

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL DIVORCE: Experiences of the Child in Later Latency

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This paper discusses the impact of divorce on 31 children in later latency, as observed shortly after the initial parental separation and one year later. The material is part of an on-going clinical study, begun in 1970, of 131 children and adolescents from 60 divorcing families in Northern California.

The child of latency age has somehow managed to escape the intensive psychological scrutiny with which his younger and older siblings have been regarded. Although no one has disputed the central significance of latency, which Erikson³ has characterized as "socially, a most decisive stage," much less is known or conceptualized regarding parent-child relationships during these middle years than of those developmental years which immediately precede or follow them. Moreover, relatively little attention has been devoted to the varying effects of disrupted or fixated development during latency. Although many school-age children come into therapy, the central focus is usually on

failure to resolve conflicts that stem from earlier developmental periods. Nor do we tend to learn much about latency from the treatment of adults; there is a relative unavailability of transferences and reconstructions pertaining to these years in most adult analyses. Bornstein² attributed the fact that "One learns relatively little about latency from the analysis of adults" to the distorted and idealized memories of adult patients who recall "the ideal of latency," namely, the successful warding-off of instinctual impulses during this time.

It is commonly agreed that the confluence of developmental and social forces propel the school-age child outward and away from the family towards

Presented at the 1975 annual meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, in Washington, D.C. Research was supported by a grant from the Zellerbach Fund of San Francisco.

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peer relationships and new adult figures. Clinicians have stressed^{1, 2, 5, 6, 8} the special importance of assuring developmental continuity during these years. Bornstein² specifically cautioned against environmental interruptions, referring to the importance of "free energies needed for character development," and observing that the latency child "fears nothing more than the upsetting of his precarious equilibrium." Erikson,^{3, 4} in addressing the fundamental tasks of this period, called attention to the lasting consequences of partial or total failure to successfully master these at their appropriate times. And Sarnoff,⁸ more recently, referring to the fragility of the newly-consolidated latency defenses, warned that the drives in latency "may be stirred into activity at any time by seduction or sympathetic stimulation."

It is within this context, stressing the overriding importance of developmental continuity during this life phase, that our understanding of the impact of parental divorce upon the child must be set. For divorce necessarily affects the freedom of the child to keep major attention riveted outside the family circle. Moreover, the decision to divorce frequently ushers in an extended several year period marked by uncertainty and sharp discontinuity which has the potential to move the psychological and social functioning of the latency child into profound disequilibrium and painfully altered parent-child relationships. Alternatively, these changes can bear the potential for promoting development and maturation, as well as the possibility of more gratifying relationships within the post-divorce family structure.

Our data for this paper are drawn from the sample already described,⁷ of 57 latency aged children from 47 fam-

ilies, here focused on the experiences of the 31 children from 28 families who were between nine and ten years old at the time that they were initially seen by us. As elaborated elsewhere,^{7, 9, 10} these 31 children from 28 families represent part of a cohort of 131 children from 60 divorcing families referred for anticipatory guidance and planning for their children around the separation, and then seen by us again approximately a year later for the first of two planned follow-up studies.

THE INITIAL RESPONSES

How They Looked When They Came

Many of these children had presence, poise, and courage when they came to their initial interviews. They perceived the realities of their families' disruption and the parental turbulence with a soberness and clarity which we at first found startling, particularly when compared with the younger children who so frequently appeared disorganized and immobilized by their worry and grief. These youngsters were, by contrast, actively struggling to master a host of intense conflicting feelings and fears and trying to give coherence and continuity to the baffling disorder which they now experienced in their lives.

Robert said, "I have to calm myself down. Everything is happening too fast."

Katherine told us that a long time ago, when she was little, she thought everything was fine, that her parents really loved each other, and that, "Nothing would happen to them until they got real, real old." She added with the fine perceptions of a latency age child, "Mom and Dad married 12½ years ago. They met 17½ years ago. I always thought love would last if they stayed together that long."

Some children came prepared with an agenda.

Anna, after a few general comments from the interviewer, designed to put her at ease, interrupted with a brisk, "Down to business," and went on immediately to describe the diffuse feelings of anxiety with which she suffered these days and which made her feel "sick to her stomach."

Mary volunteered that she was "so glad" her mother brought her to talk about the divorce because, "If I don't talk about it soon I'll fall apart."

For others the opportunity to be with a concerned adult had considerable significance seemingly unrelated to specific content. Some of these children tried in many ways to continue the relationship.

Janet begged to return the following week. She offered, "I like to talk about my troubles," and drew a heart on the blackboard, writing under it, "I like Miss X."

Mary tried to extend her interview time, saying that her mother had not yet returned to fetch her, and then confessing that she had just lied.

Still others among these children found these interviews threatening and painful, and barely kept their anxiety controlled by keeping themselves or their extremities in continual motion, the rhythm of which motion correlated with the subject discussed.

Thus, legs moved much faster when Daddy was mentioned to Jim, who was bravely trying to maintain his calm and referred with some disdain to "Mother's divorce problem," adding, "I wonder who she's got now?"

Others maintained their composure by denial and distancing.

Jack stated, "I keep my cool. It's difficult to know what I'm thinking."

David said darkly, "I don't try to think about it."

The Layering of Response

These various efforts to manage—by seeking coherence, by denial, by cour-

age, by bravado, by seeking support from others, by keeping in motion, by conscious avoidance—all emerged as age-available ways of coping with the profound underlying feelings of loss and rejection, of helplessness and loneliness that pervaded these children and that, in most of them, only gradually became visible within the context of the several successive interviews. Actually, testament to the resourcefulness of so many of these children is just this capacity to function simultaneously on these two widely discrepant levels, not always discernible to the outside observer. At times, only information from collateral sources revealed their simultaneous involvement in the mastery efforts of the coping stance and the succumbing to the anguish of their psychic pain. This at times conscious layering of psychological functioning is a specific finding in this age group. It is profoundly useful in muting and encapsulating the suffering, making it tolerable and enabling the child to move developmentally. But it does not overcome the hurt, which is still there and takes its toll.

After his father left the home, Bob sat for many hours sobbing in his darkened room. The father visited infrequently. When seen by our project, Bob offered smilingly, "I have a grand time on his visits," and added unsolicited and cheerily, "I see him enough." Only later would he shamefacedly admit that he missed his father intensely and longed to see him daily.

A few children were able to express their suffering more directly to their parents, as well as to us. This is the more poignant if one bears in mind Bornstein's² admonition that the latency child is *normally* engaged developmentally in a powerful battle against painful feelings.

Jane's father left his wife angrily after discovering her infidelity, and ceased visiting the children. He moved in with a woman who had children approximately the age of his own children. Jane cried on the telephone in speaking with her father "I want to see you. I want to see you. I miss you. Alice (referring to the child of the other woman) sees you every day. We only see you once a month. That's not enough."

A very few children succumbed more totally and regressively.

Paul responded to his father's departure by lying curled up sobbing inside a closet. He alternated this behavior, which lasted intermittently for several weeks, with telephone calls to his father, imploring him to return.

The suffering of these children was governed not only by the immediate pain of the family rupture, but expressed as well their grief over the loss of the family structure they had until then known, as well as their fears for the uncertain future that lay ahead for their newly-diminished family. In a sense, as compared with younger children, their more sophisticated and mature grasp of time and reality and history increased their comprehension of the meanings and consequences of divorce—while enabling some of them better to temper the impact.

Jim, when told by his parents of the plan to divorce, cried, "Why did you have to wait until we were so old?"

Finally, efforts to master inner distress were conjoined at times with efforts to conceal from the outside observer because of an acute sense of shame. Feelings of shame did not appear in the younger children in our study, but emerged specifically with this age group. These children were ashamed of the divorce and disruption in their family, despite their awareness of the common-

ness of divorce; they were ashamed of their parents and their behaviors, and they lied loyally to cover these up; and they were ashamed of the implied rejection of themselves in the father's departure, marking them, in their own eyes, as unlovable. Out of such a complex combination of wish to save face and loyalty to parents, some children lied bravely.

Jesse proudly told us that his physician father had insisted that all of his shots be in his left arm in order to protect his pitching arm. Actually, the father had evinced no interest whatsoever in Jesse's athletic career.

Attempted Mastery by Activity and by Play

Unlike the younger latency children, so many of whom were immobilized by the family disruption, the pain which the children in this age group suffered often galvanized them into organized activity. This was usually a multidetermined response geared to overcome their sense of powerlessness in the face of the divorce, to overcome their humiliation at the rejection which they experienced, and to actively—and as energetically as possible—reverse the passively suffered family disruption. In some, this was a direct effort to undo the parental separation.

Marian, with considerable encouragement at long distance from the paternal grandfather, embarked on a frenzied sequence of activities designed to intimidate her mother and force her to return to the marriage. Marian scolded, yelled, demanded, and berated her mother, often making it impossible for her mother to have dates, and indeed almost succeeding in reversing the divorce decision by mobilizing all her mother's guilt in relation to herself and the other children. In one such episode, the child screamed in anger for several hours and then came quietly and tearfully to her

mother, saying softly, "Mom, I'm so unhappy," confessing that she felt "all alone in the world." Following this, the harassment ceased.

Several children in this older latency group energetically developed a variety of new, exciting, and intrinsically pleasurable mastery activities which combined play action with reality adaptation. Many of these activities required not only fantasy production but the enterprise, organization, and skill of the later latency child.

Ann, whose father was a successful advertising and public relations man, designed and issued a magazine with articles and drawings, announcing the impending divorce of her parents, together with other interesting happenings, which she distributed and sold in her school and community.

In her role identification with her public media father, Ann not only overcame the loss of his ongoing presence, at the very same time, through her newspaper publication, she proclaimed her acceptance of the reality of this loss. But central to this maneuver is the psychic gratification in it—Ann transformed pain into the pleasure of achievement, and recaptured the center stage of interest.

Bill, for his part, spent many after school hours following the divorce in the office of his cold and disinterested father, answering the telephone, playing out the role of executive, and calling his mother regularly to tell her that he was having a grand time.

Elizabeth and her younger siblings found a seagull on the beach on the weekend following the parental separation and announcement of divorce. They spent several hours that day digging a grave, making a cross, marking the grave, and soberly writing the history of their activity on the plaque. One may presume that they were providing not only the seagull but also their pre-divorce family with a somber and appropriate funeral.

Anger

The single feeling that most clearly distinguished this group from all the younger children was their conscious intense anger. It had many sources, but clearly a major determinant was its role in temporarily obliterating or at least obscuring the other even more painful affective responses we have described. Although we have reported elsewhere¹⁰ a rise in aggression and irritability in the pre-school child following parental separation, the anger experienced by these older latency children was different in being both well organized and clearly object-directed; indeed, their capacity directly to articulate this anger was striking.

John volunteered that most of the families of the kids on his block were getting a divorce. When asked how the children felt, he said, "They're so angry they're almost going crazy."

Approximately half of the children in this group were angry at their mothers, the other half at their fathers, and a goodly number were angry at both. Many of the children were angry at the parent whom they thought initiated the divorce, and their perception of this was usually accurate.

Amy said she was angry at Mom for kicking Dad out and ruining their lives. "She's acting just like a college student, at age 31—dancing and dating and having to be with her friends."

Ben accused his mother, saying, "You told me it would be better after the divorce, and it isn't."

One adopted child screamed at his mother, "If you knew you were going to divorce, why did you adopt us?"

Interestingly, despite detailed and often very personal knowledge of the serious causes underlying the divorce decision,

including repeated scenes of violence between the parents, most of these children were unable at the time of the initial counseling to see any justification for the parental decision to divorce. (By follow-up, many had come more soberly to terms with this.) Although one father had held his wife on the floor and put bobbie pins in her nose while their two children cried and begged him to stop, both children initially strongly opposed the mother's decision to divorce.

For some, anger against the parents was wedded to a sense of moral indignation and outrage that the parent who had been correcting their conduct was behaving in what they considered to be an immoral and irresponsible fashion.

Mark said that "three days before my dad left he was telling me all these things about 'be good.' That hurt the most," he said, to think that his father did that and knew he was going to leave all the time.

This kind of moral stance in judgment upon parents is reminiscent of the attitudes we found frequently in the adolescent group,⁹ but not in the younger groups.

The intense anger of these children was variously expressed. Parents reported a rise in temper tantrums, in scolding, in diffuse demandingness, and in dictatorial attitudes. Sometimes the anger was expressed in organized crescendos to provide a calculated nuisance when the mother's dates arrived.

Shortly after the divorce, Joe's abusive, erratic, and rejecting father disappeared, leaving no address. The mother reported that now she had to ask the boy for permission to go out on dates, was reproached by him if she drank, and had her telephone calls monitored by him; when she bought something for her-

self, he screamingly demanded that the same amount of money be spent on him. Joe used his sessions with us primarily to express his anger at his mother for not purchasing a gun for him.

Adding to the dictatorial posturings and swaggering expressions that these children enjoyed playing out following the departure of their fathers was the fact that, in many of these households, the father had carried responsibility for a harsh and frightening discipline. His departure thus signaled a new freedom to express impulses that had been carefully held in check during his presence, a freedom to do so with impunity and with pleasure.

Mary said that she was scared of her father. He had always required that things be spic and span around the house. "In that way I'm glad he's gone," she said.

Many mothers were immobilized by their own conflicts, as well as by their unfamiliarity with the role of disciplinarian. Others indicated in covert ways that they fully expected that one of the children would assume the father's role within the family. For some of these children the taking on of such an aggressive stance clearly reflected an identification with the attributes of the departed father, and thus an undoing of the pain of his departure.

Anne congratulated her mother warmly on her decision to divorce her tyrannical husband. Shortly thereafter, however, Anne herself began to act out a commanding and screaming role vis-a-vis her mother and the younger children. This culminated in a dramatic episode of screaming for many hours when an uncle attempted to curb her wild behavior. She became very frightened after this, offering that all men were untrustworthy and that nobody would ever love her again.

Other children showed the obverse of

all this—namely, an increased compliance and decreased assertiveness following the divorce.

Janet's behavior shifted in the direction of becoming mother's helper and shadow, and showing unquestioning obedience to her mother's orders. She became known throughout the neighborhood as an excellent and reliable baby-sitter despite her very young age (nine years). She was, however, not able to say anything even mildly critical of her rejecting father, and was one of the few children who openly blamed herself for the divorce. When initially seen by us, she was preoccupied with her feelings of inadequacy and her low self-esteem.

Fears And Phobias

Unlike the pre-school children and the younger latency group, the children of this sample were not worried about actual starvation, and references to hunger in response to the parental separation were rare. Their fears, however, were nonetheless pervasive. Some, while not entirely realistic, were still tied to reality considerations; others approached phobic proportions. In fact, among this group it was often difficult for us to separate out the reality bases, including their sensitivity to the unspoken wishes of their parents, from the phobic elaboration. Thus, approximately one-quarter of these children were worried about being forgotten or abandoned by both parents.

John, in tears, said that his mother had left him at the doctor's office and didn't return on time. He cried, "She said that she was doing errands, but I know she was with her boyfriend."

Martha said to her mother, "If you don't love Daddy, maybe I'm next."

Some of their responses related to their

accurate perception of parental feelings that children represent an unwelcome burden at this time in their lives.

Peggy reported that her mother had said to her, "If you're not good I'm going to leave." Although Peggy knew that her mother had said this in anger, she still worried about it.

Ann opined, "If Daddy marries Mrs. S., she has two daughters of her own, and I'll be Cinderella."

Some expressed the not wholly unrealistic concern that reliance on one rather than two parents was considerably less secure, and therefore the child's position in the world had become more vulnerable.

Katherine told us, "If my mother smokes and gets cancer, where would I live?" She repeatedly begged her mother to stop smoking, and worried intensely whenever her mother was late in arriving home.

Some worried, not unrealistically, about emotionally ill parents.

Ann stated about her mother, "I love her very much, but I have feelings. I'm afraid when Mom takes a long time to come home. She once tried to commit suicide. One day she ate a whole bottle of pills. I think of someone dying . . . how I'll be when I'm alone. Mom tried to commit suicide because of my father. It wasn't until after the divorce that she stopped crying. I think of her jumping over the Golden Gate Bridge. Mom thinks no one worries about her, but I do."

Many of these children experienced the additional concern that their specific needs were likely to be overlooked or forgotten.

Wendy referred several times through her interviews to the fact that her mother insisted on buying Fig Newtons, when she perfectly well knew that Wendy hated them.

Responsibility For The Divorce

Only a few children expressed concern about having caused the divorce, although we endeavored in a variety of ways, including direct observations, play, and drawings, to elicit such material. We may, perhaps, cautiously infer from the fact that their occasional stealing occurred in situations where the child was assured of being caught, that there may exist some need for punishment relating to guilty fantasies. However, our direct evidence on this issue was limited to a few children in this later latency group, and appeared only in those children who showed a variety of other symptomatic behaviors in addition to the guilty thinking.

Lorraine, whose petty pilfering and lying and school difficulties were greatly exacerbated with the parental separation, said, "Whenever I think something is going to happen, it goes and happens. Like the time I thought my great-aunt was going to die, and then she died. And like the time I thought there was going to be a divorce." She wished that she could grow up and become a good witch, like Samantha.

Shaken Sense Of Identity

Many of these children experienced a sense of a shaken world in which the usual indicators had changed place or disappeared. For several children, these changed markers were particularly related to their sense of who they were and who they would become in the future. Critical to this new sense of stress is that during latency years the child's normal conception of his own identity is closely tied to the external family structure and developmentally dependent on the physical presence of parental figures—not only for nurture, protection, and control, but also for the con-

solidation of age appropriate identifications.^{3,7} Specifically, the self image and identity which in latency is still organized around, "I am the son of John and Mary Smith," is profoundly shaken by the severance of the parental relationship. Some children expressed this confusion and sense of ruptured identity with anxious questions, comparing physical characteristics of their parents and themselves, as if trying in this manner to reassemble the broken pieces into a whole.

Jack, unsolicited, volunteered a long discussion of his physical features. "My eyes change colors, just like my Mom's. My hair is going to change to light brown, just like my Dad's. Other people say I'm like my Dad. My Dad says I'm like my Mom. I say I'm like a combination."

Another aspect of this threat to the integrity of self which occurs at the time of divorce is posed more specifically to the socialization process and superego formation. The child feels that his conscience controls have been weakened by the family disruption, as the external supports give way and his anger at the parents moves strongly into consciousness. One manifestation of this may be new behaviors of petty stealing and lying which make their appearance in this age group around the time of family disruption. The threat the child perceives to his sense of being socialized is related, as well, to his concern of having to take care of himself; it was conveyed to us by Bob's moving story of his two rabbits.

Bob volunteered, "I think I want to talk to you today." He told about the two little rabbits he had bought several years ago and cared for in an elaborate high-rise hutch he had carefully constructed. One day, despite his protective watchfulness, vicious neighborhood dogs ripped the cage apart, and the rab-

bits disappeared or were dragged off. The two rabbits, whom he had named Ragged Ear and Grey Face, may have escaped, he thinks, because recently he came upon two rabbits playing in the woods. They were wild rabbits now, but they resembled the two he had lost.

The two rabbits of this rich fantasy may well have referred to the child and his brother, and his story may reflect his fear of the primitive angers (the vicious dogs) let loose at the time of divorce, his fear that he would be destroyed, and the projected rescue solution—via return to a presocialized wild state in which the child-equals-rabbit takes responsibility for his own care. Clearly, the little wild rabbits who survived had a different identity and a different superego formation than the rabbits who were cared for so lovingly in the elaborately built hutch.

Loneliness And Loyalty Conflicts

Children in this older latency group described their loneliness, their sense of having been left outside, and their sad recognition of their powerlessness and peripheral role in major family decisions.

Betty said, "We were sitting in the dark with candles. Then they (her parents) told us suddenly about the divorce. We didn't have anything to say, and so then we watched TV."

These feelings of loneliness, not observed in this way in the younger age groups, reflect not only the greater maturational achievement of these children but also their more grown-up expectation of mutuality, as well as reciprocal support, in their relationships with parents and other adults. They thus felt more hurt, humiliated, and pushed aside by the events visited upon them, over which they had so little leverage.

It should be noted that these children,

in their wrestling with this loneliness, realistically perceived the very real parental withdrawal of interest in children which so often occurs at the time of divorce. In addition to the departure of one parent, both parents understandably at such times become preoccupied with their own needs; their emotional availability, their attention span, and even the time spent with the children are often sharply reduced. Moreover, the families in our study were, by and large, nuclear families, unconnected to wider extended families or support systems of any enduring significance to the children. In this sense the children's feelings of loneliness and of loss reflected their realization that the central connecting structures they had known were dissolving.

Perhaps, however, the central ingredient in the loneliness and sense of isolation these children reported was related to their perception of the divorce as a battle between the parents, in which the child is called upon to take sides.⁷ By this logic, a step in the direction of the one parent was experienced by the child (and, of course, sometimes by the parent) as a betrayal of the other parent, likely to evoke real anger and further rejection, in addition to the intrapsychic conflicts mobilized. Thus, paralyzed by their own conflicting loyalties and the severe psychic or real penalties which attach to choice, many children refrained from choice and felt alone and desolate, with no place to turn for comfort or parenting. In a true sense, their conflict placed them in a solitary position at midpoint in the marital struggle.

Somatic Symptoms

Finally, one symptomatic response observed in this group, and not seen in

any younger group, was the report of a variety of somatic symptoms of different kinds and degrees of severity, such as headaches and stomach aches, which the children related to the parental conflict and parental visits.

Martha refused to visit her father, saying that after she visited him she returned with terrible headaches which lasted several hours.

Bobby had cramps in his legs, which he said were only relieved when his father massaged them.

Two of the children in this group who suffered with chronic asthma experienced intensified attacks, occurring more frequently.

Jack reported that, during his visits with his father, his asthma increased markedly; he added quickly, "My dad has nothing to do with my asthma."

CHANGES IN SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Since learning is a central developmental task of latency, it is important to note that, exactly comparable to our figures with the younger latency children, half of the 31 children in this older latency cohort also suffered a noticeable decline in school performance. Unlike the younger latency children,⁷ a concomitant deterioration in their peer relationships occurred in this group during and following the parental separation. There was no discernible correlation between prior school performance and the subsequent drop in school achievement, or between the degree of behavioral distress in the home setting and the falling-off in learning. Only one child showed considerable school improvement following the parental separation. This was in a divorce that involved the separation of the mother (and the children) from a seriously ill, manic-depressive husband.

The behavior of many of the children at school was at considerable variance with that displayed at home. Thus, some children who were feeling pressed and frightened at home began to act out a bossy, controlling, sometimes devious role at school.

Kay, a gentle girl at home, frightened about the loss of her mother and openly heart-broken by her real rejection by her father, was described by her teachers as a girl who "needs to be queen of the hill," and as "devious, lying, whining, pitting children against each other." Her school work slipped badly as these new social behaviors emerged.

Another school behavior pattern which emerged at the time of separation combined a decreased ability to concentrate in class with increased aggression on the playground.

Some children found the pressure of academic and social expectations at the time of divorce turmoil almost unbearable.

Jeff, a sober and mild mannered child whose parents were fighting angrily over custody of the children, on receiving an incomplete on his school paper, spurted out of class and ran pell mell across a nearby field, screaming all the way, "I won't do it."

Some children used the school to express what they could not say at home.

Elsie wrote a composition about a drunken man and his girlfriends, which had clear references to her father's behavior.

We have not been able thus far to distinguish the characteristics of those children who showed change in their school adjustment from those who showed no change at all. All but four of the 15 children whose learning declined at the time of the parental separation had resumed their previous educational and social achievement levels by the time of the one-year follow-up.

CHANGES IN PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

We turn now to a necessarily abbreviated discussion of some of the new parent-child configurations that emerged as a response to the marital strife and parental separation. These changed relationships constitute a significant component of the total response of children in this age group. The divorce-triggered changes in the parent-child relationship may propel the child forward into a variety of precocious, adolescent, or, more accurately, pseudoadolescent behaviors. They can, on the other hand, catalyze the development of true empathic responsiveness and increased responsibility in the child. And they can also result, as in the case of alignment with one parent against the other, in a lessening of the age-appropriate distance between parent and child and a retreat by the child along the individuation-separation axis of development.

Alignment

One of the attributes of the parent-child relationship at this particular age is the peculiar interdependence of parent and child, which can become enhanced at the time of the divorce, and which accords the child a significant role in restoring or further diminishing the self-esteem of the parent. Thus the child in late latency, by his attitude, his stance, and his behavior has independent power to hurt, to reject, to confront, to forgive, to comfort, and to affirm. He also has the capacity to be an unswervingly loyal friend, ally, and "team member," exceeding in reliability his sometimes more fickle and capricious adolescent sibling.

Among the 31 children in this cohort, eight (or 26%) formed a relationship

with one parent following the separation which was specifically aimed at the exclusion or active rejection of the other. These alignments were usually initiated and always fueled by the embattled parent, most often by the parent who felt aggrieved, deserted, exploited, or betrayed by the divorcing spouse. The angers which the parent and the child shared soon became the basis for complexly organized strategies aimed at hurting and harrasing the former spouse, sometimes with the intent of shaming him or her into returning to the marriage. More often the aim was vengeance. For many of these parents, these anger-driven campaigns served additionally to ward off depressions, and their intensity remained undiminished for a long time following parental separation. It should be noted that none of these children who participated, many of them as ingenious and mischievous allies, had previously rejected the parent who, subsequent to the alignment, became the target of their angers. Therefore, their provocative behavior was extremely painful and their rejection bewildering and humiliating to the excluded parent.

Our data indicate that, although the fight for allegiance may be initiated by the embattled parent, these alignments strike a responsive chord in the children within this specific age group. In fact, it is our suggestion that for children in late latency, the alignment with one parent against the other represents a highly complexly organized, over-determined, ego-syntonic coping behavior, which serves a diversity of psychological needs and keeps at bay a number of significant intrapsychic conflicts and their attendant anxieties. A central part of the dynamic of this behavior is the splitting of the ambivalent relationship to the parents

into that with the good parent and the bad parent. Moreover, in our findings, these alignments have the hurtful potential for consolidation and perpetuation long past the initial post-separation period, especially in those families where the child is aligned with the custodial parent.

Paul's father was referred to us informally by the court to which the father had gone to complain of his wife's vindictive blocking of his visits with his three children. The father, a successful chemical engineer, expressed sadness and longing for his children, and concern that his children were being systematically turned against him by their mother's unremitting attacks and falsehoods. For example, the children were told by the mother that they had to give up their dog because the father was refusing to purchase food for it, although at that time the family was receiving well over \$16,000 a year in support. Paul's mother expressed astonishment and bitterness at his father for the unilateral divorce decision, describing her many years of devoted love and hard work to support the father's graduate education. She coldly insisted that, as a devout Christian woman, she would never harbor anger. Yet she was convinced that, since the father had rejected both her and their three children, Paul would "never forgive his father, nor forget."

Paul's initial response to the parental separation was his regression to sobbing in a dark closet, which we have earlier described, alternating with telephone pleas to his father to return. Later, in recalling this time, the child said to us, "I felt that I was being torn into two pieces." By the time we saw Paul, several months following the separation, he had consolidated an unshakable alignment with his mother. He extolled her as small and powerful, possessed of ESP, and knowledgeable in six languages. Of his father, he stated, "He'll never find another family like us." He volunteered that he never wanted to visit his father—ever. In response to our efforts to elicit fantasy material, he said that he would like best to live on a desert island with his mother and siblings and have a very, very long telephone cord for speaking with his

father, and maybe a speedboat for visiting him.

Among Paul's activities during the year following our initial contact was his continuing reporting to his mother, and eventually to her attorney, about his father's "lurid" social life and presumed delinquencies, and his continued rejections of his father's increasingly desperate overtures, including gifts and wishes to maintain visitation. Paul also maintained a coercive control over his younger sisters, who were eager to see their father, and he made sure by his monitoring of them that they would not respond with affection in his presence. At follow-up he told us, "We are a team now. We used to have an extra guy, and he broke us up into little pieces." His anger and his mother's anger seemed undiminished at this time.

Empathy

Heightened empathic response to one or both distressed parents—and siblings—was catalyzed in several children as a specific consequence of the separation and the ensuing divorce.

With unusual insight, Anne described this process in *status nascendi*. She said, "I know that my mother isn't ready for the divorce, because I can put myself in her place. I can think just like I think my mother thinks."

Some youngsters were able to perceive their parents' needs with great sensitivity, and to respond with compassion and caring.

Mary told us, "My mom cried. She was so tired of being so strong for the children, and she asked us to sleep with her." Mary and her brother complied. "It made Mom feel better. Then we got up in the morning and made her breakfast in bed. Sometimes we just tell her, 'we are here, it's going to be all right.'"

We were interested to find that parents were often profoundly appreciative of this sensitivity and consideration.

Jane's mother told us that Jane was a wonderful child who wordlessly responded to the

mother's needs and feelings. "Whenever I feel alone in the evening she cuddles me," her mother said.

Some of these children, especially the little girls, worried about their fathers and were concerned about the particulars of where they were sleeping and eating.

Jane told us how much she worries about her father, that he works late, that he only has a couch to sleep on, and that he seems so "extra tired."

Sometimes the children took on responsibility for the younger children, as well as for themselves, and for important routines in the household. Many parents had no adult relationships to lean on, and they relied heavily on these children for emotional support and advice, as well as for practical help.

Sometimes empathic feelings were stimulated by unequal treatment of siblings by the departing parent.

Jack suddenly began to wheeze as he told us that his father had invited him, but not his sister, to live with him. He added that his father had sent him a Christmas card, signing it, "With all my love," but had only sent his sister a signed card. "I guess it made her feel pretty bad," he added sadly.

A few children were particularly sensitive to the changing moods and needs of their emotionally ill parent, and learned early to dissemble and protect what they understood to be the fragility of the parent's adjustment.

Jane stated as one of her problems that it was hard for her to be honest with her mother. Her mother kept asking questions about the father's relationship with his new girlfriends. She, Jane, could not tell her mother that her father and his girlfriend didn't fight, because "I'm scared that it will make her sad and cry." At follow-up, Jane solemnly told us, "Mom will probably marry, but she is not ready. She just got the divorce and wants to be settled. I think she has gone

through a lot of trouble and sadness and needs more time."

FOLLOW-UP AT ONE YEAR

A first follow-up on these youngsters took place a year after the initial consultation. By and large, as with the younger latency children, the turbulent responses to the divorce itself had mostly become muted with the passage of the intervening year. In about half the children (15 of the 29 available at follow-up) the disequilibrium created by the family disruption—the suffering; the sense of shame; the fears of being forgotten, lost, or actively abandoned; and the many intense worries associated with their new sense of vulnerability and dependence on a more fragile family structure—had almost entirely subsided. But even these children with apparent better outcomes, who seemed relatively content with their new family life and circle of friends, including step-parents, were not without backward glances of bitterness and nostalgia. In fact, the anger and hostility aroused around the divorce events lingered longer and more tenaciously than did any of the other affective responses. Of the total group, ten (or one-third) of the children maintained an unremitted anger directed at the non-custodial parent; of these, four did so in alignment with the custodial mother, the other six on their own.

Edward, who was doing splendidly in school and in new friendship relationships with his mother and with an admired male teacher, nonetheless said bitterly of his father, "I'm not going to speak to him any more. My dad is off my list now." (This was a father who, prior to the divorce, had had a very warm relationship with his son.)

Although some of these children who were doing well continued to harbor

reconciliation wishes, most had come to accept the divorce with sad finality. Some seemed to be unconsciously extrapolating from these reconciliation wishes to plan future careers as repairmen, as bridge builders, as architects, as lawyers. Others, like Jane, were perhaps extending their protective attitudes towards their disturbed parents.

Asked what she might like to do when she grows up, Jane responded, "You might laugh. A child psychiatrist. You're one, aren't you?" She talked movingly of working someday "with blind children, or mentally retarded children, or children who cannot speak."

By contrast, the other half (14 of the 29 seen at follow-up) gave evidence of consolidation into troubled and conflicted depressive behavior patterns, with, in half of these, *more* open distress and disturbance than at the initial visit. A significant component in this now chronic maladjustment was a continuing depression and low self-esteem, combined with frequent school and peer difficulties. One such child was described by his teacher at follow-up as, "A little old man who worries all the time and rarely laughs." In this group, symptoms that had emerged had generally persisted and even worsened. For instance, phobic reactions had in one instance worsened and spread; delinquent behavior such as truancy and petty thievery remained relatively unchanged; and some who had become isolated and withdrawn were even more so. One new behavior configuration that emerged during the first post-divorce year in these nine- and ten-year-olds was a precocious thrust into adolescent preoccupation with sexuality and assertiveness, with all the detrimental potential of such phase-inappropriate unfoldings. And amongst all the chil-

dren, both in the groups with better and with poorer outcomes, relatively few were able to maintain good relationships with both parents.

In a future report we shall present a fuller discussion of the many variables which seem to relate to this bimodal spread of outcomes for the post-divorce course of these children. Here we would like to close with the remarks of a ten-year-old sage from our study, whose words capture the salient mood of these children at the first follow-up—their clear-eyed perception of reality, their pragmatism, their courage, and their muted disappointment and sadness. In summarizing the entire scene, she said, "Knowing my parents, no one is going to change his mind. We'll just all have to get used to the situation and to them."

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