

# DIVORCE

The first two years are the worst

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An in-depth study of divorced parents and their children examines the problems and changes they face in the two years following separation

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

*Divorce American Style*  
*Divorce for the Unbroken Marriage*  
*Creative Divorce*  
*Divorce in the Progressive Era*  
*Divorce: Chance of a New Lifetime*  
*Divorce: The Gateway to Self Realization*  
*Divorce: The New Freedom*

As these current book titles suggest, divorce is becoming increasingly popular in the United States. They also suggest that divorce can be an exciting and fun thing and that it can open the door to liberation and new possibilities. The first suggestion is true. In fact, if the 1974 trend continues (about one million divorces per year) 40 percent of all new marriages will ultimately end in divorce. The second suggestion is more difficult to evaluate. Divorce can be a positive and liberating solution to certain family problems, but it can also be a time of crisis that results in stress, conflict and trauma for the divorcees and for their children. Some of the problems that follow in the wake of divorce were described at the recent meeting of the American Psychological Association (SN: 9/18/76, p. 186) by E. Mavis Hetherington of the University of Virginia.

Most divorce research in the past has focused on mothers and children and has been largely descriptive. The characteristics of divorced mothers and their children have been described and compared to those of mothers and children in intact homes. Hetherington's research, conducted with Martha Cox and Roger Cox, is one of the first studies to concentrate on the entire family system. It makes an in-depth analysis of changes in family interaction and functioning in the two years following divorce.

A total of 96 white, middle-class families took part in the study. They consisted of 24 boys and 24 girls and their divorced parents and the same number of children and parents from intact families. The children were all about four years of age at the start of the study. In all divorced families custody of the children had been granted to the mothers (as is the case in more than 90 percent of divorces involving children). A multimethod, multimeasure approach was used in the investigation of family interactions. The measures used included interviews of and diaries kept by

the parents, observations of parents and children interacting in a laboratory setting and at home, checklists and parent ratings of children's behavior and a battery of personality tests of the parents. In addition, observations of the children were made in nursery schools, and ratings of the children were obtained from their peers and teachers. Parents and children were evaluated by these measures two months, one year and two years after the divorce.

As would be expected, some of the first problems faced by divorced parents were those related to household maintenance and economic and occupational difficulties. Many of the men, particularly those from marriages in which conventional sex roles had been maintained and in which the wife was not employed, experienced considerable difficulty in running a household and reported a "chaotic life style." Although the men had more problems, the households of both divorced men and women were more disorganized than those of intact families, especially in the first year following divorce. Members of separated households were more likely to eat at irregular hours. Divorced mothers and their children were less likely to eat together. Bedtimes were more erratic, and children were more likely to be late for school. Divorced men slept less, had more erratic sleep patterns and had more difficulty with shopping, cooking, laundry and cleaning. These problems sometimes interfered with job performance and were further complicated by the economic stress associated with maintaining two households.

Divorce also led to changes in self concept and emotional adjustment. Two months after the divorce about one third of the fathers and one fourth of the mothers reported an ebullient sense of freedom, but by one year this had largely been replaced by depression, anxiety or apathy. One of the most obvious changes in divorced parents in the first year following divorce was a decline in feelings of competence. They felt they had failed as parents and spouses and expressed doubts about their ability to adjust well in any future marriages. They reported that they functioned less well in social situations and were less competent in heterosexual relations. Nine of the divorced

fathers reported an increased rate of sexual dysfunction.

Social life and the establishment of meaningful, intimate interpersonal relationships also present problems for divorced parents. Almost all complained that socializing is organized around couples and that being a single adult, especially a single woman with children, limits recreational opportunities. Divorced mothers reported having significantly less contact with adults and often commented on the sense of being locked into a child's world. Several described themselves as prisoners and used terms like "walled in" and "trapped." This was less true, however, of working women who had social contacts through their co-workers. Divorced men had a restricted social life two months after divorce, followed by a surge of activity at one year and a decline in activity to the wife's level by two years. In contrast with the women, divorced men complained of feeling shut out, rootless and at loose ends and of a need to engage in social activities even if they were not pleasurable. Both men and women spoke of intense feelings of loneliness.

Happiness, self-esteem and feelings of competence in heterosexual behavior increased steadily during the two years following divorce for males and females, but they were not as high even in the second year as those of married couples. Frequency of sexual intercourse was lower for divorced parents than married couples at two months, higher at one year for males and about the same frequency at two years. Divorced males particularly seemed to show a peak of sexual activity and a pattern of dating a variety of women in the first year. However, the stereotyped image of the happy, swinging single life was not altogether accurate. Many males, but few of the females, were pleased with the increased opportunity for sexual experiences with a variety of partners, but by the end of the first year both men and women were expressing a need for intimacy and a lack of satisfaction in casual sexual encounters.

Six of the 48 divorced couples had sexual intercourse with each other during the two months following divorce, but the relationship between all but four of the divorced couples was characterized by acrimony, anger, feelings of desertion,

resentment and memories of painful conflicts. Considering the stress involved, it is not surprising that at one year after divorce 29 of the fathers and 35 of the mothers reported that they thought the divorce might have been a mistake and that they should have tried harder to resolve their conflicts. By the end of the second year only 12 of the mothers and 9 of the fathers felt this way.

Poor parenting on the part of divorced parents was apparent in most cases during the two years following divorce. The researchers found that divorced parents make fewer maturity demands of their children, communicate less well with their children, tend to be less affectionate and show marked inconsistency in discipline and a lack of control over their children when compared with parents in intact families. Poor parenting is most apparent when divorced parents, particularly mothers, are interacting with their sons. These parents communicate less, are less consistent with and use more negative sanctions with sons than with daughters. In addition, in the laboratory situation, divorced mothers exhibited fewer positive sanctions and affiliation and more negative behaviors, such as negative commands and opposition to requests, with sons than with daughters. Sons of divorced parents seem to have a harder time of it, says Hetherington, and this may explain why previous studies have shown that the ef-

fects of divorce are more severe and enduring for boys than for girls.

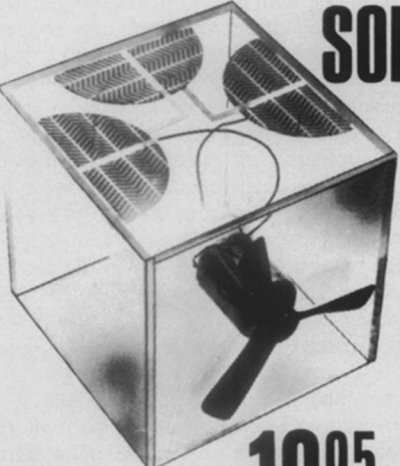
The interviews and observations showed that the lack of control divorced parents have over their children was associated with different patterns of relating to the child for mothers and fathers. The mother tries to control the child by being more restrictive and giving more commands that the child often ignores or resists. The father wants his contacts with his children to be as happy as possible. He begins by being extremely permissive and indulgent with his children but becomes increasingly restrictive during the two-year period, although never as restrictive as fathers in intact homes. The "every day is Christmas" behavior of the divorced father decreases with time, and the divorced mother decreases her futile attempts at authoritarian control and becomes more effective in dealing with her children by two years.

Divorced mothers may give their children a hard time, but mothers, especially divorced mothers, get rough treatment from their children. In most cases, children are more likely to oppose their mothers and comply with fathers. They also more frequently make negative complaining demands of the mother. Boys tend to be more oppositional and aggressive and girls more whining, complaining and compliant. The divorced mother is harassed by her children, particularly her

sons. In comparison with fathers and mothers in intact families, her children in the first year don't obey, affiliate with or pay attention to her. They nag and whine, make more dependency demands and are more likely to ignore her. The aggression of boys with divorced mothers peaks at one year and then drops significantly but is still higher than that of boys in intact homes at two years. Some divorced mothers described their relationship with their child one year after divorce as "declared war," "struggle for survival," "the old Chinese water torture" or "like getting bitten to death by ducks." As was found in the divorced parents' behavior, one year following divorce seemed to be the period of maximum negative behaviors for children, and great improvement occurred by two years, although the negative behaviors were longer lasting in boys than in girls. In almost all areas, the second year appears to be a year of marked recovery and constructive adaptation for both parents and children.

These findings, of course, represent averages. There were wide variations in coping and parenting within intact and divorced families. However, of the families studied, there were none in which at least one family member did not report distress or exhibit disrupted behavior, particularly during the first year following divorce. Previous research has shown that a conflict-ridden intact family may be more harmful than divorce for family members, but this does not mean that divorce itself does not represent a crisis.

"We did not encounter a victimless divorce," says Hetherington. Since this seems to be the rule rather than the exception and since statistical evidence suggests that the rate of divorce is likely to increase, Hetherington concludes that "it is important that parents and children be realistically prepared for problems associated with divorce that they may encounter." □



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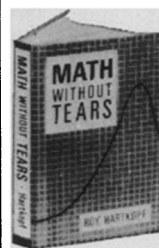
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