

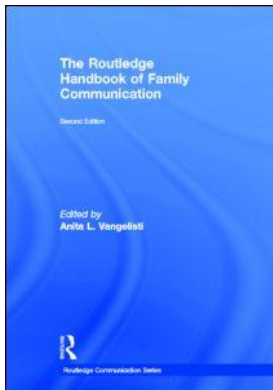
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### **Divorced and Single-Parent Families**

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# Divorced and Single-Parent Families

## Risk, Resiliency, and the Role of Communication

*Tamara D. Afifi and Amanda Denes*

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The rise in divorced and single-parent families represents one of the most profound changes in the American family in the past four decades (Amato, 2005; Usdansky, 2009). As a result of this change, there has been an outpouring of interest from researchers over the potential “deterioration” of the American family and its effects on children. The impact of family structure on children has arguably been one of the most well researched areas in the social sciences, generating two thousand research articles on divorce between 2000 and 2009 alone (Amato, 2010).

Despite the wealth of research on divorce and single parenthood, less is known about how the American people feel about these changes to the traditional family form. To address this issue, Usdansky (2009) conducted a content analysis of attitudes toward divorce and single parenthood in popular magazines ( $N = 474$ ) and scholarly research articles ( $N = 202$ ) published between 1900 and 1998. She found that critical attitudes toward divorce in both the scholarly articles and popular press magazines plunged during this time, not due to an increase in favorable opinions about divorce, but as a result of a “virtual disappearance of normative debate” (Usdansky, 2009, p. 209). As Usdansky speculates, the absence of debate may reflect an ambivalent acceptance of divorce, perhaps as a result of weakening family values and norms in favor of individual choice and personal happiness or varied feelings about the benefits and consequences of divorce for children. These same opinions, however, were not shared with regard to nonmarital childbearing, which scholars and the lay public equally criticized throughout the century (Usdansky, 2009). One possible explanation for the more critical attitude toward single parenting is that while Americans are relatively ambivalent about divorce, they simultaneously place a high value on marriage, and single parenthood represents the antithesis of marriage (Cherlin, 2009).

To better understand why these attitudes exist, we take a closer look at what researchers have found regarding the impact of divorce and single parenthood on children using a risk and resiliency approach. In particular, we focus on communication patterns that promote risk and resilience in divorced and single-parent families. Communication

is the foundation of a family because it is the means through which family members construct and maintain their relationships with each other (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). As such, it is often the catalyst for positive and negative change in families. We conclude with a discussion of current trends and possible directions for future research.

## Effects of Divorce and Single Parenthood on Children

### *Impact of Divorce on Children*

Determining the precise impact of divorce on children is a difficult task because it depends upon a host of complex circumstances (see Amato, 2010). Most research suggests that divorce can have short-term and long-term effects on children. Some of the short-term effects of divorce on children include a decline in their standard of living, less quality and quantity of time spent with parents, internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression, lower self-esteem), externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency, acting out in school), poorer academic achievement, changes in residences and schools, and greater fears of abandonment (e.g., Burt, Barnes, McGue, & Iacono, 2008; Strohschein, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002). Divorce can have long-term effects as well. Children whose parents divorce tend to have a greater fear of commitment in romantic relationships, are more likely to get divorced themselves, have greater psychological and economic difficulties, obtain less education, have insecure attachments, and experience more strained relationships with their parents (especially fathers) than those whose parents remain married (Amato, 1996; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Li & Wu, 2008; Sun & Li, 2010; Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2010). Even though many of these effects may dissipate over time, there is evidence that for some individuals, the negative effects of divorce linger into adulthood (Amato, 2010).

The scholarly debate that has continued for years concerns the exact size of these effects and their long-term nature. Earlier studies by Wallerstein (e.g., Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) suggested that most children suffered from long-term, debilitating effects of divorce. Other scholars like Popenoe (1993) have argued that divorce has strongly contributed to the demise of the American family. Most research, however, tends to take more of a “moderate” and multi-faceted approach. An important shift in thinking came with Hetherington (e.g., Hetherington, 1999, 2003) and Booth and Amato’s (e.g., 1994, 2001) research on divorce, which tends to assume a risk and resiliency approach. Hetherington’s research suggests that children vary considerably in their responses to divorce, with some fairing quite well and potentially benefiting from being removed from a tumultuous family environment and others suffering from long-term difficulties (Hetherington, 2003). Most of this variance is due to contextual factors, such as the age and gender of the child and parent, the number of stressors and transitions the child experiences, how long it has been since the divorce, whether remarriage is involved, and the communicative patterns that characterize the parents’ post-divorce relationship and the parent–child relationship.

Amato and colleagues’ research (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Booth & Amato, 1994, 2001) has been instrumental in demonstrating the impact of divorce on children (see Amato, 2010 for a more extensive review). With their longitudinal data set that spans generations, Amato and Booth have found that one of the most important predictors of how well children function after divorce is the degree of interparental conflict. In fact, research has found that even

though divorce still has a direct influence on children's well-being (Riggio, 2004), interparental conflict is probably more important than divorce in predicting children's psychological well-being and parent-child relationship quality (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Jekielek, 1998). As Amato and his colleagues (2001; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Booth & Amato, 2001) note, children whose parents have a conflicted marriage and who remain married may have poorer psychological well-being than children whose parents have a conflicted marriage and divorce. Amato et al. (1995) also found that children whose parents had a high conflict marriage and divorce were better off after the divorce. By contrast, children whose parents had little conflict in their marriage prior to the divorce were worse off if their parents divorced. Hetherington (1999, 2003), however, argues that much of the long-term effects of divorce dissipate *if* conflict between former spouses is kept at a minimum.

Two meta-analyses conducted by Amato have been foundational for delineating the impact of divorce on children. Amato and Keith (1991) first conducted a meta-analysis of 92 studies that compared children of divorce with children of first marriage families on measures of well-being. In general, they found that divorce is associated with lower well-being for children. As the authors also emphasize, however, the effect sizes were small (with the average effect size being .14 of a standard deviation) and were smallest with more recent and more methodologically and statistically sophisticated studies. Amato (2001) then updated the aforementioned meta-analysis with another analysis of 67 studies published in the 1990s, finding similar effects for children of divorce on academic achievement, psychological well-being, conduct, and social relationships. Interestingly, the gap for children of divorced and married parents across these variables was smallest during the 1980s and *increased* again during the 1990s (with an average effect size of -.29). In other words, children today might be *more* affected by their parents' divorce than previous generations. Amato argues that there are two primary explanations for why this trend exists. First, couples are divorcing for different reasons. In the 1970s and 1980s, couples were likely to get divorced when it was a highly discordant relationship. In the 1990s and today, however, couples are more likely to get divorced in the quest for personal happiness, even if there is little or no conflict in the marriage, which may be more damaging to children because it disrupts their schemata for marriage and commitment. A second account for the rise in effect sizes during the 1990s could be that the gap in economic well-being became even wider between children of single parents and children of married parents, contributing to more significant effects of divorce on children in that era.

### *Impact of Single Parenthood on Children*

Although much of the research on single parenthood is subsumed under the research on divorce, scholars have also examined the impact of growing up with only one parent on children regardless of divorce. Most of this research shows that, on average, children who grow up in single-parent homes are disadvantaged on a variety of behavioral, psychological, and cognitive outcomes, as well as financial attainment compared to children who grow up in two-parent households (O'Connor, Dunn, Jenkins, Pickering, & Rasbash, 2001; Riala, Isohanni, Jokelainen, Jones, & Isohanni, 2003). Research has also found that children who are raised by single parents are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including increased use of drugs and alcohol and earlier sexual activity, than children raised by two parents (Barrett & Turner, 2006; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Wagner et al., 2010).

Research has long shown that children from single-parent homes are educationally disadvantaged, both in their likelihood of completing high school as well as attending college (e.g., Barton, 2006). Single parents are less able to provide support and monitor their child's academic behavior, resulting in lower academic achievement and higher drop out rates (Jeynes, 2002). Astone and MacLanahan (1991) found that children from single-family households reported that their parents helped less with homework and, more generally, were less supervised at home. Parents' own behavior often influences children's behavior and similarly, parents' educational aspirations for their children often influence the children's school outcomes (Astone & MacLanahan, 1991).

While research suggests that single parenthood negatively affects children's well-being, research also indicates that the type of single-parent family matters and that not all single-parent families should be considered synonymous. Hill (1986) analyzed different types of single-parent families and found that, compared to two-parent households, single-parent families on average spent more time transitioning between stages of stability. However, he found that the addition of a child when single parents remarry required even greater transitions and periods of family disorder than those who did not remarry. He also discovered that widowed mothers who remarry are the least likely to divorce compared to other single parents who remarry and first-marriage couples. What Hill's study and other research (e.g., Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007) shows is that finer distinctions among single-parent families are required.

Research has also differentiated between single-mother and single-father homes. Because single mothers are more economically disadvantaged than single fathers (Grall, 2009), it has been suggested that children from single-father homes should experience certain benefits due to their higher SES status. Amato and Keith (1991) found that children in father-custody homes exhibited fewer problems than children in mother-custody homes. This finding contradicted early work that found that children in father-custody homes, though having the highest SES, had the worst health outcomes (i.e., Hanson, 1986). Some scholars have argued that because of inherent gender and sex roles of men and women, a single mother and a single father naturally have different strengths in their parenting. For example, research has found that single mothers are better than single fathers at socializing their children and providing interpersonal communication skills, while single fathers are better than single mothers at providing economic and practical skills (Downey, 1994). To test this individualist perspective, Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, and Dufur (1998) used a national data set to compare well-being of children from single-mother versus single-father households. Overall, they found that single mothers from nearly all backgrounds were disadvantaged compared to single fathers (single fathers had more prestigious occupations, higher income, and more education). Despite the disadvantages faced by single mothers, children from such homes had better outcomes than children from single-father homes, though these differences were small. Along six indicators of poor behavior, only two showed that children raised by fathers were significantly less well behaved than those raised by mothers. Overall, Downey et al. conclude that few differences exist between single mothers and single fathers.

Single fathers are also becoming more involved in their children's lives than any other time in history. Amato, Meyers, and Emery (2009) found that between the 1970s and 2000s, the percentage of uninvolved dads (those who had not seen their children or paid child support in a year) decreased from 35 percent to 22 percent, while the amount of involved dads (those who see their child once a week and pay child support) increased from 8 percent to 26 percent. As single fathers continue to become more

involved in their children's lives, the effects of single parenthood on children may change as well.

## **Why Divorce and Single Parenthood Can Place Children at Risk and the Role of Communication**

### *Divorce, Risk, and Communication Patterns*

There are numerous reasons why divorce can place children at risk for maladaptation. When a divorce occurs, parents and children experience a cascade of stressors. Afifi, Hutchinson, and Krouse (2006) identified 15 of the top stressors that parents and adolescents experience during a divorce, some of which included interparental conflict, finances, moving, loneliness, and loss of friendships. Most of these stressors directly or indirectly impact parents' communication with each other and their children. Many times, the communication patterns themselves are the primary source of the stress.

One of the most pressing stressors for parents and children when undergoing a divorce is interparental conflict. Most research on divorce focuses solely on the short-term effects of divorce, but longitudinal research is essential because processes like interparental conflict are often present long before and after a divorce occurs (Amato, 2010; Yu et al., 2010). Researchers also need to delineate the specific aspects of conflict that are healthy and unhealthy. Too much conflict and never seeing one's parents engage in conflict can both be poor models of conflict management for children. Amato and DeBoer (2001) found that young adults who never saw their parents' divorce coming were the worst off psychologically and had the most difficulty with commitment in their own romantic relationships. Research suggests that interparental conflict that is prolonged, intense, concerns the children, and makes children feel enmeshed in it, tends to be particularly harmful (Booth, 1999). More specifically, when children feel caught between their parents' conflict or get put in the middle of their parents' disputes, it can increase children's anxiety, depressive symptoms, and weaken their relationship with their parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Because children love their parents, it produces cognitive dissonance when they are forced to defend their loyalty to both of them. Unfortunately, children often eventually side with one parent over the other in an effort to reduce the dissonance.

Research has examined the communication patterns that predict children's feelings of being caught and how children respond behaviorally when these feelings surface. Children feel caught when they act as messengers of information or mediators between their parents, feel the need to defend loyalties, and when their parents disclose negative information about each other, engage in demand-withdraw patterns, or have difficulties with conversation and conformity orientation (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007; Buchanan et al., 1991). When children feel caught between their parents, their first instinct is to engage in avoidance (Afifi, Afifi, Morse, & Hamrick, 2008). They might use avoidance behaviors or avoid talking about their parents' relationship as a way to escape or minimize their parents' conflict, not make their parent feel bad, or preserve their relationships with their parents. Children also sometimes model their parents' conflict behaviors by becoming aggressive in response to their feelings of being caught or they may directly confront their parents about their feelings when they get older and develop more communication competence (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). While

feeling caught is more common in divorced families, it can also occur in first marriage families (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007). In fact, these feelings may dissipate in children of divorce approximately ten years after the divorce, but they may linger in children whose parents are still married because they are unable to escape the conflict (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

Parents' conflict and stress can also spill onto their children through the parents' divorce disclosures. As Koerner and others (e.g., Glenwick & Mowrey, 1986; Koerner et al., 2004) have found, parental disclosures regarding intimate, private, or sensitive information, like finances, ill feelings toward the other parent, and personal worries, increase children's anxiety. When former spouses have unsettled emotions with each other and their social networks decline after a divorce, they might confide in their children as a way to fill their need for support (Greeff & Van Der Merwe, 2004). These disclosures can result in emotional parentification whereby a child provides emotional support to a parent in a peer-like relationship (Jurkovic, Thirkeild, & Morrell, 2001). Divorce disclosures tend to be particularly problematic when parents disclose inappropriate information about each other. These types of disclosures are predictive of children's diminished mental and physical health and feelings of being caught (e.g., Afifi et al., 2008; Afifi & McManus, 2010; Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, & Raymond, 2002).

Not all parental divorce disclosures are harmful, however, and some can actually promote psychological well-being and facilitate parent-child bonds. Children need information about the divorce and related topics (e.g., the parents' new dating partners) to reduce their uncertainty (Ferguson & Dickson, 1995; Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995). Some scholars (e.g., Arditti, 1999; Thomas et al., 1995; Westberg, Nelson, & Piercy, 2002) suggest that parental divorce disclosures may enhance adolescents' psychological well-being and closeness with their parents. For instance, Koerner, Jacobs, and Raymond (2000) argued that talking about meaningful issues related to the divorce may promote cohesive bonds between custodial parents and adolescents while simultaneously helping both the parent and the child cope with the divorce. Arditti also found in her interviews with college-age daughters that when the daughters assumed a more powerful role in the family after the divorce, they appreciated the greater intimacy and disclosures with their mothers that followed.

Although the bonds between children and custodial mothers can become more cohesive after a divorce because they are coping with their loss together, there are substantial changes in interaction between children and custodial parents, in general, that occur in the years following a divorce that can be detrimental to children (Tein et al., 2000; Wolchik et al., 2000). When custodial parents are stressed because of the divorce, they often show less affection and warmth and administer more inconsistent parenting (Hetherington et al., 1982; Tein et al., 2000; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This diminished ability to parent is associated with children's post-divorce adjustment problems (Koerner, Jacobs, & Raymond, 2000).

Divorce also makes it incredibly difficult for non-custodial parents, who must learn new maintenance strategies to foster cohesive relationships with their children (Lamb, 1999; Yu et al., 2010). Research indicates that both the quantity and quality of contact with the nonresidential parent are important for maintaining close relationships with children after a divorce (Lamb, 1999). When adolescents are closer and more involved with their residential and nonresidential fathers, they tend to have less delinquency, fewer depressive symptoms, higher self-esteem, and better grades (Booth, Scott, & King, 2009; Mitchell, Booth, & King, 2009).

The research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce also suggests that parents may transfer their interpersonal skill deficiencies to their children. Amato (1996) found that parents' interpersonal skills was a stronger mediator of the association between the parents' divorce and their adult children's divorce than contextual variables (e.g., age at divorce, cohabitation, income) or divorce attitudes. If the parents have interpersonal problems, such as anger, jealousy, criticism, infidelity, dogmatism, and passive aggressiveness, their adult children may model these skills in their own marriages. Parents' divorce may increase the risk that their children get divorced because of the parents' tendency to model skill deficits.

### *Single Parenthood, Risk, and Communication Patterns*

While many of the same factors that place children at risk for divorce exist with single parenthood, there are unique characteristics of the structure of a single-parent family that can hinder the ways that parents communicate with their children. These characteristics revolve around three issues:

- 1 economic hardship;
- 2 stress overload and the lack of another parent to buffer the stress;
- 3 diminished parenting.

### *Economic Hardship*

Many of the cognitive and behavioral differences for children of single-parent families and children of two-parent families are thought to be due to economic hardship. For example, while 12.5 percent of the overall population lives in poverty, this percentage nearly doubles to 24.6 percent for custodial single parents (Grall, 2009). In 2007, 27 percent of custodial mothers and 12.9 percent of custodial fathers fell below the poverty line (Grall, 2009). Children of single mothers are also more likely than children in other family types to be poor in adulthood and eventually become single parents themselves (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). When a family is experiencing financial hardship, it can unleash a multitude of stressors, which then increases the propensity for conflict, parental depression, and difficulty parenting (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). A lack of economic resources in and of itself is not necessarily problematic. It becomes problematic when parents perceive it as stressful and it affects their interactions with each other and their children (Amato, 2005).

Several studies have found drastic decreases in the differences between single-parent and two-parent homes when controlling for SES (e.g., McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; McLanahan, Astone, & Marks, 1991). For example, after controlling for SES, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that nearly half the differences between one-parent and two-parent homes disappeared. However, they still found that single parents spent less time helping children with homework, overseeing activities, and meeting with teachers and visiting their children's school. Similarly, McLanahan et al. (1991) found that when holding SES constant, single-parent households and step-parent households had similar effects on educational outcomes. Astone and MacLanahan (1991) found that in stepfamilies, children reported less involvement with homework, but their reports of parent supervision mimicked two-parent families. These researchers point out that such a finding may show that increases in SES through remarriage may moderate some of the behavioral and educational difficulties of divorce, but not all of them. In general, studies have shown that



children in stepfamilies have similar outcomes to single-parent families and worse outcomes than families with two continuously married parents (Amato, 2005).

### Stress Overload and the Lack of Another Parent to Buffer the Stress

According to stress theory, changes in family structure can be stressful because these changes often propel other changes in family organization, rules, roles, and parenting behaviors (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Single parents and their children often undergo a number of changes, including a divorce or death, changes in residences and schools, a decrease in household income, the parent potentially working multiple jobs, and a decrease in the size of the parents' social networks. These transitions tend to become even harder when the single parent then remarries (Hetherington, 1999). While a step-parent can and often does provide a good parental role model for children, these bonds take time to develop. There is an increasing amount of research that shows that the number of transitions a child experiences is an important predictor of well-being (Booth, 1999). When children's home life is unstable, they are more likely to disengage from it and gravitate toward negative peer influences, making them more susceptible to drug and alcohol use, risky sexual behaviors, and delinquency (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

Single parenthood can be stressful because single parents are managing multiple stressors alone for sustained periods of time. Unlike two-parent homes, in single-parent families there is often not another parent to help buffer the stress. Single parents also tend to be more likely than married parents to suffer from depression and anxiety (Anderson, 2008; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Single parents who become socially isolated, often as the result of a divorce, tend to be at risk for the psychological effects of the stress of single parenthood (Usdansky & Wolf, 2008).

The accumulation of stressors, combined with a lack of spousal and social support, can weaken single parents' coping mechanisms. For instance, divorce and single parenting may affect parents' self-control or ability to effectively regulate their emotions. As Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice (2007) contends, self-control is like a scarce resource or energy reserve that can become depleted through repeated use, resulting in "numbness" or baseline levels of coping. The stressors of divorce and single parenthood may overwhelm or deplete parents' cognitive and emotional resources, leaving them emotionally unavailable for their children which, in turn, can affect their parental monitoring, affection, and awareness of their child's feelings. As Hartos and Power (2000) found, single mothers were aware of only about half of their adolescents' stressors, but adolescents and mothers who were in more agreement about the adolescents' stressors had fewer family problems and more parental monitoring.

When parents are stressed, their stress can spill over onto their children through their verbal and nonverbal communication (Larson & Almeida, 1999). For example, Larson and Gillman (1999) randomly collected survey data throughout the day with beepers from single mothers and their adolescents. They found that when mothers were anxious and angry, their children were anxious and angry. Parents' anxiousness and anger had stronger contagion effects on their children when the parents were highly stressed and used psychological control with their children. Given the many stressors that single parents experience, stress contagion effects can be quite important.

### Diminished Parenting

As we suggested above, the stress of single parenthood is believed to largely affect children's well-being through diminished parenting. Perhaps because they are emotionally and

cognitively exhausted from the various stressors they face, single parents tend to administer more inconsistent and harsh punishment (e.g., spanking), monitor their children less, and are more permissive (Amato, 2005; Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998). Although some research suggests that there are few effects of family structure on parental monitoring for pre-adolescent children, most research shows that single parents are less likely to supervise their adolescents' behavior (Bulcroft et al., 1998). As a result, adolescents from single-parent families tend to have more delinquency problems and engage in more risky behaviors than adolescents from two-parent families, but when parental monitoring increases, these problems are reduced (Griffin et al., 2000; Wagner et al., 2010). Single mothers who also work outside the home have been shown to be particularly susceptible to poor care-giving (Berger, 2004), perhaps due to the demands of balancing work and family.

More recent research has shown that the type of difficulties children can encounter when they grow up in single parent homes needs to be more clearly delineated. Lanza et al. (2010) found that urban youth who have at least an average amount of warmth and affection, social support, and consistency in parenting are at low risk for externalizing problems like aggression, but are still at risk for poor academic achievement. Rather than accumulative risks, these authors argue that scholars need to assess the types of risks children are exposed to in single-parent families and how it differentially affects their well-being. In particular, research is necessary that can determine how various communication patterns within the family, and how they might interact with the type of school and neighborhood environment, affect different aspects of a child's attitudes and behaviors.

As is the case with divorce, single parents in general also run a greater risk of instrumental parentification (e.g., children caring for the house, caring for siblings and other family members, and contributing to household income) and emotional parentification (Jurkovic, 1997) than other parents. For example, single parents may communicate with their children about the financial difficulties they experience, or issues they have with the non-custodial parent. Koerner et al. (2000) examined disclosure between single mothers and their daughters and found that most mothers in their sample had disclosed information about both finances and their former husbands (their daughters' fathers). Interestingly, however, they found that mothers did not disclose about finances because they perceived their children as "equals," but rather because they believed that making their child financially aware was part of their parenting responsibilities. Regardless of intent, Koerner et al. found that disclosures in both of these domains were positively associated with daughter's psychological distress.

### **What Factors Promote Resilience in Divorced and Single-Parent Families?**

Just as parents' communication skill deficits predict maladaptation in divorced and single-parent families, communication competencies can buffer some of the adverse effects. In particular, researchers have found that high amounts of parental warmth, affection, and social support, as well as access to larger social networks, moderate the association between stressors and mother-adolescent relationships in divorced and single-parent families (e.g., Wagner et al., 2010; Wolchik et al., 2000). Research has also shown that when both parents are involved in their children's life, risky behaviors do not increase in single-parent families (Garis, 1998). In addition, Griffin et al. (2000) found that eating dinner together was associated with less aggression and delinquency in youth in single-parent families. Rituals like dinner not only provide stability and monitoring, but they allow a

family to build cohesion through talk. Despite the challenges in single-parent homes, children from such homes report that they spend more time talking to their parents than children from two-parent homes (Astone & MacLanahan, 1991). While this talk can sometimes result in emotional parentification, it can also facilitate incredibly meaningful, cohesive relationships, as well as reduce children's uncertainty about a host of topics, including their parents' dating behaviors (Ferguson & Dickson, 1995).

Communal coping is another way that divorced and single-parent families can build strength in the face of adversity. Communal coping involves dyads or groups of people who face similar stressors actively addressing a stressor as "our problem and our responsibility" (Lyons et al., 1998). While communal coping can be ineffective if parents' verbally ruminate about their stressors and displace their own stress onto their children, when families resolve their stressors as a group, it often builds collective coping efficacy (Afifi et al., 2006).

One often overlooked factor that may promote resilience in post-divorce families is forgiveness. Forgiveness is associated with better psychological well-being, less conflict and anger toward one's ex-spouse, and more effective co-parenting after divorce (Bonach & Sales, 2002). Moreover, clinical interventions have shown that former spouses can be taught how to forgive, which can enhance their mental health (e.g., Rye et al., 2005). As part of this process, former spouses must also successfully renegotiate their attachments with each other from spouses to co-parents, uncoupling while remaining committed to their family (Graham, 1997, 2003). As Masheter (1997) argues, the healthiest ex-spouse relationships are those that are high in friendship, low in hostility, and low in preoccupation. Given that divorced parents are co-parenting more than ever before and positive co-parenting consists of trust, fairness, and good faith (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006), it is important to examine how forgiveness can facilitate this process.

While research has explored many of the negative effects of children being raised in single-parent households, only recently have scholars turned their attention to the characteristics that help to make a healthy single-parent family. One challenge facing single-parent families is how the parent can effectively balance work and family. One possibility is to use a work-family fit approach, where emphasis is placed on how work and family domains enhance each other. For example, Kirchmeyer (1992) found more positive spillover between nonwork and work domains than negative spillover. Organizations that offer flexible work schedules and other policies that are family friendly, as well as encourage communication about one's family, probably help buffer some of the stress of single parenthood because they it make being a single parent more manageable and less isolating.

### *Trends and Directions for Future Research*

There are numerous directions for future research related to divorce and single parenthood that involve communication. One important trend in the research on family structure is biology. The vast majority of the research on the impact of divorce on children has relied on self-reports, but it is important to assess how divorce affects children's physiological stress responses. Thus far, a handful of studies have found that young adults who experienced as a child severe separation or loss of a parent as a result of divorce, had lower cortisol levels upon wakening (or cortisol awakening responses) (Bloch, Peleg, Koren, Aner, & Klein, 2007; Meinlschmidt & Heim, 2005) and lower pre-task and post-task

cortisol levels (Kraft & Luecken, 2009; Tyrka et al., 2008). Cortisol is a hormone that is released by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) system when the body is stressed. The release of cortisol is a natural and healthy response to stress, but abnormally high, low, or irregular levels of cortisol can be indicative of maladaptation. However, these were young adults who experienced rather severe divorce circumstances or an artificial stress-inducing task in the laboratory.

Whether adolescents experience over or under activation of their hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) and sympathetic nervous systems (SNS) may have more to do with interparental conflict and other communication skills than divorce. To test this assumption, Afifi, Granger, Aldeis, Joseph, & Denes (2012) asked adolescents and parents to talk about something stressful related to the parents' relationship and measured the adolescents' HPA axis (measured by salivary cortisol) and SNS (measured by salivary alpha-amylase or sAA) responses to their parents' communication skills (i.e., social support, communication competence, and interparental conflict). One of the primary findings from this study was that regardless of whether the parents were married or divorced, the adolescents and young adults whose parents were communicatively skilled were able to down regulate or recover quickly after the discussion task. However, children whose parents were still married and lacked communication skills had more rapid and erratic response patterns for sAA and greater difficulty recovering from the interaction with their parent than children of divorce whose parents lacked these skills.

Researchers also have begun to examine how single-parent life contributes to allostatic load. Allostatic load refers to the "wear and tear" on a body caused by stress (McEwen, 2001). When individuals experience an accumulation of different life stressors, their allostatic load tends to increase, making it difficult for the body to maintain a state of homeostasis (or allostasis). This stress can slowly erode the body's stress response system, resulting in greater susceptibility to disease. Single parents often have worse health compared to other adults, which could partially be explained by the allostatic load they experience due to an influx of stressors (Johner, 2007).

Another under-researched area of single-family life involves parents' sexual identity. Bigner and Jacobsen (1989) found that gay fathers followed less traditional parenting roles, focused less on being economic providers, and were more nurturing than heterosexual fathers. Gay fathers also tend to be stricter and more responsive to children's needs than nongay fathers (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1992). Studies of lesbian mothers have largely found positive outcomes for children. Green et al. (1986) looked at differences between the children of single lesbian mothers and single heterosexual mothers. They found no significant differences between the two groups of children regarding their sexual identity, popularity, or social adjustment. While the research on single gay fathers and lesbian mothers is limited, exploring the positive communication behaviors in such families is a worthwhile endeavor.

Additional research that examines divorce from a global perspective also is necessary. Too often divorce is viewed from a Western lens, as "his and her" divorce, seemingly regardless of extended kin, norms, or group influences. In cultures that are more collectivistic or where the family is given precedence over the individual and where power within the family is hierarchical, extended family may become stakeholders in other family members' decisions regarding marriage and divorce (Afifi et al., 2012). After a divorce, certain family members may also bridge the two families together for the sake of the children, even if the former spouses would rather not see each other. In essence, divorce may "look different" in different cultures.

Ultimately, the most important to children's outcomes is the quality of parenting received (Amato, 2005). Regardless of whether there is one parent or two parents or the parents are divorced or married, it is ultimately the quality of the parenting that is the most important factor in determining children's well-being. Children thrive when healthy relationships are established within and across families, with communication at the crux of these relationships.

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