children about the forthcoming separation and divorce and the problems associated with them.
- The child's continued involvement with the non-custodial parent, including frequent visits and unrestricted access.
- Lack of hostility between the divorced parents.
- Good emotional and psychological adjustment to the divorce on the part of the custodial parent.
- Good parenting skills and the maintenance of an orderly and stable living situation for the children.

Continued involvement with the children by both parents is important for the children's adjustment. The greatest danger is that children may be used as pawns by their parents after a divorce. The recently divorced often suffer from a lack of self-esteem and a sense of failure. One means of dealing with the feelings caused by divorce is to blame the other person. To prevent further hurt or to get revenge, divorced parents may try to control each other through their children. A recent study has shown that children are likely to suffer long-term psychological damage—well into adulthood—if the parents do not consider their emotional needs during the divorce process (Wallerstein 1997).

### Betwixt and Between: Children Caught in the Middle

One of the presumed consequences of divorce for children is the sense of being caught in the middle, forced to choose sides, and being pulled in different directions by their parents. Some have even suggested that feeling caught between parents may be one of the factors that differentiate children's reactions to divorce, explaining why some do better and some do worse. Such feelings may also lead to adolescent depression and deviant behavior. Evidence indicates that older

adolescents are more likely than younger adolescents and children to feel caught. In addition, such feelings may extend well into adulthood, although reduced contact with both parents may lessen the intensity of such feelings.

When caught in the middle, children may opt for one of three strategies: try to maintain positive relationships with both parents, form an alliance with one parent over and against the other, or reject both parents. Trying to remain close to two embattled parents may exact costs that outweigh the benefits of such relationships. Choosing sides comes at the expense of a relationship with one parent and can trigger guilt toward the abandoned parent and resentment toward the other. Rejecting both parents means losing closeness to both—a steep price to pay.

Paul Amato and Tamara Afifi (2006) also found that parents put more pressure on daughters than on sons to take sides in their disputes, and feeling caught in the middle is of more negative consequence for mothers and daughters than for mothers and sons.

## Multiple Perspectives on the Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children

There are multiple perspectives on how and why divorce affects children (Amato 1993). Specified outcomes range from negative through neutral to positive (Whitehead 1996; Coontz 1997). There is enough divergent information that we could selectively cite research to make either a more pessimistic or a more optimistic generalization. We review some of these mixed findings here.

A variety of studies reviewed by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, in her strongly anti-divorce book, *The Divorce Culture* (1997), suggest multiple ways in which children suffer after their parents divorce. First, across racial lines, children of divorce suffer substantial reduction in family income as a direct result of divorce. Second, most children experience a weakening of ties with their fathers, suffering damage when and after fathers leave. She suggests that separation and later divorce induce a “downward spiral” in father–child relationships, wherein distance between them grows, and children eventually lose their fathers’ “love, support, and substantial involvement.” Third, children suffer a loss of “residential stability,” often having to move from the family home because of drops in their economic standing.

Whitehead goes on to detail other measurable ways in which children suffer: reduced school performance, increased likelihood of dropping out, worsened and increased behavioral problems, a greater likelihood of becoming teen parents. Many of these same outcomes were identified as among the “risks and problems associated with stepfamily life” (Whitehead 1996).

In her more optimistic book, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families* (1997), Stephanie Coontz tempers some of this distressing news. While acknowledging the “agonizing process” that accompanies divorce and the ways in which children, especially, can be hurt by divorce, Coontz qualifies the more pessimistic interpretations. In a subtle but important comparison, she notes that research shows “*not* that children in divorced families have more problems but that *more* children of divorced parents have problems” (Coontz 1997, emphases in original). In other words, all children of divorce do not suffer the negative consequences identified by researchers and reported by people such as Whitehead. Coontz reminds us that although more children in divorced homes drop out or become pregnant than do children whose parents stay married, “divorce does not account for the majority of such social problems as high school dropout rates and unwed teen motherhood” (Coontz 1997). Finally, Coontz goes even further in an optimistic direction, noting that there are some measures on which large proportions of children of divorced homes score higher than do average children from homes with two parents. She reports that children of single parents (usually single mothers) spend more time talking with their custodial parent, receive more praise for their academic successes, and face fewer pressures toward conventional gender roles. Thus, she argues, in some ways, single-parent households may be beneficial environments within which to be raised (Coontz 1997).

## Just How Bad Are the Long-Term Consequences of Divorce?

The message about the long-term consequences varies according to the research examined. Influential longitudinal research conducted by Judith Wallerstein highlights fairly extensive, long-term trauma and distress that stays with and affects children of divorce well into adulthood. Beginning with *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce* (Wallerstein

and Kelly 1980), through *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989), and culminating with *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study* (Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee 2000), Wallerstein has followed a sample of (originally) 60 families, with 131 children among them, as they divorced and went through the subsequent adjustment processes at 18 months, 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and ultimately 25 years. Seventy-five percent of the original families, and 71% of the 131 children were studied for all three books.

Wallerstein found that at the 5-year mark, more than a third of the children were struggling in school, experiencing depression, had difficulty with friendships, and continued to long for a parental reconciliation. At the 10-year follow-up, she indicated that almost half of the children carried lingering problems and they had become worried, sometimes angry, underachieving young adults. Three-fifths of the children of divorce retained a lingering sense of rejection by one or both parents and suffered especially poor relationships with their fathers. Finally, at the quarter-century point, Wallerstein asserted that the effects of divorce on children reached their peak in adulthood, where the ability to form and maintain committed intimate relationships was negatively affected (see Amato 2003).

A more moderate view of the long-term effects of divorce emerges from other studies (Hetherington and Kelly 2002 and Amato 2003). E. Mavis Hetherington undertook the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage, which initially consisted of following a sample of 144 families with a 4-year-old “target child.” Half of the sample families were divorced, half were married. Initially they were to be followed and restudied at 2 years to compare how those who divorced fared in comparison to those who did not. Eventually, the sample was expanded, and subsequent research was conducted at 2, 6, 11, and 20 years after divorce. As the “target children” (that is, the initial 4-year-olds) married, had a child, or cohabited for more than 6 months, they were further studied (Hetherington and Kelly 2002). Meanwhile, families were added to the sample at each wave, to reach a final sample of 450, evenly split between nondivorced, divorced, and remarried families.

Throughout the research, a variety of qualitative and quantitative data were collected on personalities of parents and children, adjustment, and relationships within and outside the family (Hetherington 2003).

The impression that Hetherington’s research leaves is more encouraging than the one received from Wallerstein’s studies. For example, most adults and children adapt to the divorce within 2 to 3 years. Although at the 1-year mark, 70% of the divorced parents were wrestling with animosity, loneliness, persistent attachment, and doubts about the divorce, by 6 years, most were moving toward building new lives. More than 75% of the sample said that the divorce had been a good thing, more than 50% of the women and 70% of the men had remarried, and most had embarked on the postdivorce paths they would continue to take (Hetherington 2003).

In considering the effects of divorce on children, Hetherington reports that 20% of her sample of youths from divorced and remarried families was troubled and displayed a range of problems, including depression and irresponsible, antisocial behavior. They had the highest dropout rate, had the highest divorce rate (as they themselves married), and were the most likely to be struggling economically. But perhaps more important, “80 percent of children from divorced homes eventually are able to adapt to their new life and become reasonably well adjusted” (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, 228). Given that 10% of youths from nondivorced homes also were struggling, the difference for children from divorced as opposed to nondivorced homes was fairly small (10%).

As Hetherington points out, the optimal outcome for adults and their children is to be in a happily married household. Nevertheless, her research indicates that we may overstate the risks and fail to recognize the resilience of men, women, and children of divorce.

Paul Amato (2003) suggests that much of the divorce research supports Wallerstein’s claims that divorce is “disruptive and disturbing” in the lives of children, but he fails to find the same strength and pervasiveness of the supposed effects. Using still other longitudinal data gathered as part of the Marital Instability over the Life Course Study, Amato reports that 90% of children with divorced parents achieve the same level of adult well-being as children of “continuously married parents” (Amato 2003). Amato further suggests that children who experience multiple family transitions (parental divorce, remarriages, subsequent divorces, and so on) are the ones who most suffer. He found that children who experienced only a single parental divorce (without any additional parental transitions) were no different in their psychological well-being than children of continuously married parents.

## Child Custody

Of all the issues surrounding separation and divorce, custody issues are particularly poignant because they represent continued versus strained or even severed ties between one parent and his or her children. When the court awards custody to one parent, the decision is generally based on one of two standards: the *best interests of the child* or the *least detrimental of the available alternatives*. In practice, however, custody of the children is awarded to the mother in about 90% of the cases. Three reasons can be given for this: (1) women usually prefer custody, and men do not; (2) giving custody to the mother is traditional; and (3) the law reflects a bias that assumes women are naturally better able to care for children.

Sexual orientation has also been a traditional basis for awarding custody (Baggett 1992; Beck and Heinzlerling 1993). In the past, a parent's homosexuality has been sufficient grounds for denying custody, but increasingly, courts are determining custody on the basis of parenting ability rather than sexual orientation. Interviews with children whose parents are gay or lesbian testify to the children's acceptance of their parents' orientation without negative consequences (Bozett 1987).

### Types of Custody

The major types of custody are sole, joint, and split. In **sole custody**, the child lives with one parent, who has sole responsibility for physically raising the child and making all decisions regarding his or her upbringing. There are two forms of joint custody: legal and physical. In **joint legal custody**, the children live primarily with one parent, but both share jointly in decisions about their children's education, religious training, and general upbringing. In **joint physical custody**, the children live with both parents, dividing time between the two households. Even though joint custody does not necessarily mean that the child's time is evenly divided between parents, it gives children the chance for a more normal and realistic relationship with each parent (Arnetti and Keith 1993). Under **split custody**, the children are divided between the two parents; the mother usually takes the girls and the father, the boys. Split custody often has harmful effects on sibling bonds and should be entered into only cautiously (Kaplan, Hennon, and Ade-Ridder 1993).

Parental satisfaction with court imposed custody arrangements depends on many factors (Arditti 1992; Arditti and Allen 1992). These include how hostile the divorce was, whether the noncustodial parent perceives visitation as lengthy and frequent enough, and how close the noncustodial parent feels to his or her children. In addition, the amount of support payments affects satisfaction. If parents feel they are paying too much or were "cheated" in the property settlement, they are also likely to feel that the custody arrangements are unfair. Unfortunately, custodial satisfaction is not necessarily related to the best interests of the child.

The anger and conflict surrounding custody arrangements helped give rise to a fathers' rights movement and remain key rallying points among "men's rights" advocates (Coltrane and Hickman 1992). The fathers' rights movement depicts its participants as caring fathers who want equal treatment regarding child custody, visitation, and support (Bertoia and Drakich 1993). Given the nature of changing gender roles and the reality of economic hardships, more mothers are relinquishing their children to the fathers.

This trend of fathers seeking and gaining custody of their children comes despite many judges' traditional attitudes about gender and established child-care patterns. Research concerning the effects of a father's custody on the psychological well-being of children reveals no conclusive evidence to preclude or prefer it. The chances of a father gaining custody are improved when the children are older at the time of the divorce, the oldest is male, and the father is the plaintiff in the divorce (Fox and Kelly 1995). Regardless of who is awarded custody, however, it is important when possible for children to maintain close ties with both parents following a divorce (Howell, Brown, and Eichenberger 1992).

### Sole Custody

Most children continue to live with their mothers after divorce. This occurs for several reasons. First, because women have traditionally been responsible for childrearing, sole custody by mothers has seemed the closest approximation to the traditional family, especially if the father is given free access. Second, many men have not had the day-to-day responsibilities of childrearing and do not feel (or are not perceived to be) competent in that role. Sole custody does not mean that the noncustodial parent is prohibited from seeing his or her children.

Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly (1980b) believe that if one parent is prohibited from sharing important aspects of the children's lives, he or she will withdraw from the children in frustration and grief. Children experience such withdrawal as a rejection and suffer as a result.

It is generally considered in the best interests of the children for them to have easy access to the noncustodial parent. Changes in the noncustodial parent's relationship with his or her children may be related to the difficulties and psychological conflicts arising from visitation and divorce, the noncustodial parent's ability to deal with the limitations of the visiting relationship, and the age and gender of the child (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980a).

### Joint Custody

**Joint custody**, in which both parents continue to share legal rights and responsibilities, has become a preferred form of legal custody. A number of advantages accrue to this type of arrangement. First, it allows both parents to continue their parenting roles. Second, it avoids a sudden termination of a child's relationship with one of his or her parents. Joint-custody fathers tend to be more involved with their children; they spend time with them and share responsibility and decision making (Bowman and Ahrons 1985). Third, dividing the labor lessens many of the burdens of constant child-care experienced by most single parents.

Joint physical custody, however, requires considerable energy from the parents in working out both the logistics of the arrangement and their feelings about each other. Many parents with joint custody find it difficult, but they nevertheless feel that it is satisfactory.

The children do not always like joint custody as much as the parents do. In practice, children rarely split their time evenly between parents (Little 1992).

Any custody arrangement has both benefits and drawbacks, and joint custody is no exception. Although it may be in the best interests of the parents for each of them to continue parenting roles, it may not necessarily be in the best interests of the child. For parents who choose joint custody, it appears to be a satisfactory arrangement. But when joint custody is mandated by the courts over the opposition of one or both parents, it may be problematic. Joint custody may force two parents to interact (*cooperate* is too benign a word) when they would rather never see each other again, and the resulting conflict and ill will may be detrimental to the children. Parental hostility may

make joint custody the worst form of custody (Opie 1993).

### Reflections

**What form of custody** do you believe is the most advantageous to a child? What factors would you consider important in deciding which is the best type of custody for a particular child? If two parents constantly battled over their children, what are some of the consequences you might expect for the children? How do children cope in such circumstances?

### Noncustodial Parents

Only recently is research emerging about noncustodial parents. Popular images of noncustodial parents depict them as absent and noncaring, as reflected in the widespread popular use of the term *deadbeats*, which refers specifically to noncustodial parents who fail to maintain their support obligations. A more accurate picture depicts varying degrees of involvement (Bray and Depner 1993; Depner and Bray 1993). Noncustodial parent involvement exists on a continuum in terms of caregiving, decision making, and parent-child interaction. Involvement also changes depending on whether the custodial family is a single-parent family or a stepfamily (Bray and Berger 1993).

Noncustodial fathers often suffer grievously from the disruption or disappearance of their father roles following divorce. They feel depressed, anxious, and guilt ridden; they feel a lack of self-esteem (Arditti 1990). The change in status from full-time father to noncustodial parent leaves fathers bewildered about how they are to act; there are no norms for an involved noncustodial parent. Men often act irresponsibly after a divorce, failing to pay child support and possibly becoming infrequent parts of their children's lives. This lack of norms makes it especially difficult if the relationship between the former spouses is bitter. Without adequate norms, fathers may become "Disneyland Dads," who interact with their children only during weekends, when they provide treats such as movies and pizza, or they may become "Disappearing Dads," absenting themselves from all contact with their children. For many concerned noncustodial fathers, the question is simple but painful: "How can I be a father if I'm not a father anymore?"

Noncustodial fathers often weigh the costs of continued involvement with their children, such as

emotional pain and role confusion, against the benefits, such as emotional bonding (Braver et al. 1993a, 1993b). Those fathers who maintain their connections are generally older and remarried; they have little or no conflict with their ex-spouses and no significant problems with their children (Wall 1992). For others, however, the costs outweigh the benefits. They are not successful in being noncustodial fathers and abandon the role. A study of noncustodial parents in a support group found that common themes included children rejecting parents and parents rejecting children (Greif and Kristall 1993).

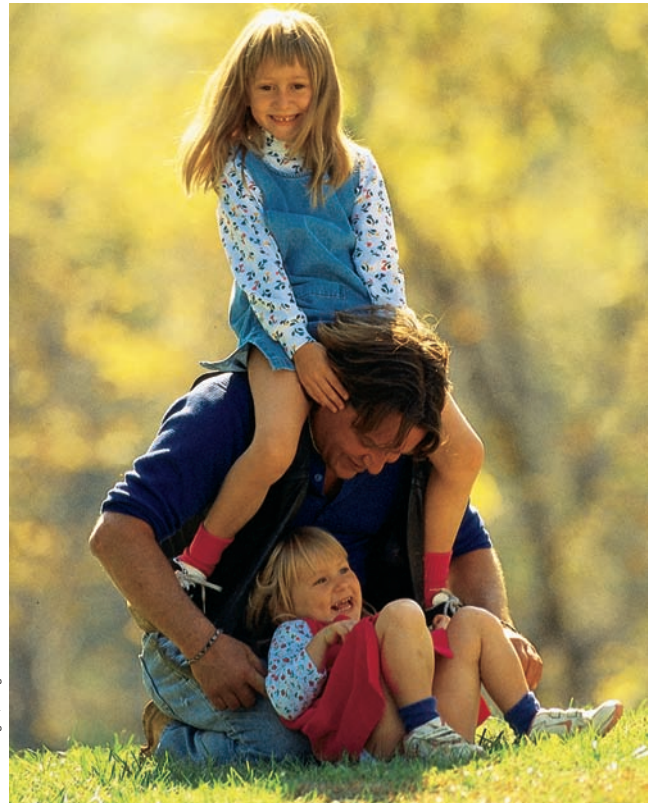
Children often eventually have little contact with the nonresidential parent. This reduced contact seems to weaken the bonds of affection. A study of 18- to 22-year-olds whose parents were divorced found that almost two-thirds had poor relationships with their fathers and one-third had poor relationships with their mothers—about twice the rate of a comparable group from nondivorced families (Zill, Morrison, and Coiro 1993). Divorced fathers are less likely to consider their children sources of support in times of need (Amato 1994; Cooney 1994). Although perhaps better than Frank Furstenberg and Christine Nord's (1985) claim of more than two decades ago that “marital dissolution involves either a complete cessation of contact between the nonresidential parent and child or a relationship that is tantamount to a ritual form of parenthood,” noncustodial parents certainly see their relationships suffer considerably.

## Custody Disputes

As many as one-third of all postdivorce legal cases involve children. Vagueness of the “best interests” and “least detrimental alternative” standards by which parents are awarded custody may encourage custody fights by making the outcome of custody hearings uncertain and increasing hostility. Any derogatory evidence or suspicions, ranging from dirty faces to child abuse, may be considered relevant evidence. As a result, child custody disputes are fairly common in the courts. They are often quite nasty.

## Divorce Mediation

The courts are supposed to act in the best interests of the child, but they often victimize children by their emphasis on legal criteria rather than on the children's



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■ *It is usually important for a child's postdivorce adjustment that he or she have continuing contact with the noncustodial parent. Noncustodial parents are involved with their children in varying degrees.*

psychological well-being and emotional development (Schwartz 1994). There is increasing support for the idea that children are better served by those with psychological training than by those with legal backgrounds (Miller 1993). Growing concern about the effect of litigation on children's well-being has led to the development of divorce mediation as an alternative to legal proceedings (Walker 1993).

### Reflections

*If you were divorcing,* what would be the pros and cons of entering divorce mediation? What would you personally do? Why?

**Divorce mediation** is the process in which a mediator attempts to assist divorcing couples in resolving personal, legal, and parenting issues in a

## Issues and Insights Covenant Marriage as a Response to Divorce



In 1996, as a way of trying to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce rates, Louisiana became the first state in the United States to establish a two-tiered system of marriage.

Marrying couples could choose either a “standard marriage” or a covenant marriage (Hewlett and West 1998; see also Chapter 9 of this book). Following Louisiana’s lead, other states have enacted their own covenant marriage legislation. Regardless of the state in question, covenant marriage usually consists of something close to the following, which is drawn from the Louisiana law:

We do solemnly declare that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman who agree to live together as husband and wife for so long as they both may live. We have chosen each other carefully and disclosed to one another everything which could adversely affect the decision to enter into this marriage.

We have received premarital counseling on the nature, purposes, and responsibilities of marriage. We have read the Covenant Marriage Act, and we understand that a Covenant Marriage is for life. If we experience marital difficulties, we commit ourselves to take all reasonable efforts to preserve our marriage, including marital counseling.

With full knowledge of what this commitment means, we do hereby declare that our marriage will be bound by Louisiana law on Covenant Marriages and we promise to love, honor, and care for one

another as husband and wife for the rest of our lives.

This is supplemented by an affidavit by the parties that they have discussed with a religious representative or counselor their intent to enter a covenant marriage. Included is their agreement to seek marital counseling in times of marital difficulties, and their agreement to the grounds for terminating the marriage.

We cannot say whether covenant marriage will “work” to reduce the prevalence of divorce. It may have no effect, because the people who elect to enter such a marriage may already perceive marriage as a relationship to keep “till death do us part.”

This certainly seems to be the case based on recent research by Laura Sanchez and colleagues (2002). After interviews with three Louisiana focus groups of about a dozen participants each that represented different views on marriage and divorce, the researchers suggest that advocates and opponents of covenant marriage have different perceptions of marriage, marriage reform, divorce, and children’s well-being.

The six conservative Christian couples they interviewed, married 11 to 56 years, saw a dangerous decline of traditional two-parent families, a decline in the value placed on motherhood, a general unwillingness to sacrifice for spouse and children, and the emergence of a “culture of divorce.” They had converted their marriages to covenant marriages just months before they were interviewed.

The second focus group, a dozen feminist activists (11 females and 1 male, ages 20 to 50), saw traditional marriage as “inherently patriarchal” and detrimental to women’s independence and rights. They also suggested that marriage (from courtship through weddings) is a commercial-

ized competition for men, with “victory” (that is, marriage) celebrated with indulgent and conspicuous consumption. They were strongly suspicious of and against covenant marriage.

The third focus group consisted of 10 low-income women (9 black, 1 white), all residents of public housing.

Of the 10, 2 women were married (18 years and 26 years each), a few were divorced, a few cohabited, and some never married. These women were chosen to explore issues related to poverty and welfare and how attitudes about marriage might affect or might be affected by their socioeconomic status.

This group had more practical and less politically ideological views of marriage. They valued marriage and saw numerous disadvantages faced by unmarried women. They perceived no-fault divorce as a source of a reduced commitment to marital responsibility, allowing people easy opportunities to leave rather than fix marriages. They also felt that divorce and single parenthood harmed children. Marriage was portrayed as an ideal worth aspiring toward, but they also acknowledged the problems of “falling out of love, growing apart, and modern strains on women and men in marriage” (Sanchez et al. 2002, 103).

The values expressed by the three focus groups suggest that in the short run, covenant marriage will appeal to those who already endorse its assumptions about marriage. To those who have concerns about inequalities in traditional marriage or worry about women’s rights in families, covenant marriage will be unappealing.

To do more than “preach to the choir”—appealing to those who already share the covenant marriage philosophy—will be more difficult for proponents of such reform.

cooperative manner. More than two-thirds of U.S. states offer or require mediation through the courts over such legal issues as custody and visitation. Mediators act as facilitators to help couples arrive at mutually agreed-upon solutions. Although some mediators are attorneys by profession, in the divorce process they neither act as lawyers for nor give advice to either party. Mediators can be either private or court ordered. Mediators generally come from marriage counseling, family therapy, and social work backgrounds, although increasing numbers are coming from other backgrounds and are seeking training in divorce mediation (DeWitt 1994).

Mediation has many goals. A primary goal is to encourage divorcing parents to see shared parenting as a viable alternative and to reduce anxiety about shared parenting (Kruk 1993). Their role is not to save the marriage but to see that couples exit the marriage with less conflict, feeling that their interests were represented. Data on satisfaction indicates that those who use mediators as part of their divorce process have greater levels of satisfaction than those who divorce through adversarial means. They also spend less to end their marriages, because divorce mediation is less financially costly than divorce that relies on litigation alone (<http://www.divorceinfo.com/doesmediation-work.htm>).

When mediation is court mandated, topics are generally limited to custody and visitation issues. Divorcing parents often find mediation helpful for these issues. In contrast to court settings, mediation provides an informal setting to work out volatile issues. Men and women both report that mediation is more successful at validating their perceptions and feelings than is litigation. Furthermore, women, the poor, and those from ethnic groups are less likely to experience bias in mediation than in a courtroom setting (Rosenberg 1992).

Some courts order parents to participate in seminars covering the children's experience of divorce, as well as problem solving and building coparent relationships (Petersen and Steinman 1994). Parents report that these seminars help them become more aware of their children's reactions and give them more options for resolving child-related disputes.

Divorcing parents also report that mediation helps decrease behavioral problems in their children (Slater, Shaw, and Duquesnel 1992). If parents can work through their differences apart from their children, the children are less likely to react to the anger and fear they might otherwise observe.

## What To Do about Divorce

As the previous pages have illustrated, divorcing is a painful process for those involved, and it leaves families and individuals changed forever.

Most people will agree that we would be better off reducing the rate of divorce, but how can that goal be achieved? First, we must decide on the most important cause of the high divorce rates in the United States.

If we believe that divorce rates rose partly because we made it easier and more acceptable to divorce, should we restigmatize divorce? Make exiting a marriage more difficult? If divorce rates rose with the increasing economic independence of women, how can we reduce divorce? Do we need to encourage employed women to stay home? How then do their families survive without their incomes (see Chapter 12)? If part of the explanation for rising divorce rates is in the increasing importance given to self-fulfillment and the decline of both familistic self-sacrifice and religious constraints, how can we reduce divorce? Can we change people's values? Finally, if increases in divorce result from the weakening of all but the emotional function of marriage and the reduction, especially, of the family's economic role, can *anything* be done about divorce?

Part of the dilemma has to do with how we perceive divorce. Is divorce the *problem*, or is it a *solution* to other problems? Do we want to impose restrictions on divorce that require people to remain in unfulfilling, possibly dangerous relationships? The societal reactions to reducing divorce have been largely of two kinds: cultural and legal. From a cultural perspective, some commentators bemoan the popular cultural denigration of marriage (Whitehead 1993, 1997; Popenoe 1993). They suggest that we "dismantle the divorce culture" we have constructed by more consistently championing and effectively demonstrating the benefits of stable, lifelong marriage.

Instead of celebrating "family diversity" and glorifying single-parent households, they believe we should consistently reiterate the idea that marriage is a lifelong commitment involving considerable sacrifice. If that means we must "restigmatize divorce," then that is what we should do (Whitehead 1997).

The other emphasis has been a legal one. Believing that marriage was weakened and divorce increased by no-fault divorce legislation, some have argued that we



make divorce *harder to obtain*. Some states have contemplated repealing no-fault divorce legislation or raising marriage ages. Some states have enacted a two-tiered system of marriage in which couples are allowed and encouraged to consider *covenant marriage*—marriage under laws that require couples to undergo premarital counseling, swear to the lifelong commitment of marriage, and promise to divorce only under extraordinary circumstances and only after seeking marriage counseling (see the “Issues & Insights” box on covenant marriages and Chapter 9). Too new to yet evaluate, the covenant marriage system has appealed to both those who wish to reduce divorce and those who wish to establish a more traditional, even religious, understanding of marriage commitments.

The difficulty behind both cultural and legal efforts is that in attempting to make divorce harder or less attractive, they do little to make staying married easier. This, too, could be done. It might entail enacting some work–family policy initiatives to ease the stress and strain facing two-earner households. On the subject of financial resources, because we know that divorce hits hardest at lower- and working-class levels, bolstering the economic stability and security of low-income families might also lead to less divorce.

If we can’t reduce or eliminate divorce, we should at least do what we can to protect those who go through divorce, especially children (Coontz 1997; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). We should devote resources that will help custodial parents raise their children more effectively. This means, among other things, ensuring their access to quality childcare when they

are at work, guaranteeing their receipt of financial obligations (such as child support and alimony) from their former spouses, and helping them avoid the devastating plunge into poverty. In addition, ex-spouses must be instructed in how to display more amicable relationships with each other and should be expected to do so. Because at least some effects of divorce are tied to the level of postdivorce conflict and adjustment, taking steps to reduce conflict and ensure more effective adjustment will benefit children and their parents. Early and aggressive intervention into the postdivorce family (such as teaching anger management or instructing fathers about the vital roles they can still play) constitutes such intervention (Coontz 1997; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

There is no denying that separation or divorce is typically filled with pain for all involved—husband, wife, and children. Furthermore, as we have seen, both the process and its outcomes are often different for husbands and wives and for parents and children. Hopefully, this chapter has increased your understanding of how much divorce there is, the multiple factors that have led to shifts in the divorce rate and that expose individuals to greater or lesser risk of divorce, and the different perspectives on what we can and should do about divorce. Keep in mind that as one family ends, new family forms emerge. These include new relationships and possibilities, new circumstances and responsibilities, and new families with unique relationships: the single parent or the stepfamily. These are the families that we explore in the next chapter.

## Summary

- Divorce is an integral part of the contemporary American marriage system, which values individualism and emotional gratification. The divorce rate increased significantly in the 1960s but leveled off in the early 1990s. Between 40% and 50% of all current marriages end in divorce.
- Researchers are increasingly viewing divorce as part of the family life cycle rather than as a form of deviance. Divorce creates the single-parent family, remarriage, and the stepfamily.
- Among the statistics researchers use to measure divorce are the *ratio* of marriages to divorces, the *crude rate* of divorces per 1,000 people in a population, the *refined rate* of divorces per 1,000 marriages, and the *predictive rate* of the future likelihood of divorce within a cohort.
- The likelihood of divorce is lower for those who earn more than \$50,000, marry after age 25, come from an “intact” parental marriage, have some religious affiliation, and have attended college.
- The trend in divorce has been downward since the 1980s.
- Compared to other countries, the U.S. divorce rate is among the highest.

- A variety of societal, demographic, and life course factors can affect the likelihood of divorce. The most important factors may be family processes: marital happiness, presence of children (in some cases), and marital problems.
- *No-fault divorce* revolutionized divorce by eliminating fault finding and the adversarial process and by treating husbands and wives as equals. An unintended consequence of no-fault divorce is the growing poverty of divorced women with children.
- Divorce can be viewed as a process involving six *stations* or processes: emotional, legal, economic, coparental, community, and psychic. As people divorce, they undergo these stations simultaneously, but the intensity level of these stages varies at different times.
- Uncoupling is the process by which couples drift apart in predictable stages. It is differently experienced by the initiator and his or her partner. Uncoupling ends when both partners acknowledge that the relationship cannot be saved.
- In establishing a new identity, newly separated people go through transition and recovery. They may experience *separation distress*, often followed by loneliness. The more personal, social, and financial resources a person has at the time of separation, the easier the separation generally will be.
- Women generally experience downward mobility after divorce. The economic effect on men is more mixed and depends on what proportion of the marital income they were responsible for before the divorce.
- *Child support* often goes unpaid, despite a number of legal initiatives to increase compliance by parents who owe support. A major determinant of compliance is what percentage of the parent's income is expected in support.
- Psychological distress, reduced self-esteem, less happiness, more isolation, and less satisfying sex lives are among noneconomic consequences of divorce. For some, the consequences of divorce are more positive than negative and include higher levels of personal growth, more autonomy, and—for women—improvements in their social lives, career opportunities and self-confidence.
- Remaining in an unhappy marriage reduces life satisfaction, mental and physical health, and self-esteem.
- Children are typically told about the divorce by mothers. Children's overall reactions are usually negative. For those to whom the news is told long before the actual divorce, the divorce itself may be experienced as relief.
- Consequences for children depend on the nature of their parents' marriage. In highly dysfunctional, high-conflict households, children may experience parental divorce as relief. However, in low-conflict marriages, even when parents lack commitment and happiness, divorce will likely be experienced as "unexpected, unwelcome, and uncontrollable."
- Children in the divorce process go through three stages: (1) the initial stage, lasting about a year, when turmoil is greatest; (2) the transition stage, lasting up to several years, in which adjustments are being made to new family arrangements, living and economic conditions, friends, and social environment; and (3) the restabilization stage, when the changes have been integrated into the children's lives.
- A significant factor affecting the responses of children to divorce is their age. Young children tend to act out and blame themselves, whereas adolescents tend to remain aloof and angry at both parents for disrupting their lives. Adolescents may be bothered when their parents date again. Many problems assumed to be caused by divorce are present before marital disruption.
- Factors affecting a child's adjustment to divorce include (1) open discussion before divorce, (2) continued involvement with noncustodial parent, (3) lack of hostility between divorced parents, (4) good psychological adjustment to divorce by custodial parent, and (5) stable living situation and good parenting skills. Continued involvement with the children by both parents is important for the children's adjustment.
- Although divorce has been said to put children in the middle of parental conflict, this seems to occur more in intact, high-conflict parental marriages.
- Longitudinal studies following children of divorce over decades have come to different conclusions about how bad the long-term consequences of divorce are and how long they last.
- Custody is generally based on one of two standards: the best interests of the child or the least detrimental of the available alternatives. The major types of custody are *sole*, *joint*, and *split*. Physical custody is generally awarded to the mother. Joint custody has

become more popular because men are becoming increasingly involved in parenting.

- Noncustodial parent involvement exists on a continuum from absent to intimately and regularly involved. Noncustodial parents often feel deeply grieved about the loss of their normal parenting role.
- *Divorce mediation* is a process in which a mediator attempts to assist divorcing couples in resolving personal, legal, and parenting issues in a cooperative manner.
- Recent legislative initiatives such as *covenant marriage* are attempts to reduce the divorce rate by strengthening the marriage commitment.

## Key Terms

alimony 506	joint custody 516
child support 506	joint legal custody 515
crude divorce rate 492	joint physical custody 515
distal causes 500	no-fault divorce 500
divorce mediation 517	predictive divorce rate 492
initiator 501	proximal causes 500
intergenerational transmission 497	

ratio measure of divorce 492  
refined divorce rate 492  
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social integration 494  
sole custody 515  
split custody 515  
stations of divorce 500

## Resources on the Internet

### Companion Website for This Book

<http://www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/strong>

Gain an even better understanding of this chapter by going to the companion website for additional study resources. Take advantage of the Pre- and Post-Test quizzing tool, which is designed to help you grasp difficult concepts by referring you back to review specific pages in the chapter for questions you answer incorrectly. Use the flash cards to master key terms and check out the many other study aids you'll find there. Visit the Marriage and Family Resource Center on the site. You'll also find special features such as access to InfoTrac<sup>®</sup> College Edition (a database that allows you access to more than 18 million full-length articles from 5,000 periodicals and journals), as well as GSS Data and Census information to help you with your research projects and papers.

