

## Interventions for Children of Divorce: Toward Greater Integration of Research and Action

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A number of child-, family-, and system-focused interventions have been designed to prevent or reduce the negative effects of divorce on children. This article critically evaluates these intervention efforts by examining (a) their relation to basic research on the processes proposed to mediate children's postdivorce adjustment and (b) evaluation studies assessing the effectiveness of various programs. Although interventions address some of the factors proposed to mediate children's adaptation to divorce, the interplay between interventions and basic research on children's postdivorce adaptation is limited. Moreover, some intervention efforts appear to be beneficial, but most lack empirical documentation of their efficacy. This analysis leads to several recommendations for basic and applied research and for improving the response of the mental health field to the problems experienced by many children from divorcing families.

Children who experience divorce often exhibit adjustment problems that may continue for years after the separation (cf. Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1988; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen, & Anderson, 1989; Kurdek, 1987). Although the rate of divorce in the United States has leveled off in recent years, it remains high (currently 4.7 per 100,000 population; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990), and over one third of the children born in the 1970s and 1980s are expected to experience the divorce of their parents (see Emery, 1988). Thus, the negative outcomes associated with divorce are likely to affect a significant proportion of the population and present an important challenge to the mental health field.

Recognition of the problems that children face in adapting to their parents' divorce has led to the development of a number of interventions (see Hodges, 1986), some of which are widely used. For example, one program for children has been adopted by school districts in 45 U.S. states and 3 Canadian provinces (N. Kalter, personal communication, September 1990). Although widespread attempts to ameliorate the negative outcomes associated with divorce are admirable, two features of these efforts are a cause for concern. First, empirical data documenting the efficacy of intervention programs are rarely reported. Second, the extent to which interventions are guided by basic research on the impact of divorce on children is quite limited.

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The present article therefore evaluates the efficacy of interventions for children from divorced families and attempts to integrate more fully research on children's postdivorce adjustment and efforts to reduce the impact of divorce on children. Towards this end, the article is divided into three sections. The first summarizes research on the types of adjustment problems often seen in children from divorced families. This provides a backdrop against which the interventions evaluated in the second section can be better understood. In the final section, we offer a number of recommendations for both basic and applied research that arise from our analysis.

### Effects of Divorce on Children: A Synopsis

A recent meta-analysis of 95 studies comparing children from divorced and intact families found small but reliable differences between the adjustment of children from divorced and intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991). The mean effect sizes for various measures of adjustment ranged from  $-.08$  (for internalizing problems) to  $-.23$  (for externalizing problems), with a median effect size of  $-.15$  across all measures, indicating slightly poorer adjustment for children who had experienced a divorce. Numerous studies have examined the adjustment of children after divorce (for qualitative reviews see Atkeson, Forehand, & Rickard, 1982; Emery, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kurdek, 1981; Zaslow, 1988, 1989), but many are plagued by serious methodological problems—including the use of small, nonrepresentative samples, the lack of appropriate comparison groups, inadequate measures of central constructs, and the use of a single source to provide data on multiple variables (see Emery, 1988; Kurdek, 1987). Amato and Keith (1991) found that greater methodological quality was inconsistently related to effect sizes but tended to lead to lower estimates than less rigorous studies. Although existing studies vary widely in their methodology, a sufficient number of methodologically sound studies exist to draw several conclusions about the impact of divorce on children; these are summarized below.

### *Externalizing Problems*

Perhaps the most consistent finding regarding children's postdivorce adjustment is that, on average, children from divorced families exhibit higher levels of externalizing problems such as aggression and conduct disorder than children from intact families (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Felner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975; Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody, & Fauber, 1990; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Such problems may be seen in both boys and girls in the year after divorce but are more prevalent and appear to persist longer in boys (Hetherington et al., 1982; Peterson & Zill, 1986; see also Zaslow, 1988, 1989). For example, the National Survey of Children found that boys from divorced families exhibited higher levels of impulsivity/hyperactivity and antisocial behavior than boys from low-conflict, intact families 8 years after divorce (Peterson & Zill, 1986).

### *Internalizing Problems*

Although investigated less frequently, internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, and withdrawal also have been reported in children from divorced families (e.g., Forehand et al., 1990; Guidubaldi, Perry, & Cleminshaw, 1984; Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Pedro-Carroll, Cowen, Hightower, & Guare, 1986; Peterson & Zill, 1986). For instance, a recent study found that second- and third-grade children from divorced families were rated as more depressed by both their teachers and parents and reported higher levels of anxiety than children from intact families (Hoyt et al., 1990). However, inconsistent results have been obtained for self-esteem and perceived competence of children and adolescents. Whereas Long, Forehand, Fauber, and Brody (1987) found that adolescents from divorced families rated themselves as lower in cognitive and social competence than did youths from intact families, Slater and Haber (1984) did not find differences in self-concept between divorced and intact groups (see also Camara & Resnick, 1988; Parish & Taylor, 1979; Raschke & Raschke, 1979).

### *Interpersonal Relations*

Some studies suggest that children from divorced families also exhibit difficulties in social interactions (Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979, 1982; see Hess & Camara, 1979, and Long et al. 1987, for contrary findings). Hetherington and her colleagues (Hetherington et al., 1979) provide the most detailed description of these children's peer relationships. They found that in the 1st year after the divorce, boys exhibited higher levels of aversive behavior with peers and lower levels of prosocial behavior than boys from intact families. At 2 years postdivorce, boys' behavior had improved considerably, but they still exhibited less helping behavior and spent less time affiliating or playing with others than boys from intact families. Although the behavior of boys from divorced families improved greatly over 2 years, their peers continued to perceive them negatively and tended to ignore, avoid, or act oppositionally toward them. In contrast, girls who had experienced a divorce exhibited difficulties in peer interactions only at 2 months after the divorce. Finally, children from divorced families display lower levels of prosocial skills than

children from intact families (e.g., Forehand, McCombs, Long, Brody, & Fauber, 1988; Forehand et al., 1990).

### *Academic Problems*

Children and adolescents from divorced families often experience more academic problems than those from intact families (e.g., Guidubaldi et al., 1984; Hetherington et al., 1982; Shinn, 1978). In a national sample, Guidubaldi et al. (1984) found that after controlling for IQ, children of divorce scored lower on the reading, spelling, and math subscales of the Wide Range Achievement Test, had lower grades in reading and math, and were given lower teacher ratings of academic achievement, independent learning, involvement, and intellectual dependency. Children from divorced families also were rated higher by teachers on failure anxiety, unreflectiveness, irrelevant talk, and inattention, which suggests that their achievement problems may be attributable in part to classroom behavior that interferes with learning (Emery, 1988).

### *Use of Mental Health Services*

Finally, children from divorced families evidence a higher rate of referral for mental health services than those from intact families (e.g., Guidubaldi et al., 1984; Kalter, 1977; Kalter & Rembar, 1981; Tuckman & Regan, 1966). These higher referral rates do not appear to simply reflect parents' reaction to the adjustment problems commonly seen during the stressful months after the divorce; indeed, one study found that children had been referred an average of 5 years after the divorce (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). Although the decision to refer children for mental health care is affected by variables other than the child's actual adjustment (e.g., parent's own psychological functioning, Griest, Wells, & Forehand, 1979; Webster-Stratton, 1988), the high rate of referrals suggests that many children of divorce experience significant adjustment problems.

### *Critical Overview*

Children who experience divorce have been found to exhibit a range of adjustment problems, particularly in the first 2 years after the divorce. However, there is considerable variability in children's adjustment, and it is equally notable that many children adapt successfully to this transition and evidence no long-term ill effects (Hetherington, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989). Amato and Keith's (1991) demonstration of fairly small differences in the adjustment of children from divorced and intact families most likely reflects this variability. In attempting to understand how and if divorce has deleterious effects on children, it is important to consider three issues.

First, it is important to distinguish between the physical separation of parents and their formal divorce. Although most studies use the latter to mark the beginning of the transition process, the parents' separation is likely to be more salient and traumatic for children. Many children have vivid memories of the day their father (or mother) left the family (Wallerstein, 1983); in contrast, the final divorce decree may be granted without their awareness. Furthermore, many of the events and experiences associated with life after divorce (e.g., single parent-

ing, visitation, economic strain) begin after parents separate. Viewing separation as the onset of family dissolution therefore may provide a more accurate picture of the transitional process.

Second, because divorce is best understood as a transition, it is critical to examine the amount of time that has passed since the separation when assessing children's adjustment. Unfortunately, cross-sectional studies often ignore time since separation and thus obscure changes in children's adjustment that may occur with the passage of time. However, longitudinal research that charts children's adaptation over time indicates that behavior problems are common at the time of divorce but generally diminish as time passes after the divorce (Guidubaldi et al., 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982, 1985; see also Emery, 1988). Children exhibit a variety of signs of disturbance in the months after the separation, including anxiety, sadness, anger, aggression, noncompliance, sleep disturbances, and disrupted concentration at school (Forehand et al., 1990; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kelly, 1988; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), but how long this initial period of distress lasts undoubtedly varies from family to family. One longitudinal study found that both parents and children exhibited more problems 1 year after divorce than 2 months after the divorce, but by 2 years after the divorce many of the problems exhibited by children had diminished or disappeared (Hetherington et al., 1982). Research on longer term effects of divorce suggests that many children adjust well to the divorce and do not exhibit emotional or behavioral problems, but that a minority continue to experience problems or develop new problems after the crisis period has abated (Hetherington, 1989). Differences between children from divorced and intact families have been documented as long as 8 years after the divorce (Peterson & Zill, 1986).

Finally, recent research indicates that it may not be the dissolution of the marriage per se but subsequent events that lead to continuing adjustment problems in children. This work, which is described in more detail below, indicates that factors such as the consistency of parenting and the degree of conflict between ex-spouses are better predictors of children's adjustment than whether their parents have divorced. Thus, comparisons between groups of children from divorced and intact families are less illuminating than investigations of variables that may mediate postdivorce adaptation, and consequently the focus of research on divorce has shifted from examining structure (divorced vs. intact families) to studying process.

Recognition of the disruptive effects that separation and divorce may have and the sheer number of children who experience it has stimulated efforts to better understand children's postdivorce adjustment and the development of intervention efforts to reduce the impact of divorce. However, much more has been written about factors that adversely affect children's adaptation to divorce than about the attempts to prevent or reduce these effects. Therefore, in the remainder of the article, we critically examine existing intervention approaches in the light of research on factors that might mediate children's divorce adjustment.

### Interventions for Children From Divorced Families

A variety of interventions have been developed to ameliorate the adverse effects of divorce on children. These approaches

can be grouped into three classes according to the primary target of the intervention: the child, the parents, or the legal system. The most common interventions designed for children and parents are psychoeducational groups that provide social support and strive to enhance participants' coping skills. At the legal level, divorce mediation has been developed as an alternative to the traditional adversarial process of settling divorce-related disputes, and changes in child custody and support laws have been intended to improve children's postdivorce adaptation. These three levels of intervention parallel the types of factors identified by basic research as mediators of children's adjustment to divorce, namely, individual characteristics of the child, family interaction, and ecological factors (also see Kurdek, 1981). Our evaluation of interventions therefore is organized in terms of individual, family, and systemic levels of intervention. For each level of intervention, we briefly document basic research on mediating variables proposed to influence children's adjustment, describe existing intervention programs, review evaluation research on their efficacy, and offer a critique of the material presented.<sup>1</sup>

### *Child-Focused Interventions*

Most of the interventions designed to help children of divorce target the children directly. However, basic research has paid less attention to child characteristics than to familial or ecological factors as predictors of postdivorce adjustment. Research investigating characteristics of children that may influence their adaptation to divorce has focused on four factors: gender, age, temperament, and social cognition.

### *Basic Research on Child Characteristics*

*Gender.* A number of studies show that boys exhibit higher levels of maladjustment after divorce than do girls, who often evidence no greater adjustment problems than girls in intact families. However, sex differences are not consistently reported and tend to be obtained only when children are living with unremarried mothers (see Hetherington, 1989; Zaslow, 1988, 1989). When children live with a custodial father or in a remarried family, girls exhibit poorer adjustment than girls in intact homes, whereas boys in remarried or father-custody homes fare better than those in mother-custody homes (Hetherington et al., 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Santrock & Warshak, 1979). These findings should be interpreted cautiously because fathers who receive custody may not be representative of fathers in general and because older boys are more likely to live in father-custody homes than are younger boys or girls (Emery, 1988). However, the data suggest that family processes, rather than genetic or biological factors, are primarily responsible for the often-reported sex differences in children's adjust-

<sup>1</sup> Although many children also may be involved in individual or family therapy because of problems emerging after a divorce, there are no systematic evaluations of the efficacy of these traditional therapeutic methods for children of divorce (Emery, 1988), and a discussion of how models and techniques used in individual and family therapy may be adapted for children of divorce is beyond the scope of this article (see Hodges, 1986).

ment. For example, custodial fathers and mothers have been found to differ in their parenting style, and fathers appear to be much less likely to become involved in coercive exchanges with boys than are mothers (Emery, Hetherington, & DiLalla, 1984). Custodial mothers therefore may have more conflict with sons than daughters, which may adversely impact the quality of their relationship. In addition, it has been argued that the same-sex parent provides an important model for children and that loss of contact with this model has negative effects on children's development (see Santrock & Warshak, 1979). Consequently, boys who live with their mother and do not have much contact with their father or other men may be at a disadvantage. The question of whether boys or girls are more adversely affected by divorce thus is quite complex, and the answer is likely to depend on a host of factors such as the sex of the custodial parent, their parenting style, whether they have remarried, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the amount of contact with the noncustodial parent.

*Age.* Children's level of social, emotional, and cognitive development is likely to affect their understanding of the divorce and ability to cope with the stressors that often accompany parental separation. Wallerstein (1983) has described qualitative changes in the typical reactions of children of different ages, and although her findings are drawn from a predominantly White, upper-middle-class sample, they nonetheless are illustrative. She reports that preschool children tend to regress behaviorally, blame themselves for the divorce, and fear being abandoned and separated from parents. Elementary school children commonly express moderate depression, are preoccupied with the parent's departure from the home and long for his or her return, perceive the divorce as a rejection of them, and fear being replaced. Older children express greater anger about the divorce, tend to blame one of the parents for the divorce, and may develop somatic symptoms.

However, despite possible developmental differences in children's response to divorce, it is not clear whether children of a particular age are especially vulnerable to developing adjustment problems. Whereas some studies show that divorce has the most adverse impact on young children (e.g., Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Kalter & Rembar, 1981), others do not find age effects (Guidubaldi et al., 1987; Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, & Wells, 1987). Moreover, many studies confound children's age at the time of divorce with the length of time passed since the divorce and children's age at the time of assessment (Emery, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kalter, Schaefer, Lesowitz, Alpern, & Pickar, 1988). As Emery (1988) has noted, any two of these variables perfectly define the third; thus it is difficult to isolate the role of any of the three factors. Longitudinal research is badly needed to explore the developmental trajectory of children who experience divorce at different ages; perhaps the most reasonable conclusion to draw at this time is that children of different ages respond differently to divorce but that no one age group is more likely to develop adjustment problems than another (Hetherington et al., 1989).

*Temperament.* Children's temperament may also affect their adjustment to divorce (e.g., Hetherington, 1989; Kurdek, 1987). Few data examine this hypothesis directly, but existing findings suggest that temperament is correlated with children's adjustment under certain conditions (Hetherington, 1989; Hether-

ington et al., 1989). More specifically, Hetherington (1989) reported that children's temperament was not related to the adaptiveness of children's behavior when the level of stress in their life was low and social support was high; however, when social support was less available, stress had a more adverse effect on temperamentally difficult children than on temperamentally easy children. As in the case of sex differences, the influence of children's temperament appears to be moderated by other factors in their environment, such as quality of parent-child relationships and the degree of stress they experience.

*Social cognition.* A final child characteristic that has been examined in relation to children's adaptation to divorce is their perception and understanding of the divorce (for a review see Kurdek, 1986). Clinicians have stressed the importance of children gaining an accurate understanding of their parents' separation (e.g., Gardner, 1976; Wallerstein, 1983), and several intervention programs include as a goal clarifying children's misconceptions about the divorce (e.g., Kalter, Pickar, & Lesowitz, 1984; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987). Self-blame is thought to be common after divorce, particularly in younger children (Wallerstein, 1983; see also Grych & Fincham, in press). However, the role of children's perception of divorce has received limited empirical evaluation, and no clear pattern of results has emerged. For example, in one study Kurdek and Berg (1983) found that children's attitudes about their parents' divorce (e.g., blame, hope of reunification, fear of abandonment) were related to parent ratings of adjustment problems and teacher ratings of children's personal and social competence. In a second study, "problematic beliefs" were correlated with children's self-reported anxiety and self-concept but not with parent and teacher ratings of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Kurdek & Berg, 1987). Although children's perceptions of the divorce are considered important clinically, further empirical work is needed to specify the nature of the relationship between children's cognitions and their adjustment.

In summary, existing research provides some support for the idea that certain child characteristics are related to children's adjustment to divorce, although there is some evidence to suggest that the influence of characteristics such as gender and temperament may depend on other familial or environmental factors. In the next section, we describe and evaluate interventions that focus directly on children from divorced families.

### *Interventions*

In general, child-centered programs attempt to help children by alleviating the negative feelings, misconceptions, and practical problems commonly experienced after a divorce. These programs share a number of features. They generally use a time-limited, small-group format that typically includes 4 to 10 children. A group setting is preferred over an individually oriented approach for a number of reasons (Kalter, Alpern, et al., 1988; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987). First, most social service agencies and schools lack the resources to work with large numbers of children individually, and group programs are able to serve more of the children who could benefit from them. Second, the group setting itself may be therapeutic in that discussing the divorce with peers who also have gone through a divorce normalizes the experience and provides a potentially supportive

network for children (Kalter, Alpern, et al., 1988; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987; Stolberg & Cullen, 1983). Third, children may be more comfortable discussing difficult, sensitive issues with other children who have gone through a similar experience than with an adult therapist in individual treatment (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987; Stolberg & Cullen, 1983).

A second characteristic of child-focused programs is that they tend to be based in schools. Although sometimes conducted in other settings (e.g., mental health centers), locating these programs in schools maximizes the number of children who can participate in them and thus makes help available to many children, especially those from low-income families, who might otherwise not receive it (Cowen, Hightower, Pedro-Carroll, & Work, 1989). School also is a familiar context for children and can provide them with a natural support network of schoolmates and teachers (Cowen et al., 1989; Kalter, Alpern, et al., 1988). In addition, when a program is established in a school, it is possible to train school personnel to administer and conduct the program, increasing the likelihood that it will become self-perpetuating (Cowen et al., 1989).

Finally, school-based intervention programs share similar goals and strategies (see Hodges, 1986). The groups tend to be both educational and therapeutic in focus and to have several central goals: to clarify confusing and upsetting divorce issues, to provide a supportive place for children to work through difficult issues, to develop skills for coping with upsetting feelings and difficult family situations, and to improve parent-child communication. Although the actual techniques used in the programs vary, sessions may include role playing, the use of audiovisual materials, storytelling, social problem solving exercises, drawing, bibliotherapy, and creation of a group newspaper or television show focusing on divorce.

Child-focused groups are quite widespread. For example, the program designed by Kalter and his colleagues has been used in over 2,000 school districts and 100 mental health centers (N. Kalter, personal communication, September 1990). However, despite their popularity, there is surprisingly little formal evaluation of the various programs. Next we discuss several interventions for which there is a description of the structure and format of the program and empirical assessment of their effectiveness.

### *Evaluation Research*

*Children of Divorce Developmental Facilitation Group.* Kalter and his colleagues have conducted two evaluations of their eight-session program, which focuses on normalizing the experience of divorce, clarifying and working through upsetting and confusing issues related to the divorce, and developing coping strategies for difficult feelings and family interactions. The groups involved predominantly White, middle-class elementary school children. In the first study (Kalter et al., 1984), approximately one third of the children had experienced divorce within 3 years before the intervention, and half had gone through a divorce over 5 years earlier. Although the children, parents, and group leaders reportedly were very positive about the group, few significant differences emerged between ratings of children's adjustment before and after participation in the group. Moreover, the findings from this study are limited by the lack of a comparison group.

The second evaluation involved 81 children and included a delayed-treatment control group (Kalter, Schaefer, et al., 1988). The postgroup assessment occurred approximately 6 months after the end of the group. Although the custodial parents of boys reported that their children exhibited lower levels of aggression and externalizing problems on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), most other differences between groups were not significant (several reached a marginal level of significance). There were no differences on CBCL scales for girls who participated in the program, but both boys and girls reported a decrease in sad/insecure feelings on the Divorce Perception Test (Plunkett & Kalter, 1984).

*Divorce Adjustment Project.* Stolberg and Garrison (1985) evaluated the Divorce Adjustment Project, which included separate 12-week groups for children and for their mothers. Similar to the developmental facilitation group described above, this intervention focused on normalizing the experience of divorce, understanding and working through divorce-related feelings and issues, developing coping strategies, and parent-child communication. The evaluation involved eighty-two 7-13-year-old children who had experienced a separation between 9 and 33 months before the intervention. The investigators examined four groups: families in which only the child participated in a group (child-only condition), families in which only the mother participated in a group (parent-only condition), families in which both the child and the mother took part in the groups (combined condition), and a no-treatment comparison group. Children's and adults' adjustment was assessed at the end of the group and 5 months later, but only the results pertaining to the children are considered here (for parent results, see Family-Focused Interventions section).

At the postgroup assessment and the 5-month follow-up, participation in the child-only condition was found to result in greater improvement in self-esteem than the combined condition and the no-treatment control group. At the 5-month follow-up, children in the child-only condition also improved in their adaptive social skills to a greater extent than did children in the combined condition. The superiority of the child-only condition over the combined condition is surprising, but this finding may be the result of important group differences that existed before the intervention. Families were not randomly assigned to conditions, and children in the combined condition had higher self-esteem and had experienced more positive and fewer negative life events than had children in the child-only condition. Thus, children in the combined condition appear to have been better adjusted before the intervention and may not be expected to change as much as children who are more poorly adjusted. In addition, the groups differed in length of time the parents had been separated and in mothers' occupation. Although analyses of covariance were used in an attempt to control for these differences, this procedure is not appropriate when the covariate (e.g., time since divorce) is related to the independent variable (intervention group; Hays, 1981; Keppel, 1982).

*Children of Divorce Intervention Project.* Pedro-Carroll, Cowen, and their colleagues provide the most extensive evaluation of a school-based program (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Pedro-Carroll et al.,

1986). The Children of Divorce Intervention Project (CODIP) is an adaptation of the child support group in Stolberg and Cullen's (1983) Divorce Adjustment Project. In addition to helping children understand and cope with divorce-related feelings and problems, the CODIP program seeks to enhance children's perceptions of themselves and their families. Two initial evaluation studies were conducted with White, middle-class fourth through sixth graders; one of the studies (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985) compared the adjustment of 40 children whose parents had been divorced an average of 2 years with a demographically matched sample of 32 children in a delayed-treatment control group, and the other (Pedro-Carroll et al., 1986) compared 54 children whose parents had been divorced an average of 4 years with a demographically matched sample of children from intact families. In each study, posttesting was conducted 2 weeks after the end of the group.

Teacher ratings indicated that children participating in the groups showed a greater decrease in shy/anxious problems and a greater increase in adaptive assertiveness and frustration tolerance than the comparison groups. In their first study (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985), children in the intervention group also exhibited a greater decrease in learning problems and increases in peer sociability and rule compliance. Children's self-reports revealed that the intervention group reported lower levels of anxiety after the group but did not differ from the control group on a measure of perceived self-competence (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985), and parents rated children in the intervention groups as showing greater increases in overall adjustment. However, children's self-perceptions and attitudes about the divorce did not show significantly different changes across groups in either study.

The CODIP program also was evaluated in a racially mixed urban population of second and third graders (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989). The program was modified in an attempt to better match the life-style and experiences of this population; for example, acceptance of diverse family forms and the role of the extended family as a source of support were highlighted. Children participating in the CODIP group (who were divorced an average of 3.7 years) were compared with matched groups of children from divorced families not taking part in the program and children from intact families. In line with the goals of the group (e.g., understanding divorce-related concepts and feelings, development of coping skills, enhancing positive perceptions of self and family), children taking part in the group reported more positive feelings about their parents, themselves, their families, and their ability to cope successfully with problems, and parent ratings showed significant increases in overall adjustment. In addition, teachers reported that children who had been in the CODIP group displayed greater frustration tolerance, assertiveness, task orientation, and peer social skills but did not exhibit changes in acting out, shyness/anxiety, or learning problems (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989).

#### *Other Evaluation Studies*

Roseby and Deutsch (1985) evaluated a group for fourth- and fifth-grade children that focused on increasing their interpersonal knowledge, a factor they proposed to be a mediator of children's postdivorce adjustment. Interpersonal knowledge

was defined as the ability to assess the thoughts and feelings of one's self and others, and the intervention was designed to help children better understand both their own thoughts and feelings about the divorce as well as those of their parents. Children were also taught assertive communication skills. Fifty-seven children whose parents had been divorced up to 10 years earlier participated in either the treatment group or a placebo group that focused on identifying and discussing children's feelings and beliefs about the divorce and new family arrangements.

Children's understanding of the divorce, their level of depression, and their school behavior were assessed before and after participation in the group. After participating in the group, children in the intervention group were less likely to blame themselves or either parent for the divorce, to fear parental abandonment, to deny negative feelings, and to maintain unrealistic hopes for reunification than were children in the placebo group. However, despite these changes in understanding, the groups did not differ in level of depression or in teacher ratings of their school behavior.

This study is notable because it is one of the few to assess the proposed mediator of children's adaptation to divorce (children's interpersonal knowledge) in addition to overall adjustment. However, even though Roseby and Deutsch (1985) found that the treatment group showed increased understanding of the divorce at the end of the group, this change was not associated with greater change in adjustment. Conclusions from this study are not straightforward because the placebo group included several features that are considered therapeutic in the groups described above, and both the treatment and placebo groups evidenced decreased depression and improved school behavior. Thus, participation in the placebo group may itself have been an intervention, and it may be most accurate to conclude that a focus on increasing interpersonal knowledge did not lead to improvements beyond those gained from providing an opportunity for children to discuss their feelings about the divorce.

Bornstein, Bornstein, and Walters (1988) report an evaluation of a six-session therapeutic group for children from divorced families that focused on identification of feelings, communication skills, and anger control training. They compared fifteen 7-14-year-olds whose parents had divorced in the previous 12 months with 16 children in a delayed-treatment comparison group. At a 2-week follow-up, Bornstein et al. (1988) found a significant positive effect for the group on only one of seven outcome measures (teacher-rated behavior problems). Children's attitudes about the divorce (e.g., hope of parental reunification), parent-child conflict, interparental conflict, and child adjustment did not change significantly. These findings suggest that six sessions may not be sufficient to produce meaningful changes in children's functioning; however, in the absence of data concerning whether the children actually acquired the skills taught in the group, it is difficult to draw conclusions from this study.

#### *Summary and Critique*

It is apparent that the overlap between basic research on children's adjustment to divorce and child-focused intervention efforts is limited. An important reason for this is that basic re-

search has focused on studying *moderator* variables rather than *mediator* variables. Moderator variables are factors that affect the strength or direction of an association between a predictor (e.g., divorce) and a response variable (e.g., adjustment), whereas mediating variables are used to explain the processes that give rise to such associations (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). Consequently, although research on the moderating variables temperament, gender, and age may inform intervention efforts by identifying at-risk groups or shaping program emphases, they do not provide information about potential targets for interventions. In contrast, mediating variables provide information about possible mechanisms by which to influence children's adjustment.

The final individual-difference variable studied in basic research, social cognition, can be conceptualized as a mediator variable and has been a target of intervention in many child groups. Unfortunately, research on children's understanding of families and divorce is limited, and not surprisingly, intervention procedures are based largely on clinical observation and less frequently on the findings of cognitive developmental research. In contrast, school-based groups generally attempt to increase the social support available to children, a factor discussed below (see System-Focused Interventions section), and devote considerable attention to improving children's coping strategies, a topic that has received little attention in basic research on postdivorce adjustment (e.g., Armistead et al., 1990; Farber, Felner, & Primavera, 1985). In summary, the interplay between basic research and child-focused intervention efforts is limited; thus each is deprived of a potential source of enrichment.

Although school-based groups for children of divorce are widespread, only the Children of Divorce Intervention Project has clearly documented its effectiveness. Much of the support for other programs is impressionistic or limited because the evaluation studies contain serious methodological flaws. Furthermore, the conclusions that can be drawn from this research are restricted by several additional factors. First, the informants who rated children's adjustment usually were not blind to their treatment condition. The teachers and parents were aware of which children participated in the groups and therefore may have been biased. The solution to the problem of rater bias is not easily solved because it is very difficult to keep the identity of children who participate in a group secret from teachers and it is unethical to keep it secret from parents. Pedro-Carroll and her colleagues have attempted to decrease informant bias by orienting teacher ratings toward fairly concrete behaviors, but the possibility of rater effects remains. Second, postgroup assessments tend to occur at or shortly after the end of the intervention, so it is not known if children maintain the positive changes reported in some studies or if additional effects emerge at some later point after the intervention.

A major limitation of many of the evaluations of school-based groups is that they do not assess the process by which change occurs. To understand how the groups help (or fail to help) children, it is important to assess whether the goals of the group are met (e.g., increased understanding of divorce, coping skills) in addition to assessing whether the group improved children's functioning. Failure to tailor outcome measures to the goals of the group is unfortunate because such process re-

search could provide useful information at both theoretical levels (e.g., increasing knowledge about mediators) and applied levels (e.g., identifying which aspects of the programs are most useful). Similarly, structural characteristics of the group that may be related to outcome, such as the number of sessions, also have received little attention but are important for planning interventions.

Finally, evaluation studies also should distinguish children living in single-parent homes from those in stepfamilies. The experiences and problems faced by these children often are quite different, and divorce groups may not serve their needs equally well.

In addition to the limited empirical support for most child-focused programs, the question must be raised about the potential for short-term interventions targeting only the child to significantly reduce the adverse impact of divorce, especially for divorces involving severe familial or environmental stressors. Developers of child-focused programs acknowledge the important role that such factors play in mediating children's postdivorce adjustment but argue that these interventions are useful because they provide social support and help children develop effective strategies for coping with divorce-related stressors (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). Two additional pragmatic considerations also justify focusing interventions on the child. First, because all children have to go to school, they are more accessible for intervention than are parents. Second, children's coping skills and understanding of divorce may be more amenable to change than characteristics of the environment. Whereas it may be very difficult to reduce stress in children's lives, it may be possible to affect children's adjustment by changing their perception of and response to stressful circumstances.

Given the limitations of time-limited, child-focused groups, it is notable that the CODIP program consistently documents positive effects. Child-focused groups that target potential mediators remain a viable approach to helping children enhance their abilities to cope with divorce-related stressors and deserve further study. However, the potential to achieve greater changes may be reached by focusing on familial and environmental factors that influence adjustment, and next we turn from interventions directly involving the child to interventions designed to influence children's adjustment by improving family functioning.

### *Family-Focused Interventions*

Family functioning after divorce has received considerable attention as a potential mediator of children's postdivorce adjustment (Emery, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kurdek, 1981; Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988). For example, Wallerstein and her colleagues (Wallerstein et al., 1988) found that children's adjustment 5 years after the divorce was linked most closely to the quality of postdivorce family functioning. In particular, the nature of relationships between the former spouses and between parents and children have been emphasized in basic research, and below we examine three aspects of family functioning that have been identified most consistently as mediators of children's adjustment: interparental conflict, discipline practices, and the quality of parent-child relationships.

### *Basic Research on Family Functioning*

*Interparental conflict.* Although some couples express little animosity toward each other before and after divorce, high levels of marital conflict frequently accompany separation and divorce (Kelly, 1988). Interparental conflict has been linked to child problems in both intact and divorced families (see Grych & Fincham, 1990), and the conflict preceding and following the divorce, rather than the physical separation of the parents, may be primarily responsible for many of the problems seen in children from divorced families (Emery, 1982). Consistent with this view, Long, Slater, Forehand, and Fauber (1988) found that children from divorced families evidenced higher levels of anxiety and poorer school performance than those from intact families but only when interparental conflict remained high after the divorce. When postdivorce conflict was low, there was no difference between children from intact and divorced families. Similarly, Hetherington et al. (1982) report that boys from families in which a high level of interparental conflict continued 2 years after the divorce exhibited more acting out and aggressive behavior than boys from intact families but that boys from low-conflict divorced families were less aggressive than those from conflictual intact families.

Despite the consistent findings of an association between high levels of interparental conflict and poor postdivorce adjustment, the processes that give rise to this association are unknown (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Conflict may have direct effects on children (e.g., by exposing them to a potentially intense stressor), its influence may be mediated by other factors (e.g., parent-child relationships), or both. More complete understanding of the role of interparental conflict will be gained by considering the broader context of family interaction after divorce, including both interparental and parent-child relations.

*Discipline.* A second frequently discussed mediator of children's adjustment to divorce is parents' discipline practices. Parenting styles and discipline practices have been linked to the development of behavior problems in children (see Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Patterson, 1986), and after divorce parenting often is disrupted and discipline frequently becomes inconsistent, both within and between parents (Emery et al., 1984). This may be especially true for custodial mothers and their sons. Hetherington and her colleagues (1982) provide the most detailed description of parenting practices after divorce. Although generalizations from their study may be limited to White, middle-class, preschool children in maternal custody, their findings illustrate changes in discipline practices that may occur after divorce.

Hetherington et al. (1982) found that divorced mothers made fewer demands for mature behavior, communicated less well, were less affectionate, more inconsistent, and less effective in controlling their children, and monitored their children less well than did mothers from intact families. This pattern was worse 1 year after the divorce than 2 months after the divorce, but by 2 years after the divorce mothers demanded more mature behavior, communicated better, and were more nurturant, consistent, and in better control of their children. Relations with boys are particularly problematic, in that coercive cycles often develop whereby maternal control attempts and chil-

dren's noncompliance escalate, leading to chains of aversive behavior that are maintained by negative reinforcement (Emery et al., 1984; see Patterson, 1982). In contrast, noncustodial fathers were more permissive and indulgent than mothers in the 1st year after the divorce but gradually became more restrictive in their parenting style after 2 years, although they were never as restrictive as fathers in intact families (Hetherington, et al., 1982). However, fathers also were less nurturant and more detached after 2 years, which may reflect diminished contact and involvement with their children.

Note that these difficulties in parenting do not simply reflect incompetence on the part of mothers (Hetherington et al., 1982). As indicated above, children—especially boys—tend to be noncompliant, angry, and demanding after divorce and consequently make parenting much more difficult. Thus, parents and their children may both contribute to increasing aversive control behavior in their relationship.

*Parent-child relations.* The quality of parent-child relationships after the divorce is also viewed as a significant factor in children's adaptation (Emery, 1988; Guidubaldi et al., 1987; Hetherington et al., 1989). Parents are an important source of support and stability for children coping with the stress of divorce, and warm, accepting relationships with both parents are associated with better postdivorce adjustment (e.g., Camara & Resnick, 1988; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1982; Peterson & Zill, 1986). However, data concerning the positive effects of a good relationship with just one parent are inconsistent. Some research indicates that a good relationship with either parent is associated with better outcomes than poor relationships with both parents (e.g., Hess & Camara, 1979), whereas other data indicate that a good relationship is only beneficial if it is with the custodial parent (all of whom were mothers, Hetherington et al., 1982). Further, several studies suggest that contact between children and their noncustodial parent generally diminishes over time (e.g., Furstenberg & Nord, 1985), although noncustodial mothers appear more likely to maintain contact than do noncustodial fathers (Furstenberg, 1990).

Unfortunately, the increased incidence of psychological problems in divorced adults suggests that their ability to provide nurturant, responsive parenting may be diminished. Custodial parents may be less available to their children and under greater duress because of the need to cope with new burdens and increased responsibilities, and noncustodial parents often have difficulty adapting to life away from the family and may feel isolated from their children. However, in keeping with the diversity of responses to divorce documented thus far, Hetherington et al. (1982) found that almost one quarter of the fathers and one half of the mothers in their sample reported that their relationships with their children had improved after the divorce.

### *Interventions*

As interparental conflict, inconsistent and diminished parenting, and poor parent-child relationships appear to be important mediators of children's adaptation to divorce, parent-focused intervention programs may prevent or reduce child problems by promoting a family environment that is consis-



tent, warm, and low in conflict. However, despite the emphasis on family factors in basic research, less has been written about parent-oriented interventions than child-focused interventions, and little data exist concerning the efficacy of such programs.

Weiss (1979) notes that single parents tend to face four major problems that make effective parenting difficult: They often lack adequate support systems, they may feel overburdened by the demands and responsibilities of making all of the daily household decisions alone, they frequently face task overload, and they may experience emotional overload because of the need to cope with both their own emotional reactions and those of the children. Thus it may be particularly difficult to discipline consistently and be responsive to their children's needs. Two different types of parent programs have been developed to address these problems.

One type of intervention focuses on the parenting role and seeks to help divorced adults manage their children's behavior, maintain positive relationships with their children, and improve cooperation between parents over parenting issues. The second type of program focuses on the parents' individual adjustment to the divorce rather than the parenting role itself. Such groups strive to help adults cope with the changes and stresses that marital dissolution brings and can involve both parents and nonparents. Each approach is delivered in a group format designed to help build effective coping skills and provide a supportive context, which may reduce the sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by many divorced adults (Cantor & Drake, 1983). Groups have been conducted in a variety of different settings, including schools, community mental health centers, and churches and synagogues (Cantor & Drake, 1983; Stolberg & Cullen, 1983).

Groups that focus on parenting and parent-child relationships tend to have an educational focus and attempt to help parents improve their child management skills and their understanding of children's reactions to divorce. One such group, Parenting Alone Together (Stolberg & Cullen, 1983) is a 10-session program that provides single parents with information about the unique problems faced by custodial parents, common emotional responses to divorce, and coping strategies of children of different ages. In addition, it seeks to help parents understand the effect of their own emotions on their relationships with other family members. Specific strategies for effective child management are taught, along with methods for helping ex-spouses develop a cooperative coparental relationship after the divorce. This program thus addresses two of the family processes identified as mediators by basic research, namely, discipline practices and interparental conflict. Cantor and Drake (1983) describe a group for custodial and noncustodial parents with similar goals and structure to Stolberg and Cullen's group but do not report an evaluation of the efficacy of this program.

Wolchik, Westover, Sandler, and Balls (1988) developed an intervention for custodial parents whose goals flow directly from research on mediators of children's adjustment to divorce. The group focuses on enhancing the quality of the parent-child relationship by increasing positive family activities, teaching parents to attend to and reinforce positive behavior, and developing listening skills. It attempts to improve parents' discipline practices by increasing parents' monitoring of the strategies

they use and emphasizing the importance of consistent consequences for children's behavior. It also seeks to decrease interparental conflict by teaching anger control skills. Finally, the program attempts to increase the amount of contact the child has with the noncustodial parent and with nonparental adults. The group has a strong emphasis on skills acquisition and enhancement and even includes short lectures and discussions about the factors believed to mediate children's adaptation to divorce.

Groups that focus on parents' personal adjustment to divorce, rather than solely on their role as parents, also may promote children's well-being by enabling the adults to be more effective parents. For example, Kessler's (1977) Beyond Divorce program is a 10-session educational program that discusses stages of adjustment after a separation, coping with feelings of guilt, anger, and sadness that occur at different stages in the divorce adjustment process, making the transition from married to single status, building new support networks, assertiveness training, and dating and forming new relationships. Kessler's program is included as the third component of the Divorce Adjustment Project described by Stolberg and Cullen (1983). A second example is provided by Bloom and colleagues (Bloom, Hodges, & Coldwell, 1982; Bloom, Hodges, Kern, & McFaddin, 1985), who developed a 6-month program designed to provide social support and promote the development of competence in five domains identified as particularly important to newly separated adults, namely, socialization, child rearing and single parenting, career planning and employment, legal and financial issues, and housing and homemaking.

There is even less empirical data on the effectiveness of parent-focused groups than on child-focused groups. However, three programs have been evaluated.

### *Evaluation Research*

*Divorce Adjustment Project.* Stolberg and Garrison (1985) evaluated the parental component of the Divorce Adjustment Project, a 12-week community-based intervention that appeared to combine the Parenting Alone Together and Beyond Divorce groups described above. It focused on both improving parenting skills and enhancing persons' adjustment to the divorce. For example, sessions were included on discipline skills, improving communication between parents and children and between former spouses, and controlling feelings.

Results from this intervention with 82 custodial mothers showed that mothers taking part in the parent program without concurrent child participation showed significantly greater improvement in their postdivorce adjustment than did mothers who took part in the parent group at the same time that their children participated in the child group and marginally greater improvement than mothers in a no-treatment control group. Variables proposed to be mediators of children's postdivorce adjustment also were assessed, including parental support and warmth and discipline/control. However, mothers in the intervention groups did not show significantly more improvement in parenting skills than control mothers, and children of mothers taking part in the parent program did not differ in adjustment from children in the control group. Thus, although

Stolberg and Garrison (1985) assessed some of the family process factors hypothesized to mediate children's adaptation to divorce, the program does not appear to have influenced either these factors or children's functioning. As described in the section on child-focused interventions, methodological problems make interpretation of the results of this study difficult.

*Wolchik et al. (1990).* Wolchik et al. conducted an evaluation of their parent-focused group, which included, in addition to indexes of child functioning, assessment of several mediating factors targeted by the group including the quality of parent-child relations, interparental conflict, discipline practices, contact with the noncustodial parent, and contact with nonparental adults. They report that the program was most effective in enhancing the quality of the mother-child relationship and improving discipline practices but did not affect the degree of interparental conflict or contact with the noncustodial parent or with nonparental adults. Lack of change in these variables may not be surprising given that the group included only custodial parents, who can influence but do not solely determine how much conflict occurs with former spouses or how often children see their noncustodial parents. However, indexes of child adjustment were inconsistently related to participation in the group. Thus, although Wolchik and her colleagues carefully matched the outcome measures to the goals of the group and found that change occurred in some of the proposed mediating factors, the effectiveness of the group in improving children's adjustment was not clearly documented.

*Bloom and Hodges' program for the newly separated.* Bloom and his colleagues (Bloom et al., 1982, 1985) report the most extensive evaluation of an individually focused parent group. They compared the adjustment of 153 upper-middle-class men and women randomly divided into an intervention group and an untreated control group. Assessments were conducted at 6, 18, 30, and 48 months after the end of the group. At 6 months after the program ended, the intervention group reported better overall scores on a measure that assesses psychological problems (the Composite Symptom Checklist) and also reported more personal growth. However, they differed from the control group on only 1 of 11 problem areas assessed and did not differ on work-related problems. At 18 months, the intervention group no longer differed from the control group on the symptom checklist, although they expressed greater satisfaction with their lives and more personal growth after the divorce. Differences between the two groups were greater at the 30-month assessment than at the two previous assessments: The intervention group scored better on general life satisfaction and on the symptom checklist, reported more personal growth, fewer work-related problems, and fewer difficulties in 5 of the 11 problem areas. Several Group  $\times$  Gender interaction effects indicated that men in the group were better adjusted than those in the control group, but women did not differ across groups. Finally, at the 4-year assessment, there were fewer differences between groups, but the intervention group remained lower on the total symptom score, anxiety, neurosthenea, and life satisfaction scales. Whether positive changes in the adults who were parents actually improved their parenting or relationships with their children was not assessed; thus we do not know if this intervention influenced the family processes described above.

### *Summary and Critique*

Although few evaluations of parent-focused interventions have been conducted, the degree of overlap between basic research on family mediators of children's adjustment and the goals of parent groups is promising. Two of the three evaluations described above assessed both the mechanisms targeted by the groups and child adjustment and thus have the potential to address the process by which change occurs. Basic research on children's postdivorce adjustment indicates that effective parenting is likely to be an important factor in preventing or reducing adjustment problems in children, and most of the programs attempt to improve parents' discipline practices. Fewer address the quality of parent-child relations or interparental conflict, two other mediators emphasized by basic research. Stolberg and Cullen's (1983) Parenting Alone Together group includes components for building better communication between former spouses, and Wolchik et al.'s (1990) group uses anger control training as a strategy for reducing interparental conflict, but each is targeted only at custodial parents. If programs strive to help parents cooperate over issues concerning the children and to maintain good relationships with them, it is imperative to intervene with both custodial and noncustodial parents (Emery, 1988).

The two types of parent groups described above are likely to be differentially effective in influencing children's postdivorce adjustment. Although groups that focus on parents' personal adaptation may influence their child management practices and relationships with their children by improving their overall adjustment, the effect on children is indirect and may take considerable time to occur. Because the 1st year or so after divorce is usually the most stressful period for both adults and children, interventions that address parenting and parent-child relationships directly may be more likely to affect children's adaptation to the divorce. A group such as Stolberg and Garrison's (1985) may be useful to both parents and children because it attends to the parents' personal needs while also building parenting skills. However, such groups run the risk of giving insufficient attention to both sets of issues. Developing groups for parents and children that operate in parallel—covering many of the same topics and involving joint goals, activities, and assignments—may be the most effective means of influencing family processes after divorce.

Parent-focused groups hold considerable promise for improving the quality of children's life after divorce, but information about the efficacy of parent-focused interventions is limited by three factors. First, research evaluating the effectiveness of this type of intervention has barely begun. A number of parent-focused programs are available commercially, and although the developers and users of these programs may be well intentioned, if they are not demonstrably effective, large amounts of time and money could be wasted in their execution. Second, evaluations of family-focused interventions are limited by many of the same methodological problems as those discussed for child-focused programs (e.g., nonrepresentative samples). Third, as in the case of child groups, the short duration of the groups may limit their efficacy; longer lasting groups (such as Bloom et al.'s, 1982, 1985, 6-month program) or inclusion of occasional booster sessions may strengthen program effects.

Intervention programs that target the parents represent an attempt to affect the ecology of children's lives after divorce. Because their adaptation is influenced by the nature of family interaction, such interventions are likely to prove particularly important in preventing or decreasing adverse effects of divorce on children. However, postdivorce family life also is affected by broader factors, such as changes in socioeconomic status and laws pertaining to divorce. We therefore turn to examine how interventions at the systemic level may influence children's postdivorce adjustment.

### *System-Focused Interventions*

Divorce often sets into motion a series of environmental changes that may affect children's adaptation either directly or indirectly. Perhaps the most significant changes arise from the decline in income that usually confronts custodial mothers. In addition, given the problems facing divorcing parents, support by others outside of the family may be an important source of help for children. Next we discuss findings from research on these ecological factors.

### *Basic Research on Ecological Factors*

*Environmental changes.* Divorce disrupts children's life in varied ways. Some may appear minor (e.g., changes in daily routine), whereas others involve major changes (e.g., moving to a new neighborhood; Hetherington, et al., 1989; Kurdek, 1987; Stolberg & Anker, 1983; Walsh & Stolberg, 1989). Changes in their environment may adversely affect children by disrupting their support network, requiring them to develop new skills, and creating feelings of resentment and rejection (Kurdek, 1981; Stolberg & Anker, 1983; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). Research on the relation between environmental change and children's adjustment after divorce is scant but suggests that such changes may affect some aspects of children's functioning. For example, Stolberg and Anker (1983) found that greater environmental change after divorce was related to parent reports of greater depression, social withdrawal, aggression, and delinquency. In contrast, Kurdek and Berg (1983) found no relationship between degree of change experienced and children's attitudes toward and understanding of divorce. Environmental changes may be more closely related to some aspects of adjustment than others, therefore, it is important to examine measures of adjustment that are logically related to environmental stressors. For example, children who move to a new neighborhood might experience greater peer problems and increased loneliness but may not be expected to exhibit lower self-esteem. More fine-grained analyses of the types of changes children undergo and their resources for coping with them may shed light on the effects of environmental changes on children.

*Economic factors.* Probably the most significant change experienced by many children is the economic hardship they often face if they live with their mother. Over 40% of women and children have their total family income cut in half 1 year after the divorce (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). Economic conditions are particularly drastic for White women whose predivorce family income was below the median and for Black women; approximately 40% of the children in these families live in poverty a

year after divorce (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). Decreased income leads to a variety of circumstances that make life after divorce difficult for children. The children may have to move into a neighborhood with poorer quality housing, schools, and child care and may also lose touch with friends and neighbors who could provide support and stability. In addition, mothers' need to earn money may result in their having insufficient time to spend with their children (Emery et al., 1984; Hetherington et al., 1989). The role of economic factors in mediating children's adjustment is reflected in Guidubaldi et al.'s (1984) finding that many of the differences between children from divorced and intact families disappeared when family income level was taken into account.

Mothers' economic hardship is acute because they must cover most or all of the expenses of the household with much less income than existed before the divorce. Although children apparently benefit when divorced mothers become economically independent (Kurdek, 1981), it is not easy for the mothers to do so (Emery et al., 1984), especially when they have worked part-time or have been full-time homemakers. Unfortunately, spouse maintenance and child support payments tend to be set at insufficient levels and often are not ordered (or paid) at all (Emery, 1988; Weitzman, 1985). Because children's economic situation is inextricably tied to their mother's income, court decisions concerning the payment of spouse and child support often have unintended victims.

*Social support from others.* As noted above, it may be difficult for parents to provide the support and attention that children need at the time of divorce; thus, friends, neighbors, teachers, and extended kin can be a valuable source of support and caring for children undergoing a divorce (Guidubaldi et al., 1987; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kurdek, 1987). However, whether children are able to elicit support from others is another issue. Girls appear to enlist support from teachers, friends, and parents more easily than do boys (Hetherington et al., 1982). This may be due to the "particularly obnoxious combination of dependency, demandingness, noncompliance, and aggression" (Emery et al., 1984, p. 247) exhibited by boys, which may lead others to avoid them. This sort of behavior is likely to be especially problematic if boys are forced to move away from friends and familiar teachers. Although some degree of obnoxious behavior is tolerated among friends, such behavior is likely to isolate the child in a new context. Guidubaldi and his colleagues (Guidubaldi et al., 1984, 1987) stress the potential of the school as a source of social support and found that more stable and supportive school environments are associated with better adjustment in children.

### *Interventions*

Jacobs (1986) notes that

although the responsibility for the tone and eventual outcome of a divorce initially clearly lies with the divorcing couple, it is greatly influenced and at times structured by those institutions and systems within which the divorcing couple enact their emotional and legal separation. (p. 192)

The formal process of obtaining a divorce thus represents a third level at which to intervene on behalf of children. Al-

though improving children's adjustment to divorce has not been the sole impetus for recent changes in divorce laws and policies, concern for children's well-being has played an important role in bringing about these changes.

Legal decisions regarding custody and child support have profound, immediate effects on children's life after divorce, determining how much they will see each parent and what kind of life-style they will have. Whereas the divorce settlement clearly affects children's lives in these concrete ways, the process by which it is reached also may affect children in that it can promote hostility between spouses or encourage parental cooperation. Whether settlements are reached in a full court hearing or, as is much more common, out of court, the process has an adversarial quality. In the next section, we examine an alternative to the traditional means of litigating divorce disputes, divorce mediation, before analyzing how legal policies regarding the content of divorce settlements may affect children directly.

*Divorce mediation.* In conventional court proceedings, each spouse is represented by a lawyer, who tries to obtain the best possible settlement for his or her client, and decisions about property division, spouse maintenance (alimony), child support, and custody are made by a judge. In contrast, divorce mediation involves the spouses meeting with a single individual (the mediator) to work out a settlement that is satisfactory to both of them, and final decisions about the settlement are made by the spouses themselves. Divorce mediation therefore stresses cooperation and negotiation and is intended to increase parental control over the outcome of the divorce proceedings (Emery & Wyer, 1987b; Kaslow, 1988). Mediation differs from therapy, however, in that it does not seek to resolve emotional issues underlying the divorce or reunite the spouses but focuses instead on negotiation of a fair settlement.

One catalyst for the growing popularity of divorce mediation is concern for the welfare of children after divorce (Emery & Wyer, 1987b). All states now have no-fault divorces (Freed & Walker, 1989), which eliminate the need to prove that one spouse is guilty of some offense to obtain a divorce. Although this may have reduced some of the hostility and blame surrounding the divorce, it has removed one basis (i.e., determination of fault) for awarding child custody. In determining custody arrangements, judges currently are guided by a vague best-interest-of-the-child standard that makes the outcome of custody hearings unpredictable. This increases the likelihood of litigation and may promote parental acrimony and conflict because testimony that one parent is unfit to have custody of the children may influence custody decisions (Emery & Wyer, 1987b). Thus, even though the divorce itself may be no-fault, child-centered issues may still promote attempts by the spouses to disparage or discredit the other.

In addition to increasing parental control over the form of postdivorce family life, the mediation model may have important psychological benefits. When settlements are reached through an adversarial process that produces a "winner" and a "loser," one parent may feel that he or she has been taken advantage of or treated unfairly. The resulting resentment and bitterness may adversely affect both interparental and parent-child relations and lead to continued litigation. By trying to reduce blame and fault and to promote a mutually fair agreement, mediation tries to avoid producing a winner and a loser. Fur-

thermore, the experience of working together to reach a common goal may help pave the way for cooperation after the divorce (Jacobs, 1986).

Divorce mediation is not without problems and controversies. For example, there is debate over whether attorneys or mental health professionals are better suited to act as mediators, whether certain types of cases should be excluded from mediation, and what standards should guide the practice of mediators (see Emery & Wyer, 1987b; Jacobs, 1986; Sprenkle & Storm, 1983). However, its adherents argue that it is a desirable alternative to the adversarial process for many couples.

The process of resolving divorce disputes may affect children by influencing the degree of conflict and cooperation between their parents, but the content of the divorce settlement also has important consequences for children's lives after divorce. Two aspects of the settlement in particular have a direct impact on them: the custody arrangement and how much child support, if any, is provided for the child. These issues are likely to have a significant influence on two mediators of children's postdivorce adjustment: the quality of parent-child relationships and custodial parents' economic situation. Efforts have been directed at creating custody and support arrangements that will benefit children, and we now turn to examine these efforts.

*Child custody.* Laws concerning child custody have changed considerably over the years. Fathers were automatically given custody of their children until the nineteenth century, but from the turn of the twentieth century until recently there has been a legal presumption that maternal custody was in the child's best interest (Emery, 1988; Weitzman, 1985). By the mid-1980s most states had enacted laws that prevented decisions about custody awards from being made on the basis of gender (Weitzman, 1985), and the current trend is toward joint custody arrangements, in which both parents share parental rights and responsibilities. In discussing joint custody, a distinction must be made between joint *physical* custody and joint *legal* custody. In the former, children spend roughly equal amounts of time living with their mothers and fathers, whereas in the latter parents share legal responsibilities but the child spends more time with one parent than the other. In fact, in terms of practical living arrangements, joint legal custody may be indistinguishable from sole custody and visitation. Despite a legal preference for joint custody, the actual practice of awarding custody has not changed radically. For example, Weitzman found that after California replaced a maternal preference with a non-gender-based, best-interest-of-the-child standard, there was little change in the relative proportions of mothers and fathers awarded custody 4 years later.

The current interest in joint custody arrangements reflects the belief that children's relationships with both parents are important and seeks to preserve these relationships after divorce. As discussed above, good relationships with both parents are associated with better adjustment after divorce for children, and joint custody may be a way of maintaining both parents' involvement with their children. Sole custody, in comparison, may have unintended negative effects on the noncustodial parent. Emery (1988) notes that because both parents have custody while married, sole custody arrangements do not give custody to one parent so much as take it away from the other parent. The sense of isolation from their children that many parents

may feel when custody is awarded to their former spouse may have implications for the quality of parent-child relationships, conflict over the children, and perhaps payment of child support.

*Child support.* One of the factors believed to be most important for children's well-being after divorce is the economic conditions under which they live. Although noncustodial fathers generally have higher income and lower expenses than mothers raising children, the primary burden for supporting the children is placed on the mothers. Whereas property division and spousal maintenance affect the custodial mother's (and therefore the child's) standard of living, only child support payments are intended specifically for the needs of the child and therefore reflect parental rather than spousal responsibilities.

Despite the unquestionable importance of providing sufficiently for children after divorce, Duncan and Hoffman (1985) found that only about 20% of Black children and slightly over half of White children lived in families receiving spouse or child support in the 2 years after divorce. Moreover, such payments constituted only about 20% of the family income of divorced or separated women (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). When child support is ordered, the amount awarded often is inadequate to cover even half the expenses for raising children (Weitzman, 1985). Awards rarely include a cost-of-living adjustment, and thus the real value of the support payments declines over time. Moreover, noncompliance with child support orders is an enormous problem. Fewer than half of the mothers due child support receive the full amount ordered, and 20% receive no payments at all (NICSE, 1986, cited in Emery, 1988). Noncompliance with child support puts children in a precarious position that may have serious consequences for their adjustment after the divorce. Moreover, unlike many of the stresses associated with divorce, insufficient child support is preventable.

One reason for noncompliance with child support orders is that there has been little consequence for failing to comply. Historically, enforcement of support orders has relied on mothers' initiative to pursue the matter through the courts, which often have been lax in their efforts to ensure proper payment (Weitzman, 1985). However, in 1984 federal legislation was passed to make enforcement easier and more powerful. The child support enforcement amendments mandated the use of several effective enforcement techniques, including the garnishment of wages, interception of federal and state tax refunds, and civil and criminal contempt proceedings (Emery, 1988). In addition, most states have the discretion to have payment of support made directly to a court officer, eliminating the need for women to monitor payment and then notify the court when lapses occur (Freed & Walker, 1989). Enforcement strategies that are self-starting, that is, go into effect without women making formal legal claims, are likely to be particularly effective in collecting payments.

Although expanding enforcement efforts is likely to be an effective way to increase compliance, there may be additional steps that can be taken to address this problem. It is possible, for example, that nonpayment of support reflects men's rejection of a process they consider to be unfair to them. Emery and Wyer (1987a) found that men resolving custody disputes through traditional adversarial means were less satisfied with

the resolution process than men settling the dispute through mediation. It would be interesting to investigate whether men going through mediation have a better record of compliance than those who litigate. Weitzman (1985) found that men's complaints about visitation were not related to compliance, but Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, and Zill (1983) report that fathers who paid child support visited their children more frequently. Thus, there is likely to be a link between paternal interest in children and payment of child support, and this interest may be fostered by legal processes that encourage parental involvement and cooperation.

### *Evaluation Research*

*Divorce mediation.* Research on mediation indicates that it is an efficient and constructive method of resolving divorce disputes. Several studies have found that mediation decreases the likelihood of litigation after the final divorce decree and leads to a higher rate of pretrial agreements and to greater satisfaction with the divorce process among divorcing couples (Emery & Wyer 1987a; for a review see Sprenkle & Storm, 1983). Evidence concerning the broader psychological impact of mediation is scarce (Emery & Wyer, 1987b); however, three recent studies illustrate some of the benefits of mediation.

Emery and his colleagues (Emery, Matthews, & Wyer, 1991; Emery & Wyer, 1987a) studied two samples of couples randomly chosen to participate in either mediation or litigation to resolve disputes involving custody, visitation, and child support. In both studies, mediation led to a substantial reduction in the number of cases proceeding to court, and when settlements were reached, they were reached faster through mediation. The content of the agreements reached through mediation and litigation did not differ substantially; in both cases women were given sole custody of the children a majority of the time, although joint legal custody was a more likely (but still infrequent) outcome of mediation. Furthermore, the number of days children were to spend with the nonresidential parent and the amount of child support to be paid were the same for settlements reached through both methods of dispute resolution. However, contrary to prediction and the goals of mediation, couples who went through mediation did not differ from those in litigation in the degree of conflict over child rearing 5 weeks after resolving their dispute (Emery et al., 1991).

Men and women differed consistently in their satisfaction with the two types of proceedings. Compared with men going through litigation, men in mediation reported greater satisfaction with the process and outcome of the proceedings and with their impact on themselves, their children, and their relationship with their former wife. Thus, even though the content of the settlements did not differ, men felt that the process of mediation was more fair and constructive. In contrast, few differences emerged in the two studies in the satisfaction of women going through mediation and litigation. Emery and Wyer (1987a) found that women in mediation felt they had won less and lost more than women in litigation, but when the two samples of women were combined to provide more reliable results, no differences were found between women in the two groups. Examining couples' satisfaction with mediation and litigation more closely, Emery and Wyer (1987a) found that satisfaction

ratings were similar for men in mediation, women in mediation, and women in litigation but that men who went through litigation were considerably less satisfied with the resolution process. It appears that men felt they lost in litigation, which was a reasonable perception given that women won approximately 90% of the litigated custody disputes.

Kelly (1989) similarly reports a number of advantages of mediation for divorcing couples. In addition to child-related issues, property and spousal support were subject to mediation in her longitudinal study of 236 couples (82 participating in mediation). Both men and women in mediation believed that the custody and visitation agreements they negotiated would be better for everyone in the family, that spousal support was fair, and that the mediation process increased their understanding of their children's psychological needs and reactions, and both were more satisfied with the overall process of resolution than couples taking part in the traditional adversarial approach to resolving divorce disputes. Although couples in mediation reported that it helped them work together more constructively, there were no differences in the degree of anger expressed between spouses in the mediation and adversarial groups.

An important issue concerning mediation is the potential for it to produce agreements that are unfair for women. Mediation is not advised when there are significant differences in the bargaining power of the spouses, and it is possible that women, who traditionally have less power in the relationship, may be pressured or maneuvered into undesirable settlements (Emery & Wyer, 1987b; Weitzman, 1985). However, Kelly (1989) found that compared with women going through the traditional adversarial process, women who engaged in mediation were significantly more satisfied with the process on several dimensions—including the property, custody, and spousal support agreements—and were more likely to report that mediation helped them stand up for themselves. In contrast, men going through mediation were less likely to believe that the process helped them stand up for themselves than men who went through the traditional proceedings.

Nonetheless, in some cases mediation may not be in a woman's best interest. For example, mediation is likely to be inappropriate when spouse or child abuse has occurred because women may consent to unfair agreements out of fear or a desire to escape more quickly from an aversive situation (Emery & Wyer, 1987b; Felner & Terre, 1987). Whereas this case may be clear-cut, in practice it may be very difficult to identify subtle cases in which women are at a disadvantage in the negotiation process. For mediation to be successful, it must preserve the spirit of cooperation and negotiation without maintaining power differences between men and women. As one safeguard against disadvantageous agreements, Haynes (1981) recommends that both parties should retain attorneys to review the mediated settlement. In addition, formalized periodic reviews of the mediation solution are needed to assure that the solution remains appropriate when children's needs change.

Mediation may increase the perceived fairness of settlements reached after divorce, which may in turn affect spouses' behavior after the divorce. It is possible that if men are happier with the dispute resolution process they may be more motivated to stay involved with their children and perhaps provide more consistent economic support for them. In addition, if parents

are both satisfied with the outcome, their relationship may be more cooperative (Emery & Wyer, 1987b; Jacobs, 1986). With its emphasis on negotiation, mediation presents the opportunity for a "win-win" outcome rather than producing a winner and a loser. That mediation actually achieves this goal is supported by the finding that husbands' and wives' beliefs that they "won what they wanted" were significantly positively correlated for couples in mediation but significantly negatively correlated for couples going through litigation (Emery et al., 1990).

*Custody arrangements.* Increased interest in joint custody has been prompted by the desire to preserve relationships between the child and both parents in the hope of enhancing children's well-being after divorce. However, joint physical custody may increase interparental conflict and cause excessive disruption in the children's lives because they must move from one household to the other. Research examining the association between type of custody and children's adjustment has been limited, and findings are mixed (see Emery, 1988; Felner & Terre, 1987; Kelly, 1988). Whereas some writers conclude that joint custody has a positive impact on children (e.g., Kelly, 1988), others argue that the benefits of joint custody, especially joint physical custody, have not been supported by research (Emery, 1988). For example, a recent study (Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989) found that whether children lived in sole or joint custody was unrelated to their behavioral, emotional, or social adjustment; instead, children's adjustment was predicted by children's age and gender, parental emotional functioning at the time of divorce, and interparental conflict 1 year after the divorce.

The type of custody arrangement may be less important in influencing children's adjustment than the quality of family relationships after the divorce. Custody arrangements do not necessarily affect the quality of these relationships. For example, Maccoby, Depner, and Mnookin (1990) report that parents sharing custody reported greater cooperative communication but found that custody arrangements neither systematically increased nor decreased conflict between former spouses. However, interparental conflict 1 year after the divorce was predicted by the degree of hostility and conflict at the time of divorce.

Although some data favoring joint custody have been reported, the effects have not been large. This may not be surprising given that joint legal custody arrangements closely resemble sole custody in practice. Moreover, most studies have involved parents who elected joint custody. These parents may have a more cooperative relationship than the average divorcing couple, and thus findings obtained with such couples may not be generalizable to the population of divorcing couples. In fact, parents are less satisfied with joint custody when it is ordered by the court rather than freely chosen (Emery, 1988; Felner & Terre, 1987).

In summary, there does not appear to be a custody arrangement that is best for all families (Felner & Terre, 1987). In keeping with the trend toward private ordering of divorce, perhaps the best recommendation regarding joint custody is that it should be encouraged for parents who believe it would work best for them but that couples who resist this type of arrangement should not be forced to attempt it (Emery, 1988). More

research concerning the conditions under which joint custody positively or negatively affects children is needed before stronger recommendations can be made.

*Child support.* Although inadequate or unpaid support awards are likely to adversely affect children's adaptation to the divorce by creating economic hardship for custodial mothers and children, we are not aware of any studies that attempt to directly link compliance with child support orders to children's adjustment. Similarly, whether an association between support compliance and children's well-being is influenced by other factors, such as interparental conflict or parent-child relations, is not clear. However, there are data showing that strong enforcement procedures do produce better compliance with support awards. For example, Chambers (1979) found that counties in Michigan that had the highest rate of child support compliance were those that had self-starting collection procedures and a high incarceration rate for delinquent fathers.

### *Summary and Critique*

Systemic interventions address both ecological and familial factors proposed to mediate children's postdivorce adjustment. First, efforts to change laws and legal policies pertaining to divorce may facilitate children's adaptation by reducing environmental stressors and economic hardship after divorce. For example, stronger child support enforcement measures target the ecology of children's lives by seeking to ensure that children do not suffer unnecessarily from economic disadvantage. However, systemic-level interventions do not directly address the issue of social support from outside the family. Interestingly, the only interventions that explicitly target children's support network are school-based groups for children; as noted above, one goal of this approach is to provide a supportive peer context for children from divorced families. Second, system-focused interventions also attempt to influence familial mediators of children's postdivorce adjustment. Divorce mediation and joint custody are intended to decrease interparental conflict, increase cooperation over child rearing, and promote good parent-child relations.

Although systemic interventions target a range of mediators, the extent to which they actually improve the lives of children from divorced families is unknown. Several studies suggest that these interventions affect parents' behavior and perceptions about the divorce, but insufficient empirical data exist describing the impact of legal interventions on children. For example, although divorce mediation appears to have several benefits for parents, the consequences of mediation for postdivorce family functioning and children's adjustment have just begun to be explored. Even less attention has been paid to the relation between legal policies and children's adaptation after divorce. In addition, generalizing the results of existing studies on these systemic interventions is difficult because couples choosing mediation or joint custody may not be representative of the population of divorcing couples and the practices of a particular court or state may not apply to other locales (Emery & Wyer, 1987a). Thus, convergent findings from investigations in varied jurisdictions and parts of the country are needed to provide confidence in the validity of existing data.

### *Summary of Interventions for Children of Divorce*

Research on mediators of children's postdivorce adjustment highlights the role that child characteristics, family interactions, and ecological factors play in children's adaptation to divorce. These three types of mediators parallel the "triad of protective factors" identified by stress and coping theorists, which include positive personality dispositions (e.g., self-esteem), a warm, emotionally supportive family, and extended support systems outside of the family (Garmezy, 1983; Masten & Garmezy, 1985). Basic research suggests that the deleterious effects of divorce on children may be minimized when parents are cooperative, are consistent in their parenting, and maintain good relationships with their children. Similarly, a stable environment and adequate financial resources are likely to decrease the disruption and stress that follows marital dissolution. Implications of basic research for understanding the child characteristics that decrease the impact of divorce are less clear.

Interventions that correspond to each level of mediator have been developed to help children from divorced families. However, the relative attention given to mediators of children's adjustment differs in basic research and intervention. Whereas recent basic research stresses the importance of family processes and economic conditions after divorce, interventions have tended to focus on the individual child. Furthermore, within individual, familial, and systemic levels of inquiry, basic research and intervention often differ in their emphases. For example, at the individual level, school-based groups focus primarily on helping children understand the divorce and building coping skills (mediating factors), whereas basic research has paid little attention to these issues, focusing instead on moderating variables such as age and gender.

Evaluation research of interventions for children from divorced families is at an early stage. Progress has been made both in understanding factors affecting children's adjustment to divorce and in formulating intervention approaches to address the needs of these children. As the focus of basic research shifts from investigating family structure to family process, opportunities exist to more directly examine potential change mechanisms that can be targeted in intervention efforts. Although the current knowledge base provides a foundation for developing effective intervention programs, much more work is needed if the problems associated with divorce are to be significantly reduced. Therefore, in the final section we explore the implications of our analysis for improving the response of mental health professionals to the difficulties faced by children of divorce.

### *Implications for Future Research and Intervention*

Effective intervention with children who experience divorce will depend on advances made in both basic and applied research. To facilitate such advances, three recommendations are offered. First, it is critical to build on current knowledge about children's adaptation to divorce by addressing gaps in the literature and by integrating more fully findings from basic and applied research. Second, the link between theory and research needs to be strengthened. Finally, the development of preventive interventions that promote adaptation in children before

they exhibit behavioral and emotional problems may best serve the population of children who experience divorce each year. We address each of these recommendations in turn.

### *Expanding Current Knowledge*

Although advances have been made in understanding the effects of divorce on children and the conditions that attenuate or exacerbate these effects, much remains unknown about how children adapt to divorce and how to facilitate such adaptation. Below we discuss ways to build on the current knowledge base by identifying important issues that have received inadequate attention and by discussing ways to more fully integrate research and intervention efforts.

### *Addressing Gaps in the Literature*

*The course of children's adaptation.* Although divorce is widely regarded as a process that occurs over time, little is known about the course of children's adjustment to divorce. A few longitudinal studies have provided valuable information in this regard, but they tend to assess children at only a few time points separated by fairly long intervals and thus lack the sensitivity to chart in detail children's developmental trajectory after divorce. Moreover, even the physical separation of the parents is at best a rough index of the onset of the divorce process. Because the events that take place before separation or divorce (e.g., degree of parental conflict) may be important for understanding children's adjustment after the divorce, assessing families before parental separation will provide valuable insight into the course of children's adaptation. The only study that we are aware of that assessed children before and after separation showed that many of the adjustment problems seen in children from divorced families existed before the divorce and most likely were linked to interparental discord (see Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986). Prospective longitudinal studies of family process that include assessment before separation and then follow children through separation, divorce, and remarriage would allow the most complete examination of the effects of marital transitions on children. At the very least, however, it is important for research to examine relations between the time since separation and measures of current functioning. Similarly, serial marriage has increased dramatically in recent years (Brody, Neubaum, & Forehand, 1988) and as a consequence some children may experience a number of marital transitions. It is important therefore for both basic and applied research to specify or control for the number of marriages and divorces that children in the study have gone through.

*Relations between mediators.* The mediators of postdivorce adjustment may interact in complex ways, and their impact may vary as a function of the number and particular constellation of factors that occur. However, there have been few theoretical or empirical attempts to describe the interrelationships between mediators either within levels of analysis (e.g., between interparental conflict and parent-child relations) or between levels of analysis (e.g., between environmental changes and children's coping styles; for exceptions see Fauber, Forehand, McCombs Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Kurdek, 1981; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989). Similarly, interventions

rarely target more than one level of mediator. An exception is Stolberg and Cullen's (1983) Divorce Adjustment Project, which includes groups for both children and adults to provide a more holistic, integrated response to the problems faced by divorced families. There are likely to be multiple pathways to the development of adjustment problems after separation, and therefore examining how different mediating factors may interact is critical for a more complete understanding of the processes that shape children's adaptation and for designing effective interventions.

*Relation of specific adjustment problems to particular mediators.* There also have been few attempts to examine whether particular types of adjustment problems (e.g., aggression) are related to specific mediators. Investigating more fine-grained hypotheses may help untangle the complex and murky relationship between the many mediators that have been proposed and the range of adjustment problems found in children whose parents divorce. To adequately assess specific hypotheses, it therefore is critical to use outcome measures that are theoretically related to hypothesized mediators. As examples of this approach, two recent studies (Faubert et al., 1990; Forgatch, Patterson, & Skinner, 1988) suggest that inconsistent or ineffective discipline is related to externalizing problems but not internalizing problems. Uncovering relationships between specific adjustment problems and mediating processes also may lead to interventions that can be tailored specifically to children's particular adjustment problems, thereby providing a more focused and potent intervention.

*Factors promoting positive adjustment.* Basic research has tended to focus on processes leading to dysfunctional or pathological outcomes (e.g., interparental conflict, environmental change). Consequently, little is known about factors that promote healthy adaptation to divorce. This is particularly true of child characteristics. Work on psychological resilience suggests that a number of individual factors, such as self-esteem and coping strategies, may lead to different outcomes among children experiencing similar environmental stressors (e.g., Garmez, 1983; Rutter, 1979). A few studies have examined children's coping strategies after divorce (e.g., Felner et al., 1975; Armistead et al., 1990), but little progress has been made in understanding why some children appear to be less affected by stressful circumstances surrounding divorce than others. As in the case of negative outcomes, adaptive outcomes are likely to arise from multiple pathways.

*Child effects.* Most research has focused on children's adjustment as the outcome of various stresses and changes associated with divorce. What is often overlooked is that children's behavior also affects the process of adjusting to divorce. Children are likely to have a particularly important influence on family functioning. For example, characteristics of the child such as their age and sex may influence how parents respond to them. Rutter (1981) suggests that parents react more positively to signs of distress from girls and are more supportive of their coping efforts. Furthermore, children who exhibit externalizing problems, such as aggression, make parenting more difficult and may be more likely to become involved in coercive exchanges with parents than children who are sad or withdrawn. Examining the transaction between children and their environment may provide greater understanding of the course



of children's adjustment to divorce than a focus on either factor alone (Felner, 1984).

### *Integrating Basic and Applied Research*

Understanding children's adaptation to divorce also will be enhanced by greater integration of basic and applied research. Findings from basic research can inform and guide intervention efforts, and results from research on interventions in turn can enrich basic research and identify new topics of inquiry. Next we consider several implications of each type of research for the other.

A number of findings from basic research may be particularly pertinent for intervention efforts. First, although the quality of postdivorce family functioning has been shown to be a critical mediator of children's adjustment (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1989; Wallerstein et al., 1988), family factors have not been well incorporated into intervention programs. Helping parents understand how their behavior affects their children and what steps they can take to minimize the impact of divorce on children may have potent effects on children's well-being. For example, interventions that stress the importance of minimizing interparental conflict and teach parents effective problem-solving skills may decrease children's exposure to hostility and discord after the divorce. Similarly, approaches that focus directly on maintaining good relations between children and both parents may increase the stability and support children experience after divorce. Second, ecological factors such as environmental change and economic deprivation rarely have been addressed by clinical researchers. However, the clear implications of such factors for children's adjustment make this an area of great promise for intervention.

Findings from applied research similarly have not had much impact on basic research. However, evidence that some child-focused interventions are effective (e.g., Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987) suggests that individual-difference factors may be important for understanding how children adapt to divorce. Chief among these are children's coping skills and their understanding of the divorce, variables that have gained little attention in basic research. In addition, school-based groups highlight the role that social support from non-family-members may play in helping children cope with the emotional and practical difficulties that often accompany divorce. As efforts are made to explicate the processes by which child-focused interventions help children, additional variables are likely to be identified that might similarly enrich basic research.

### *Strengthening the Link Between Theory and Research*

Attention to three conceptual issues concerning the relation between theory and research will be particularly important for furthering the contribution of empirical investigations in this area. First, it is important for research to reflect current theorizing about children's adaptation to divorce. Although there is general agreement that divorce is a process and that children's adjustment is affected by numerous factors (e.g., Kurdek, 1981), few studies reflect the complexity of this formulation. It may not be possible to test current formulations in a single study because there clearly is a limit to the number of constructs that

can be assessed in any one investigation. Nonetheless, future studies can examine more sophisticated models than those commonly tested. For example, multivariate methods could be used more frequently to test hypotheses involving complex relations among proposed mediators and children's adjustment (for an example, see Fauber et al., 1990).

Second, studies examining the efficacy of interventions need to make explicit and test the theoretical model on which the intervention is based. More specifically, most evaluation studies assess changes in adjustment but not the process by which change occurs. To investigate the process by which interventions help children, it is necessary for evaluation research to assess whether changes occur on variables hypothesized to lead to positive treatment outcomes and whether these changes correlate with changes in children's adjustment. There are at least two benefits to such research. On the one hand, it will further understanding of how interventions help children and thus aid in the development of more effective interventions. In addition, as experimental manipulation of mediators during the divorce process is not feasible, interventions provide an opportunity to test whether proposed mediators can influence children's adaptation to divorce. For example, a parent-focused intervention could investigate the role of inconsistent discipline by assessing whether changes in discipline practices are correlated with changes in children's behavior. Although this approach does not prove that the proposed mediator causes adjustment problems in naturalistic settings, when combined with correlational data obtained in these settings, it increases confidence in the validity of causal inferences.

Third, alternative, less traditional, theoretical formulations are needed to guide interventions for children from divorced families. Although traditional means of clinical intervention may be useful, they cannot address adequately the full scope of problems presented by divorce. Several nontraditional types of interventions follow from the earlier analysis of factors that mediate children's adjustment to divorce. For example, the economic disadvantage faced by many children may be addressed by developing job training programs or inexpensive day care for custodial mothers, and social support for parents may be enhanced by facilitating the development of self-help groups for divorced mothers and fathers. Preventive interventions may be particularly important for confronting the problems often experienced by children when their parents divorce (see Prevention section below).

### *Prevention*

Prevention provides an alternative to traditional therapeutic approaches in that it seeks to intervene proactively with children before adjustment problems emerge. It is useful to distinguish between three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention involves targeting people who have not yet displayed any dysfunction and intervening to avert the occurrence of dysfunction. Secondary prevention, or early intervention, identifies people who are exhibiting early signs of maladjustment but are not yet experiencing a full-blown syndrome and attempts to prevent further development of dysfunction. Tertiary prevention is a misnomer in that it does not aim to prevent disorder per se but rather attempts to reduce addi-

tional effects of a fully developed and often quite serious disorder.

Most interventions for children of divorce seek to prevent the occurrence of adjustment problems after divorce. However, many of the participants in these programs experienced divorce years earlier and already exhibit some signs of maladjustment, and thus the interventions are best considered treatment rather than prevention. Although there are good reasons to include children in these programs who have lingering problems related to the divorce (see Kalter, Schaefer, et al., 1988; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987), more widespread and powerful effects may be obtained if programs target children as soon as possible after the decision to divorce is made. As large numbers of children experience parental separation every year, prevention efforts that target this population may be the most effective approach for addressing problems associated with divorce. However, because children may evidence signs of maladjustment before separation, even this strategy may not truly represent primary prevention.

Prevention programs potentially could be developed that target each of the three classes of mediators described above. At the systemic level, job training programs or inexpensive child care for newly divorced mothers could be part of a preventive intervention because they may improve the economic situation of custodial mothers and their children. At the family level, interventions in the process of obtaining a divorce have the potential to affect the entire population of divorcing couples. A legal intervention targeting family functioning could involve mandating all divorcing parents to participate in groups that address the issues of parental conflict, child rearing, and parent-child relations. Primary prevention efforts that target children at the broadest level could involve incorporating material on coping skills and family transitions into the schoolwide self-esteem enhancement programs that are becoming increasingly popular. Alternatively, school districts could establish programs for children undergoing divorce that provide support and education to any families who are interested. Given the varied factors that affect children's adjustment, integrated interventions that target both parents and children may be most effective.

Although it could be argued that widespread prevention efforts are not necessary because many children do not develop long-lasting adjustment problems after divorce, the sheer number of children who experience this stressful transition make it likely that effective programs could ward off adjustment problems in a significant number of children. To be successful, however, prevention efforts may require the efforts of a range of professionals, including social policymakers, educators, judges, and legislators.

### Conclusion

Although considerable progress has been made in studying children's adaptation to divorce, much more work is needed to understand the processes that lead to mental health problems in children from divorced families. However, it is not possible to put off action until all the facts are in; there is a pressing need to implement interventions to help children despite incomplete knowledge. The urgency of the problem does not diminish the

need to devise and implement the interventions that are most optimal according to current knowledge. In evaluating current intervention approaches, we highlighted several ways to enhance our response to the problems. Perhaps the most important of these concerns a more complete realization of the scientist-practitioner ideal in which basic and applied work truly inform and enrich each other. Towards this end, our analysis has drawn equally from these two sources and attempts to show how this approach provides the best hope for both increasing our understanding of divorce and designing effective interventions.

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