

# Parenting after Separation

**A Literature Review prepared for The Australian Psychological Society**

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# Research Summary

## Brief Statement of Introduction

Separation and divorce are common phenomena in the community today, but still represent a major life stressor for the individuals involved, with potentially strong negative consequences for the mental and physical health of all members of the family. The impact of divorce on child wellbeing has been the subject of research attention for several decades, and has long been viewed as the cause of a range of serious and enduring behavioural and emotional problems in children and adolescents (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Approximately 43 per cent of all marriages in Australia will end in divorce (ABS, 2000). Remarriage following divorce is common, but these marriages have the highest risk of divorce (ABS, 2000). In Australia, it is estimated that 50,000 children will experience the effects of family breakdown resulting from separation and divorce each year (ABS, 2004). Approximately 50 per cent of all divorces involve children under the age of 18 years (ABS, 2004). These figures are likely to be even higher when you consider the numbers of children in Australia born to people who are not actually married (cohabiting). Of all Australian families in 2003, 84% (4.6 million) were couple families and 14% (799,800) were one parent families. Families with children made up 60% of all families (ABS 2003).

Although children's resilience should not be discounted, and the majority of children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring emotional or behavioural problems (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003), children of divorced parents are still at twice the risk of problems as the non-separated community (McIntosh, 2003).

The association between intense marital conflict and children's poor adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated, and children are found to have more psychological problems when their parents are in conflict, either during marriage or following divorce. We also know that children who live with violence between their parents are at risk for psychological and behavioural problems. Separation and divorce can protect children from ongoing exposure to within-marriage conflict (and violence), but also have the potential to expose children to increased interparental conflict, particularly during the transition from marriage to separation.

Children need a secure emotional base after their parents separate, exactly as they needed before (McIntosh, 2005). Separation and divorce have the potential to disrupt vital parenting functions (Kelly, 2000). The major protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to divorce are low inter-parental conflict, effective and constructive resolution of conflict between the parents, the quality of the parent-child relationship, nurturing, authoritative parenting from at least one parent, and cooperative co-parenting with good communication (McIntosh, 2003). Recent reviews of the literature show that it has become increasingly clear that it is these family processes that contribute to determining children's well-being and 'outcomes', rather than family structures per se (such as the number, gender, sexuality and co-habitation status of parents).

# Impact of divorce on the separating partners

## Impact on physical health

The stress of separation and divorce places both men and women at risk for psychological and physical health problems. Alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, psychosomatic problems, and accidents are more common among divorced than non-divorced adults (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989). Research suggests that marital disruption and the associated distress also depresses the immune system, making divorced persons more vulnerable to disease, infection, chronic and acute medical problems, and even death.

## Psychological and emotional impact

A large number of studies published during the 1990s found that divorced individuals, compared with married individuals, experience lower levels of psychological wellbeing, including less happiness, more symptoms of psychological distress and poorer self-concepts (e.g., Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Demo & Acock, 1996; Marks, 1996).

Parents undergoing divorce often exhibit marked emotional lability characterised by euphoria and optimism alternating with anger, irritability, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, depression and suicidality, and associated changes in self-concept and self-esteem. Divorce is generally viewed as a prominent cause of depression in adults (Tennant, 2002). A review of sex differences in a depressive reaction to major life stressors, found males and females were equally likely to experience depression following marital breakdown (Maciejewski, Prigerson & Mazure, 2001). Single mothers (including those who are separated and divorced) have consistently been found to evidence higher rates of depression and psychiatric illnesses, relative to their married counterparts. Reasons cited include differences in stress and social support.

Non-residential parents (usually men) are particularly likely to experience negative effects of divorce. A pervasive problem is suffering caused by the feeling that they have lost their children, and feelings of inadequacy about their role as a parent (Dudley, 1991). They may also experience guilt about the marital break-up and the loss of daily contact with their children can be emotionally devastating for non-residential fathers (Smyth, 2004).

According to Jordan (1988; 1996) men undergoing separation and divorce also tend to avoid problems rather than face them, tend not to express their concerns and are reluctant to seek help (if they do, it is from friends or relatives rather than from professionals). Jordan (1996) also found that men appeared to be generally unaware of, and unprepared for, separation and often 'shut down' their feelings about the relationship. As a consequence, men often carry unresolved feelings of grief and hurt for many years after the initial separation, which may impact on their physical and mental health. Other studies have found, however, that females tend to experience higher rates of distress than males (Dour, 2003).

In addition, 'leavers' initially often fare better in terms of emotional wellbeing than those who have been 'left' and who often feel rejected (Bickerdike & Littlefield, 2000).

## Financial and social impact

Separation and divorce invariably involve financial changes and economic stress, and different residence arrangements require different financial costs (Smyth, 2004). Kitson and Morgan (1990) reviewed the consequences of divorce for adults, and found a decrease in the income and standards of living for women, and single parent families have been found to experience significant economic disadvantage (Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003). On the basis of data collected in 1997 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Smyth and Weston (2000) found that women and children were still more likely than men to experience financial hardship after divorce even after the introduction of the Child Support Scheme and increases in government income support, together with increasing availability of work for women. Divorce has been found to be positively related to women needing to be involved in full-time work (Austen, 2004).

Research findings also showed some other general patterns: that residential parents tend to be overworked, overwrought and overwhelmed by their own needs and those of their children, whilst non-residential parents typically feel rejected, unimportant and under-appreciated (Emery, 1994). Property disputes and custody battles characterise many divorces.

Divorce also disrupts social networks, as measured by loss or change of friends, changes in contact with affilial kin, and disrupted socialising. Although illness in women can be directly affected by marital distress (Gottman, 1993), for men it tends to be mediated through loneliness. Men tend to have relatively meagre social support systems, compared with those of women. Divorced parents have been found to encounter many difficulties in social adjustments (Ladd & Zvonkovic, 1995), and residential parents in general tend to report having significantly less contact with other adults than married parents, and have difficulty re-establishing a social life (Amato, 2000).

### **Impact on the parenting role**

A central issue for parents during divorce involves a redefining of emotional boundaries and identity, particularly as related to the redefinition of family roles. Adults often feel less effective in performing their family and other life roles for a time after divorce. Thus, in addition to severing the spousal relationship, divorce also affects the couple's relationship as parents and the way in which they fulfil their parental functions (Baum, 2003), and a period of less effective parenting is often found following divorce (Amato, 2000). Parental roles have to be reconstructed. Some divorced couples establish collaborative co-parental relationships; others are in perpetual conflict over their children (Baum, 2003). Still others disconnect from one another, not only as spouses, but also as parents. Several studies of divorced fathers who have disengaged from their children have linked their disengagement to their feelings of anger, rejection and distress following their divorce (Dudley, 1991).

### **Differential impact on residential and non-residential parenting role**

Relations between children and residential parents – frequently mothers – also often show signs of tension. Research has shown that one year after divorce, residential mothers were less affectionate towards their children, communicated with them less often, punished them more harshly, and were more inconsistent in their use of discipline than continuously married mothers (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982). A number of other studies also indicated that divorced residential parents, compared with married parents, invest less time, are less supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Simons & Associates, 1996). As stated, both residential mothers and fathers tend to feel overburdened by their parenting and life responsibilities following separation and divorce (Baum, 2003).

The quantity and quality of contact between children and non-residential parents – usually fathers – tend to decrease over time (Amato & Booth, 1996; Baum, 2003). Research also suggests that non-residential mothers and fathers find it equally difficult to maintain frequent in-person contact with their children (Stewart, 1999).

### **Moderating factors and positive changes resulting from divorce**

Several studies have shown that adjustment among divorced individuals is positively associated with education (Booth & Amato, 1991), employment (Booth & Amato, 1991; Demo & Acock, 1996) and large networks of supportive kin and friends (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). Several studies have found that unhappiness, distress, depression and health problems largely subside two or three years after separation, and that remarriage or the forming of positive new romantic relationships tends to predict adjustment to divorce (Amato, 2000). This finding is consistent with the adjustment of lesbian mothers post heterosexual relationships (McNair et al., 2002).

# The impact of divorce on children

## Children's adjustment following divorce

For children, the process of experiencing their parents' separation, of learning to alternate between households, and of potentially moving schools or neighbourhoods, can be very challenging (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson & Smart, 2005). Contact with the non-residential parent may be sporadic and may diminish over time. Given the stressors and difficulties related to the divorce transition, a large body of research has examined the relationship between divorce and child adjustment, largely in studies comparing child adjustment – expressed as the presence of behavioural, social and emotional problems – in divorced versus intact families. The two major predictors of children's adjustment consistently identified in the literature are the exposure to interparental conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Thus it is not separation or divorce per se that is problematic, but ongoing exposure to conflict and a difficult parent-child relationship, that impacts negatively on child wellbeing.

### **Normative outcome of resiliency, but not invulnerability**

Although there is little doubt that divorce brings a number of important stressors for children, the research indicates that the majority of children from divorced families are emotionally well-adjusted (Amato, 1994; 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Leon, 2003). Several quantitative literature reviews (e.g., Emery, 1988) and a meta-analysis of the literature (Amato & Keith, 1991) have found that overall, the differences in the psychological adjustment of children whose parents have divorced in comparison to those whose parents remain married are statistically significant, but small in magnitude (Emery, 1994). Thus, although divorce is associated with an increased risk for a number of adjustment, achievement and relationship difficulties, resilience is the normative outcome for children, and most children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring behaviour problems (Amato, 2001). Resilience refers to the capacity to endure stressors and difficulties without developing clinically significant adjustment problems (Thompson & Amato, 1999). However, although children of divorced parents may be characterised as resilient, they do experience significant psychological distress and pain following separation and report a number of fears and wishes, including fears of abandonment, wishes for reconciliation, grief at separation from, or the loss of contact with a family member, and worries about the increased stresses in a single parent family (Emery, 1994).

The normal outcome of resiliency for children from divorced families is not equivalent to being invulnerable to the impact of divorce; indeed children of divorce have been found to experience substantial distress (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), although as a group they are not psychologically disturbed. Nonetheless, children and adolescents of divorce report that the divorce, and the following years, is a significantly painful period of their lives (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000).

## Psychological and social impact of divorce

### **Behavioural or 'externalising' problems**

Of all child emotional and behavioural difficulties associated with various stressors, divorce is most strongly and consistently related to a greater risk of externalising problems (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991a). Compared with matched samples of children from non-divorced families, children of divorced parents have been found to be more disobedient, aggressive, non-compliant and lacking in self-regulation (Wadsworth et al, 1985). This increased risk of externalising problems for children of divorce has also been found on indices of school misconduct, such as classroom misbehaviour and suspension from school. The research strongly suggests, however, that family processes, such as inadequate parenting and interparental conflict, not family structure alone, account for many of the externalising problems found among children (Emery, 1999).

Children of divorce have also been found to have problems in social and close relationships, such as those with their mothers and fathers, authority figures, siblings and peers (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington, 1997). They have also been found to be two to three times more likely to associate with antisocial peers (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Children of divorce have also been found to commence sexual

activity earlier, have twice the probability of child bearing in adolescence, and have more pregnancies outside marriage than children of non-divorced parents (McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Children of divorced parents have a greater risk of substance use than children of non-divorced parents. According to research findings reasons given for this include reduced parental monitoring, poorer quality parenting, and less effective coping skills (Neher & Short, 1998).

### **Emotional or 'internalising' problems**

Divorce has also been associated with child internalising problems (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Children and adolescents from divorced and/or high conflict families experience higher levels of depressed mood in comparison with those from non-divorced or low-conflict families (Conger & Chao, 1996; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Similarly, research also indicates a greater incidence of anxiety disorders in children with divorced parents, although differences have typically been modest (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Children with divorced parents are also two to three times more likely to receive psychological treatment, have more illnesses and medical problems and visits to the doctor, than children with non-divorced parents (Howard et al, 1996; Zill et al, 1993).

### **Effect on educational outcomes**

Parental divorce in Australia has been found to reduce children's educational attainment, particularly the chance of completing secondary school (Evans, Kelley & Wanner, 2001). Compared to children from non-divorced families, children of divorce are more than twice as likely to drop out of school, even when socio-economic factors are taken into account (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Factors accounting for the reduction in school completion and educational attainment include disruption to family functioning, increased changes of residence, and a reduction in parental involvement, monitoring and supervision of homework (McLanahan, 1999). Observing overt conflict between parents is a direct stressor for children, and children experiencing this have been found to be at increased risk of antisocial behaviour, anxiety, depression and difficulty in concentrating – factors known to influence school performance (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

### **Gender differences in adjustment to divorce**

Recent studies have found that gender differences in response to divorce are not pronounced (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Female adolescents from divorced and remarried families are more likely than their male counterparts to drop out of high school, and both male and female adolescents are equally likely to become teenage parents (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Some girls in divorced, mother-headed families emerge as exceptionally resilient individuals following divorce, but this does not typically occur for boys following marital transitions, or for girls in step-families (Hetherington, 1989). For some girls in divorced families who have been overburdened with responsibilities or emotional support of a parent, there is an increased risk of depressive symptoms, low self-worth, and a sense of inadequacy and failure, despite their achievements (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Boys are more likely than girls to benefit from being in step-father families (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993). Close relationships with supportive step-fathers are more likely to reduce antisocial behaviour and to enhance the achievement of step-sons than of step-daughters (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993; Zimiles & Lee, 1991).

## The impact of divorce according to developmental age

A child's age and developmental stage has been identified in the research literature as one of several factors that is associated with children's responses to separation and divorce. The growth of children into adults is marked by a number of stages, both physical and social/emotional. Psychosocial development includes changes in thinking, understanding of self and the world, ways of relating to others and level of independence.

The research indicates that the reactions of children and adolescents to their parents' divorce differ qualitatively with age (Chase-Landsdale et al, 1995). This difference is thought to be due to cognitive maturity, as older children and adolescents may be more capable of understanding the reasons behind a marital separation than are younger children. Younger children are more dependent on, and more needy of continuous, reliable care from a primary caregiver. Some research has shown that the limited understanding of pre-school children leaves them more vulnerable to the effects of parental conflict and family disruption (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Zill et al, 1993). The limited cognitive capacity of young children means that they cannot grasp the concept of divorce, and can, therefore, be expected to be particularly unprepared for the changes caused by the separation (Emery, 1994). In addition, it has been proposed that young children's limited ability to realistically appraise the reasons for the divorce makes them more likely to blame themselves and fear total abandonment. Other studies have found that pre-separation stress and divorce, and the resulting family disruption and instability, has a particularly deleterious impact on adolescents, given the particular developmental challenges faced by this group (e.g. Hetherington, 1993; Sun, 2001; Adam & Chase-Landsdale, 2002), such as the development of a sense of identity and independence.

It appears that parental divorce does not necessarily have more negative effects on children of a particular age, but differential effects can be seen at different developmental stages. The following information is based on well accepted theories from developmental psychology, including Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. Some of the information has been adapted from research conducted by Relationships Australia and the Family Court of Australia.

### Infants and toddlers (0–2 years)

Although little is known about the effects of divorce on infants, young children's responses are mediated by their limited cognitive and social competencies, their dependency on their parents, and their restriction to the home. Developmental psychologists highlight the importance of forming secure attachment relationships in infancy (e.g. Bowlby, 1969). It is believed that enduring parental conflict can disrupt vital attachment processes in infancy and toddlerhood, with high intensity conflict and disrupted care each separately and together linked to the development of insecure and disorganised attachment styles (McIntosh, 2003). It is imperative that living arrangements post divorce accommodate the developmental need of infants under two years to maintain their naturally occurring attachment hierarchy (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008), specifically supporting the infant's psychological and neurological need for a continuous, reliable care-giving experience with their primary attachment figure. Extended overnight time away from a primary parent is likely to erode the security of the attachment to that parent (George & Solomon, 1999). There is no reliable data to suggest that attachment with a non-resident parent is disrupted by similar absences.

Infants have no sense of time to help them understand separations from their attachment figures. Parenting plans for infants must aim to prevent increased challenge and risk for the infant at a time when social and emotional development are reliant on predictable, stable, responsive care (Klein Pruett, Ebling & Insabella, 2004). Maintaining secure relationships with all members of the infant's attachment hierarchy is optimal in appropriate circumstances (i.e., adequate cooperation between the adults, geographic proximity, emotional maturity and availability of the caregivers). Where practical, day contact and limited over-night contact may be of benefit to maintaining secure and trusting relationships with other members of the infant's attachment hierarchy (Kelly & Lamb, 2001).

### **Developmental factors to consider**

The following developmental factors need to be considered when thinking about the impact of separation and divorce on children in this age range.

- Infants have limited abilities to understand what is happening
- They are highly dependent on their parents to meet their basic needs
- A major task at this age is the development of secure attachments, or loving, trusting bonds with parents, which requires regular, consistent and predictable contact with each parent
- Infants have a different experience of time; thus, if a caregiver is absent these children may feel that he/she has permanently left, which can be very distressing

### **Signs and symptoms of distress**

A number of behaviours and emotions have been identified as typical distress responses in this age group. Signs of distress include:

- Difficulties eating or sleeping
- Regression or returning to behaviour that they had previously outgrown (e.g. wetting pants or thumb sucking)
- Fretful, quiet or withdrawn behaviour
- Increase in difficult behaviour (e.g. tantrums, inability to control actions or feelings)
- Separation anxiety (e.g. excessive clinging, vigilance, and becoming upset at changeovers between parents).
- Insecurity
- Poor response to soothing
- Delays in language and gross motor development

### **Preschoolers (3–4 years)**

Preschool children (3-4 years) are less able than older children to appraise accurately the divorce situation, the motives and feelings of their parents, their own role in the divorce, and possible outcomes. They may blame themselves for the divorce, may fear abandonment by both parents, may misperceive parents' emotions, needs and behaviours, and may harbour fantasies of reconciliation (Hetherington et al., 1989). In the right circumstances (good parental cooperation, responsive care, clear and workable patterns and emotional facilitation of the separation), pre-kinder and kindergarten aged children can often manage consecutive nights away from a primary caregiver (Klein Pruett, Ebling & Insabella, 2004). For all infants and toddlers, the pattern of nights away from a primary caregiver is best determined case by case, considering carefully the developmental impact of all relevant factors.

### **Developmental factors to consider**

Preschoolers tend to experience the following developmental issues:

- They remain dependent on parents particularly on their emotional bond with a primary parent, and often want to stay close to the parent with whom they have had the most contact (may behave differently with each parent)
- Their abilities to think and reason are still fairly limited and it can be hard for them to understand what is happening and why
- At this stage, children tend to develop an understanding of the world that is magical, and can result in them inventing all sorts of explanations for the separation
- Their understanding of the world tends to be highly egocentric, meaning that they often believe that they are the cause of everything that happens in their world, including the separation and absence of one parent
- Their development in understanding of time means that they can cope with lengthier separations from their parents as they understand that they will return
- Most common reactions include self-blame, fear, confusion, guilt and sadness.

## **Signs and symptoms of distress**

A number of behaviours and emotions have been identified as typical distress responses in this age group. Signs of distress include:

- Difficulties with sleeping or eating,
- Nightmares
- Regression
- Increased separation anxiety
- Increased aggressive or disruptive behaviour, which may include hyperactivity
- Crying, whining and physical complaints (e.g., stomach pains, worsening of asthma)
- Withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Cognitive difficulties.

## **Young school-age children (5–8 years)**

Young school-age children have different needs and abilities from preschool-age children. They are more verbally articulate, and are more able to express their feelings than younger children, however deterioration in behaviour is also common amongst this age group. Children in this age range are trying to gain mastery at school, as well as develop new peer relationships. When trying to understand parental conflict, five-year-old children are less likely than older children to be able to understand that conflict is about divergent goals, and are likely to be self-blaming. Children are unable to analyse marital conflict in terms of the mental state of their parents until about age seven. Children in this age range may try to stop conflict by distracting their parents by their own aggressive behaviour. Children of this age are able to tolerate lengthier separations from their parents (Kelly & Lamb, 2000), and substantially shared care between separated parents becomes more viable from a developmental perspective at this stage.

## **Developmental factors to consider**

The developmental factors that need to be considered for young school-aged children include:

- They are more advanced in their thinking, and understand that others, such as their parents, operate separately from them
- However, latency aged children (6-11 years old) are likely to become caught in loyalty binds between their parents through their focus on “making it fair” for their parents.
- Although they are more able to talk about their feelings, they can have difficulties talking about their fears and may express these through behaviour problems
- They will miss the absent parent, regardless of the quality of their relationship with him/her before the separation, and boys in particular can intensely miss their fathers
- They are likely to believe that the absent parent has rejected or stopped loving them, which is very distressing and can lead to low self-esteem
- If one parent criticises the other, the child may degrade part of themselves as being bad
- They often have an intense desire for their parents to get back together and may promote reconciliation at contact/access times
- They may try to care for and comfort their parents, despite their own emotional needs
- Their primary feeling in response to separation is often sadness and they may be weepy.

### **Signs and symptoms of distress**

A number of behaviours and emotions have been identified as typical distress responses in this age group. Signs of distress include:

- Hyperactivity
- Behaviour problems (e.g. aggression)
- Regression
- Withdrawal
- Difficulties with schoolwork or obvious change in school performance
- Difficulties with peer relationships
- Separation anxieties (difficulties with transitions between parents or wanting to stay close to the parent that they have the most contact with)
- Worry/anxiety over what is or is not true, worry about parents, worry about being abandoned or sent away

### **Older school-age children (9–12 years)**

Children in this age group are able to express their feelings, and often demonstrate conflicted loyalties to one or other parent. These children are very impressionable, and closely watch how their parents behave, and form their own views. Peers and school life take on more importance, and contact or residential arrangements should take this developmental factor into consideration. Older children have a more sophisticated understanding of interactions between people, and know that conflict often means that one or other parent will have to compromise or change. These children tend to be most sensitive to whether an argument has been resolved or not (McIntosh, 2003).

### **Developmental factors to consider**

There are various developmental factors that need to be considered for children in this age range, such as:

- They are more able to understand some of the reasons for the separation, but often in simple black and white terms
- Approximately 25 per cent of these children will see one parent as the 'good guy' and the other parent as the 'bad guy', and may align with one parent (usually the mother or the residential parent) and blame or reject the other to reduce conflict and anxiety
- Their greater ability to understand their parents' feelings may lead to these children taking responsibility for looking after their parents' wellbeing rather than the other way around
- The greater ability of children in this age group to talk about their feelings means that their concerns and how they are coping may be more readily discussed
- Commonly, the primary feeling is anger at one or both parents (which can also result from grief or from harsher parenting)
- Other common feelings include shame or embarrassment, sadness, loneliness, fear, low self-esteem, powerlessness

### **Signs and symptoms of distress**

A number of behaviours and emotions have been identified as typical distress responses in this age group. Signs of distress include:

- Challenging behaviour
- Being difficult to discipline (particularly for mothers with their sons)
- Recurrent somatic complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches, non-specific malaise)
- Withdrawn behaviour
- Poor school performance, school refusal
- Risk taking behaviour (e.g. running away and drug experimentation)

## **Adolescents**

Adolescents experience considerable initial pain and anger when their parents divorce; however they are better able to accurately assign responsibility for the divorce, to resolve loyalty conflicts, and to assess and cope with additional stresses such as economic changes and new family role definitions. The adolescent is also able to take advantage of extra-familial support systems. Many adolescents experience premature detachment from their families, which can lead to greater involvement in a prosocial peer group, or can be associated with involvement in antisocial groups and activities with little adult concern or monitoring (Hetherington, 1987). Adolescents need to be given time and space to work out their own reactions to their parents' separation. If pressured by either parent, adolescents are likely to react with anger and rejection. Adolescents typically need flexibility in arrangements to allow them to participate in normal adolescent social activities and school events (Family Court of Australia, 2001). Adolescents over 12 may be least likely to want to enter or seek to maintain a substantially shared parenting arrangement (McIntosh, Long and Wells, 2009).

### **Developmental factors to consider**

Adolescence is a particularly challenging time in terms of their development. Needs for self-regulated, autonomous behaviour, academic and vocational attainment and the formation of intimate relationships may be especially difficult to meet and may exacerbate problems in adjustment in adolescents of divorced parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). A number of developmental factors need to be considered in the context of adaptation to separation/divorce. Developmental factors include:

- Development of sexual identity
- Development of sense of identity as well as independence where they can control and manipulate situations
- Issues around discipline and limit setting
- Primary social orientation to the peer group rather than the family
- Adolescents may be better able intellectually to see that there are two sides to the story and the ambiguities involved, therefore they may refuse to take sides
- A common problem is the loss of a parent-child relationship and thus the loss of a potential source of support during this difficult developmental period, so they may mourn the family of their childhood
- Issues of behaviour management, such as inconsistency in limit setting and parenting between households can further exacerbate developmentally appropriate challenging behaviour
- Adolescents are very good at detecting dishonesty, double standards and manipulation, hence those parents who are dishonest, or try to force the young person to take sides, may lose their adolescent's respect
- Adolescents can react by focusing more on their own plans, friendships and future.

### **Signs and symptoms of distress**

A number of behaviours and emotions have been identified as typical distress responses for adolescents and include:

- Increased acting out behaviour (including non-cooperation, delinquency, substance abuse or promiscuity)
- Difficulty concentrating on schoolwork
- Taking responsibility for parent concerns
- Withdrawal and depression
- Anger

## Factors affecting children's adjustment to divorce

Divorce tends to be accompanied by a number of stressors and changes that are associated with child adjustment problems. Important individual differences in children's adjustment and wellbeing following parental divorce are largely attributable to parent factors and family processes after divorce (Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2000). The real problem of divorce for children's adjustment appears to be its potential to disrupt vital parenting functions, and to raise children's exposure to detrimental parental conflict (Kelly, 2000). While divorce frequently adds complexity to children's lives, the effects of divorce are not universally adverse; children who move from a conflictual, abusive, or neglecting family situation to a more harmonious one show diminished problems following divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

There are a number of key risk factors that have been identified as contributing to poorer adjustment outcomes for children and adolescents from separated or divorced parents (Hetherington et al, 1989; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Key predictors of child post-divorce adjustment include:

- Quality of parenting
- Nature and degree of parental conflict
- Parental adjustment to separation
- The cumulative stress associated with multiple changes
- The fit of residential and contact arrangements to the child's evolving or changing needs
- Re-partnering
- Child characteristics, such as age, personality, prior vulnerabilities and temperament.

### Degree of parental conflict

The degree of parental conflict is a major risk factor associated with children's adjustment to divorce, and the association between intense marital conflict and children's poor adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated. A large body of research documents that children have more psychological problems when their parents are in conflict, either during marriage or following divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Grych, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Such difficulties include higher levels of anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour (Grych, 2005). Most experts therefore agree that children may be better off living in a happy divorced family than a conflict-ridden married one (Emery, 1999). Children from divorced but conflict-free homes have been found to have fewer behaviour problems than children whose parents remain in an unhappy marriage (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In addition, children's adjustment improves when conflict declines after divorce (Kitzmann & Emery, 1994).

Conflict is marked by some or all of the following parental behaviours: high degrees of anger and distrust, incidents of verbal abuse, intermittent physical aggression, ongoing difficulty in communicating about their children, ongoing difficulty cooperating in the care of their children, and the deliberate sabotaging of the child's relationship with the other parent (McIntosh, 2003). Several factors are thought to contribute to parental conflict following separation and divorce, including the persistence of anger and hostilities from problems originating within the marriage, anger and hurt about the separation, concern about the ex-partner's parenting of the children, and a lack of acceptance of the end of the couple relationship (Emery, 1999). The core factor in post-divorce parental conflict is parents' inability to separate their couple and parental roles (Emery, 1999).

### Prevalence of post-divorce parental conflict

Although it might be anticipated that one of the positive outcomes of separation is the reduction of marital conflict, interparental conflict is prevalent following separation and divorce (Emery, 1994; Johnston, 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In a study by Maccoby and Mnookin (1992), 34 per cent of co-parenting relationships were characterised as conflictual 18 months after separation, and 26 per cent of co-parenting relationships were still conflictual three and a half years after separation. Thus, divorce does not always reduce parental conflict, and it is estimated that between 20–25 per cent of children experience high conflict following their parents' divorce (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999).

## **The impact of loyalty conflicts**

Parents who express their rage toward their former spouse by asking children to carry hostile messages or answer personal questions about the other parent, by denigrating the other parent in front of the child, or by prohibiting mention of the other parent in their presence, are creating intolerable stress and loyalty conflicts in their children (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Research has shown that children in this situation were more depressed and anxious when compared with children of high conflict parents who did not involve their children in angry exchanges (Buchanan et al, 1991). The majority of adolescents experience feelings of being caught between their divorced parents, and the more loyalty conflicts they experience, the higher their levels of depression and deviant behaviour (Buchanan et al, 1991). Importantly, when parents in conflict avoid drawing children into their disputes, children's adjustment in high conflict divorced families is not significantly different from that of children from low conflict families (Buchanan et al, 1991).

## **The impact of parental conflict on the parenting role**

Interparental conflict can also impact on child adjustment indirectly, undermining the quality of parenting and discipline, and leading to increased parental inconsistency, lack of authoritative parenting, negativity and coerciveness. Non-cooperative parenting between ex-partners, and emotional withdrawal by both residential and non-residential parents following episodes of conflict can affect the quality of parent-child relations, including levels of parental warmth, support and nurturance, and parent-child connectedness (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The children's own increased anger and upset makes it even more difficult for distressed parents to maintain effective parenting practices (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Interparental conflict is also a cause of non-visitation by the non-residential parent, visitation disputes, non-payment of child support (Pearson & Thoennes, 1988) and post-divorce litigation (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

In a study of children whose parents presented for help with conflict resolution, over one third of the children had poor mental health ratings (rated on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire [SDQ]) compared with only 13% of children in the general population (McIntosh and Long, 2006). The peak points of risk are when conflict remains high and unresolved.

## **The impact of litigation on children**

Recent research has also uncovered the risks that litigation following separation presents to children. A court sample of separating families found that 50% of the children rated in a clinical range of symptomatology on the SDQ. (McIntosh 2006). Clearly there is an elevated risk of poor outcome for children subjected to prolonged exposure to conflict from parents.

## **Parental adjustment and quality of the parenting**

Research has consistently shown that the adjustment of children to divorce is strongly related to the psychological adjustment of parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The stress of separation and divorce places both men and women at risk for psychological and physical health problems, and alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, psychosomatic problems and accidents are more common among divorced than non-divorced adults (Hetherington et al, 1989).

The significance of these changes is that children are encountering a less effective parent at a time when they need stability in a rapidly changing life situation. Children's adjustment is therefore related to the mental health of their parents through the diminished competence in their parenting (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Hetherington, 1993). Some children and adolescents become the sole emotional support for their needy parents (Hetherington, 1999), and this can have negative implications for child adjustment following divorce, particularly if the emotional demands are inappropriate and excessive relative to the child's level of maturity.

There is also evidence of an increased risk for children with a parent with a mental illness or personality disturbance, and this is worst for children of parents with borderline and narcissistic personality disorders (McIntosh and Long, 2006). Children of parents with prodromal illness also had poor outcome. These families need specialized longer-term support to successfully put together an effective parenting plan and stick to it.

### **Cumulative stress associated with multiple changes and inappropriate contact schedules**

Research indicates that children exposed to multiple stressors and changes are at greater risk for poor adjustment following the separation or divorce of their parents (Hetherington et al, 1989). Changes include adjusting to the absence of the non-residential parent, changes in economic resources with financial decline and hardship, changes in the custodial parent's availability, and changes in family structure, such as the remarriage of one or both parents, and the addition of step-parents and step-siblings (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1999; Hetherington et al, 1989). Financial pressures on parents often necessitate a move to more affordable housing, resulting in new schools, peer groups and neighbourhoods for the children. These stressors appear to increase the risk of poor social and emotional adjustment in children (Emery, 1999). The number of negative life events to which children are exposed is a consistent predictor of children's divorce adjustment (Amato, 2000). Frequent and/or lengthy journeys between parents' homes to enable contact may impose chronic strain on children, particularly infants and pre-schoolers, through ongoing disruption of routine and increased fatigue (McIntosh and Chisholm, 2008). Disrupted behaviours that persist for more than two weeks such as poor sleep, irritability, and difficulty being soothed are likely to be signs of a young child who is strained by an inappropriate care schedule, and review of the contact schedule is advisable.

### **Residential arrangements and parental remarriage**

Studies focusing on residential arrangements following divorce tend to show that children fare better under joint arrangements rather than sole mother or father residency (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbush, 1996), provided certain conditions within the family dynamic exist to support that arrangement (McIntosh and Long, 2006). This finding needs to be treated cautiously however, as especially cooperative parents being more likely to choose and maintain joint residency than other parents. Although many children in single-mother households are disadvantaged by a lack of economic resources, some children in single-father households are disadvantaged by a lack of interpersonal resources (such as single fathers' relatively low level of involvement in school activities), resulting in roughly equal outcomes.

McIntosh and Long (2006) found that long term mental health outcomes for children in shared care are poorest for the following group: children under 10 years of age whose fathers had low formal education, who had a distant relationship with their mother, and whose parents remain in high conflict. However, especially cooperative parents are more likely to choose and maintain joint residency than are other parents. When parents for various reasons are not able to share their children's care or when shared care is not yet developmentally appropriate, gender of the primary parent is likely to matter less than the care-giving competence and availability of that parent (Downey & Powell, 1993).

A reasonable conclusion appears to be that no particular residential arrangement is best for all children, and that an individual parent's capacity to parent effectively is the best determinant of choice of residence. Residential arrangements often require modification as children develop and their relationships with parents change (Buchanan et al, 1996).

Predictions about the nature of child adjustment following parental remarriage are unclear. Residential step-parents can add complexity to the adjustment scenario, and mean that the child must confront an additional transition to another family involving the addition of non-biologically related family members to the household. Thus, for the child, there may be new stressors associated with remarriage of a parent. In addition, children whose parents have undergone multiple divorces are at significant risk for problems in adjustment (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b). Kin relationships become more complex, and may include step-siblings, half siblings, step-grandparents, as well as step-parents and biologically related kin. The research shows, however, that sensitive emotionally available relationships that become forged between the adult and child can become protective (McIntosh and Long, 2006).

### **Child temperament and personality**

Individual factors that buffer the negative impact of divorce on children include intelligence, easy-going temperament, specific talents, physical attractiveness, and the ability to respond effectively when confronted with stressful events (McIntosh, 2003). The temperamentally easy child is less likely to be the recipient of criticism, displaced anger and anxiety, and is also more likely to be able to cope with these responses (Hetherington et al, 1989). Research has shown that if temperamentally easy children have support systems available to them, going through moderate levels of stress in a divorce or remarriage may actually enhance their ability to cope with later adaptive challenges.

Temperamentally difficult or more sensitive children have been found to be less adaptable to change and more vulnerable to adversity than are temperamentally easy children (Hetherington, 1989). For temperamentally difficult children, increasing stress leads to decrements in later coping skills and an increase in behaviour problems, as well as the exacerbation of existing problems. These children also may be less able to adapt to parental negativity when it occurs, and may also be less adept at gaining the support of people around them (Hetherington, 1989; 1991b).

Children with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as social and emotional problems, are also more at risk of poorer outcome following parental separation (Amato & Keith 1991b). Children who place some of the blame for the divorce on themselves tend to be more poorly adjusted (Bussell, 1995). This tends to be associated with a variety of child problems, including depression, externalising problems, and lowered feelings of self-competence.

### **Alienation and estrangement**

Children who become alienated and estranged from the non-residential parents (Kelly & Johnston, 2001) are also at high risk of poor adjustment. Estrangement is when children, for good reasons, become reluctant or refuse to see the parent. Typically this is because they have experienced poor treatment, been overwhelmed developmentally by the visiting arrangements, or suffered family violence. Parental alienation is defined as a child's unreasonable rejection of one parent due to the influence of the other parent combined with the child's own contributions (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Early intervention (and usually this requires specialist intervention) in alienation and estrangement is advocated.

## Protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to divorce

Although many children do initially experience distress and resulting difficulties following their parents' divorce, in the long run, resilience and adaptability is the normal outcome (Emery, 1999). The major protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to divorce identified in the research literature are the experience of low interparental conflict, authoritative parenting from at least one parent, and effective co-parenting.

### Low parental conflict

Low parental conflict has been identified as one of the major protective factors for children following divorce (Emery, 1999; Hetherington et al, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Effective and constructive resolution of conflict between parents (i.e. negotiation and compromise) has also been found to be related to reduced child emotional distress and behavioural problems (Shifflett-Simpson & Cummings, 1996). Observing their parents successfully negotiate and resolve their conflicts appears to promote children's development of emotional self-regulation and interpersonal problem-solving skills (Hetherington, 1999).

Children also tend to do better when parents do not encourage them to form hostile alliances against the other parent, and when parents do not allow the child to get caught in the middle of parental acrimony (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

### Authoritative parenting

Research indicates that authoritative parenting is strongly associated with child and adolescent adjustment following divorce. Authoritative parenting refers to parents who are warm and supportive, communicative, responsive to their children's needs, yet exert firm, consistent control and positive discipline, maintain age-appropriate expectations, and monitor their children's activities closely (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Having a good relationship with at least one parent is a protective factor for children experiencing family dissolution.

### Effective co-parenting or parallel parenting

Research highlights the importance of co-parental relations to post-divorce family functioning and child wellbeing (Camara & Resnick, 1987). Under ideal circumstances, the custodial and non-custodial parents work together in a business-like relationship to avoid conflict with each other, establish consistent routines across households, share resources, rights and responsibilities, and support each other's parenting practices for the benefit of their children. Communication and cooperation and little active undermining of the other parent have been identified as major protective factors underlying the adjustment of children following divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Despite the fact that cooperative, mutually supportive and non-confrontational co-parenting relationships are advantageous to parents and children (Hetherington et al, 1998), research indicates that between only 25 and 30 per cent of parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship characterised by joint planning, flexibility, sufficient communication and coordination of schedules and activities. Research suggests that this situation is most likely to occur when the family size is small and where there was little conflict at the time of divorce. Children in this situation generally adapt better to parents' divorce and also to parents' remarriages (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

More than half of parents engage in parallel parenting, in which low conflict, low communication and emotional disengagement are typical features (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In this type of situation, there is little undermining of the other parent. Children also tend to do well in this situation, when parents are providing nurturing care and appropriate discipline in each household (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Whiteside & Becker, 2000).

## Interventions to ameliorate the impact of divorce on children

The preceding sections have highlighted the need for interventions to ameliorate the impact of divorce on parents and children. Research has shown that the major impact of divorce on children's adjustment stems from its potential to disrupt vital parenting functions, and expose children to interparental conflict (Kelly, 2000). As the predictive factors for children's adjustment to divorce have been found to be primarily associated with parental factors, there has been a great deal of interest in developing interventions to modify parental behaviour post-divorce.

In general, parenting programs are brief, time-limited interventions that aim to inform parents about the impact of divorce and conflict on children and how they can help their children cope, reduce destructive divorce-related parent behaviours, and facilitate adjustment to divorce (Amato, 1994). Parent education programs tend to be either information-based or skills-based, with some programs incorporating both approaches.

Prevention and early intervention parenting programs for ameliorating the impact of divorce on children have been supported throughout the literature (McIntosh, 2006, McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003; Thoenes & Pearson, 1999), with outcomes including the reporting by parents of increased parental cooperation, restoration of parental alliance, improved children's well-being, and a belief that early attendance at separated parenting programs will prevent or reduce enduring parental conflict.

Research by Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) points out that skills-oriented classes are more likely to lead to parental behaviour change in co-parenting situations than passive strategies. As a result of skills-based education programs, divorcing parents have been found to increase their ability to choose communication behaviours that lower parental conflict, and these effects have been maintained at six-month follow-up (Arbuthnot et al, 1997).

### Longer intervention programs

Research evidence has demonstrated that longer divorce education programs that incorporate skills training enable parents to learn, practise, and master parenting skills over time. Findings support the effectiveness of such programs in improving parent-child relationships and reducing interparental conflict as a consequence of:

- Improved parental disciplining skills, such as the use of positive reinforcement and non-coercive limit setting
- Enhanced communication skills
- Effective conflict-resolution and problem solving skills

*Evidence-based programs include: New Beginnings Program (Wolchik et al., 1993); Parenting Through Change (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999); Dads For Life (Braver et al., 2005).*

Although longer interventions have been found to be effective, the indications are that very few separating parents have time and emotional resources to attend such programs during this major life stressor. In addition, there is a paucity of evidence-based programs of this nature in Australia.

### Brief intervention programs

Empirical research evaluating brief divorce education programs provides some support for program effectiveness, with a number of programs being associated with decreased negative divorce-related parental behaviours and increased constructive parenting and co-parenting behaviours. More specifically, findings support the effectiveness of such programs in:

- Reducing children's exposure to interparental conflict
- Reducing triangulation of children, such as placement in loyalty conflicts
- Improving quality of parent-child relationships, and improving co-parenting skills such as communication and problem-solving skills
- Increasing the encouragement of children's relationship and contact with the non-residential parent
- Improving parental understanding of children's responses to separation and divorce
- Increasing willingness to participate in other services for divorcing families

Evidence-based programs include: *Children in the Middle* (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996); *K.I.D.S.* (Shiflet & Cummings, 1999); *Children First* (Kramer & Washo, 1993); *Key Steps to Parenting after Separation* (Dour, 2003); *PEACE* (McKenry et al., 1999).

## **Litigation**

Research findings also suggest that early intervention may reduce the re-litigation rate, suggesting that the sooner parents participate in divorce education, the less entrenched conflictual parental communication becomes. A comparative study of 40 families who litigated and 36 families who went through a less adversarial trial (LAT) which included a supportive, educative program, found that the LAT parents were able to recover a level of cooperation and restoration of parental alliance. Estimates of their children's well-being were substantially better than the children of the parents who litigated. (McIntosh, 2006).

Another 12 year longitudinal study into families who were repeat litigants provides more support for the benefits of collaborative forums for dispute resolution as opposed to litigation (Emery et al., 2001). Families were randomly allocated into mediation and the standard legal path. After 12 years, the non-residential parents who litigated were three times less likely to have regular contact with children than those who mediated. They were more than twice as likely to have no contact at all with their children than those who mediated. Several effects of the intervention have remained. Parents who mediated their dispute at the eleventh hour had significantly lower conflict with each other, and both parents were significantly more involved in their children's lives.

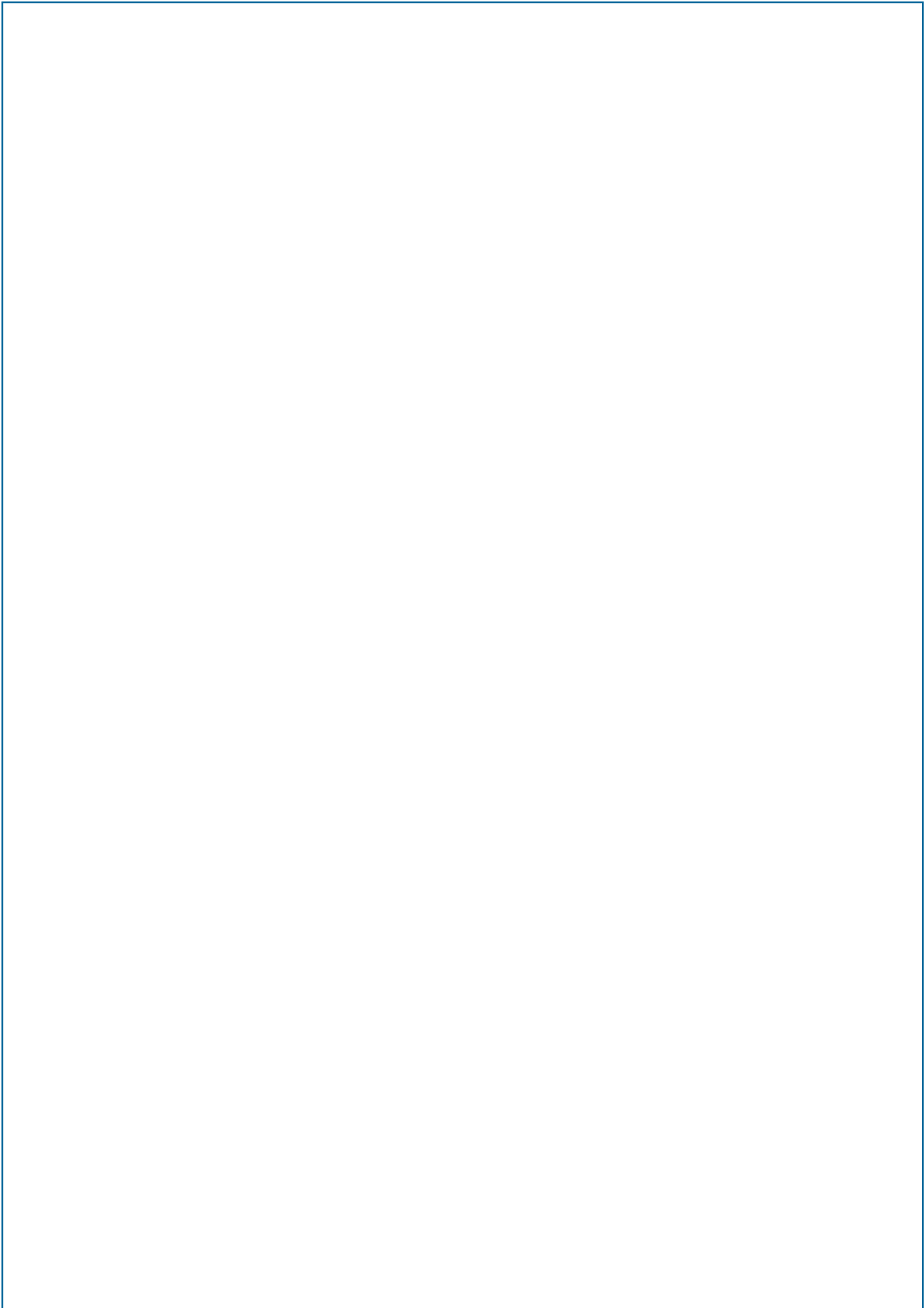
## **Considerations for the appropriateness of mediation**

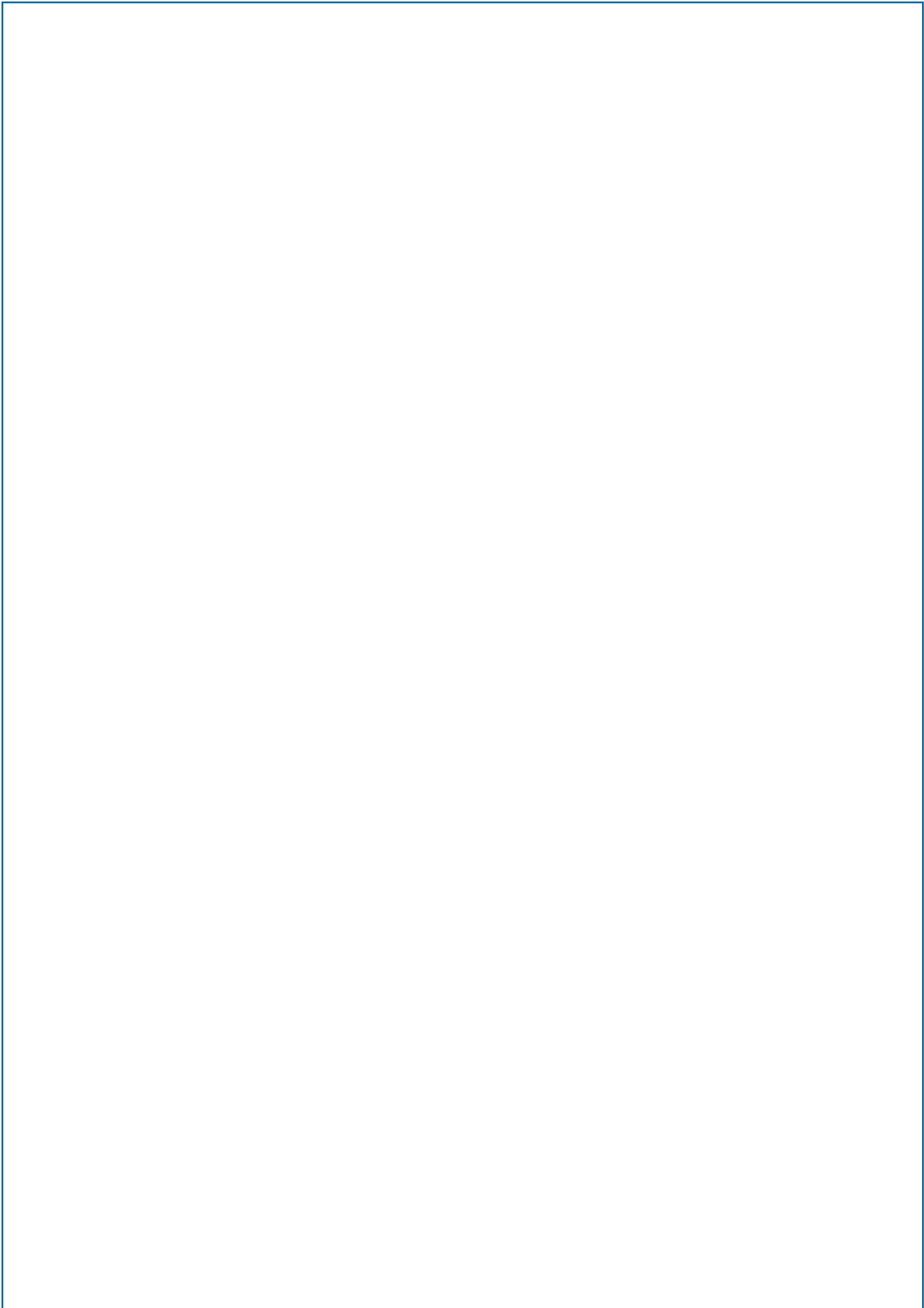
In cases with a heightened risk of domestic violence, the appropriateness of divorce mediation needs to be considered by policy makers as well as at the service delivery level. The complexity of such concerns requires careful screening for current and historical safety issues, and modified mediation practices if mediation goes ahead.

Concerns about divorce mediation in cases where there has been domestic abuse include the following: (1) Mediation decriminalizes domestic abuse and encourages a conciliatory approach that does not hold the perpetrator accountable for his behaviour, hence the abuser may be given the message that there are no adverse consequences to violence. (2) Victims might be made to feel partially to blame for the abuse. (3) Ensuring the safety of the victim during a process that allows the perpetrator to know the time and place his or her partner will be present for mediation becomes an important issue. (4) Power imbalances introduced by domestic violence may render mediation inherently unfair (Pearson, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

Early identification and intervention for families showing evidence of adjustment difficulties following divorce has been shown to reduce children's mental health problems and adjustment difficulties, and promote adaptive coping and resilience as a normative outcome.





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