Students with divorced parents

College Aged Students with Divorced Parents: Facts and Fiction
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College Student Journal, 30, 1999 p. 542-573.

For more information on this topic consult Dr. Nielsen’s most recent book:

Statistical Realities

If the students on your college campus are representative of people their age nationwide, only 40% have parents who are still married to one another. Roughly 15% have parents who never married one another, 15% have a divorced mother who has not remarried, and about 25% have parents who divorced each other and remarried. Put differently, 40% of white, Asian, and Mexican American children and 75% of black and Puerto Rican American children have lived alone with their unmarried mother before their 18th birthday. And since 20% of black mothers and 80% of all other mothers marry again within 4 years of their divorce, roughly 10% of your black students and 25% of your other students probably have stepfathers. Today’s students, however, are not more likely to see their parents’ marriage end in divorce than students were 20 years ago because there has been a 10% decrease in divorces since 1980 (Coontz. 1997; Cherlin. 1992; Cherlin & Furstenberg. 1994).

In any event, given the makeup of most families today, those of us working with college students need to be able to separate fact from fiction regarding those whose parents are divorced. Indeed many of us might be operating under one of two assumptions: that these students are suffering from a host of fairly serious problems as a consequence of their parents divorce or, in contrast, that by time they reach college, children are no longer dealing with any issues related to their parents’ divorce. Neither, in fact, is true. So what are the realities for most college students with divorced parents? And what misunderstandings might we be operating under when interacting with these young adults?

The impact of divorce on college aged youth

Especially if we have not had first hand experience with divorce, we might jump to conclusions about the impact of divorce on children and without considering those factors that influence the outcomes. In trying to sort fact from fiction, we can start by examining our most current research in regard to these questions: If their mother remarries within a few years of their parents’ divorce, how do college aged children usually fare? And when their mother has not remarried are there different consequences? In general, what are the long lasting consequences of their parents’ divorce for college aged children - and what factors seem to make the most difference between the best and worst outcomes?


In other words, those teenagers and young adults who have had ongoing social, psychological, or academic problems since their parents’ divorce were almost always troubled in these ways while their parents were married as well. Although a troubled child’s behavior and disorders often do get worse when the parents divorce, a child’s ongoing problems are almost never caused by these changes in the family (Emery. 1994; Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan. 1995; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman. 1994; Zill. 1994). Interestingly too, college students with divorced parents are often better than their peers at appreciating and respecting other people’s perspectives and being empathic (Kogos & Snarey. 1995). Many of these young adults also seem to have developed more mature, more level-headed attitudes about love and marriage as a consequence of their parents divorce (Everett. 1993; Nielsen. 1993; Tasker & Richards. 1994).

The research does not show, however, that young adults are in no way affected by their parents’ divorce - or that the divorce has no long-lasting impact as long as their mother remarries. Let’s look first then at those young adults who are usually the worst off after their parents divorce: sons and the 15% whose mothers have not remarried after several years.
Sons Versus Daughters

In general sons suffer more negative consequences than do daughters after their parents divorce. To begin with, the son is more likely than the daughter to hear hostile, derogatory, comments about his father from his mother - which, in turn, often weakens the bond between father and son (Depner & Bray. 1993; Greene & Leslie. 1989; Kalter. 1990; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Thomas & Forehand. 1993; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992). As two such sons recall: "I wish there hadn’t been so many negative statements about my father when I was living with my mother. I wish she had allowed me to like my dad without guilt" (Berman, 1992, p. 102). "I remember I hurt my dad over and over again. I think I did it because mom filled me with so many ideas that he was a bad person. I feel so sorry about that now" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 193). At least one nationally renown expert on the research concludes that: “A mother’s negative opinion of her former spouse, if conveyed to her son, can do more harm to his gender identification and his self esteem than can the lack of contact with his father. Rarely does a boy hold a negative opinion of his father without holding the same opinion of himself” (Warshak, 1992, p. 163 & 167). In other words, when the father and son do not maintain their relationship after the parents divorce, the son is much more likely to develop serious social, sexual, emotional, or psychological problems (Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Kalter. 1990; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein. 1991).

A son is also more likely than a daughter to become overly involved with his mother in ways that hurt his relationship with his father and that hurt his own social and psychological development outside the family - especially when his mother has not remarried (Corneau. 1991; Emery. 1994; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Hetherington. 1991; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Kalter. 1990; Wallerstein. 1991). The son too often gets turned into his mother’s confidant, protector, and help-mate. And in too many cases, the son idealizes his mother to such an extent that he refuses to acknowledge any of her shortcomings or any of his father’s strengths. Some young college educated men whose mothers are alcoholic or clinically depressed even refuse to let their own therapist discuss their mothers: Say what you want about me, my father, my sister or my brother, but whatever you do, don’t talk about my mother. Therapists have long recognized that both sons and daughters must stop idealizing their mother and stop denying painful truths about her before they can have a good relationship with their father or develop a fuller understanding of their parents divorce (Ackerman. 1996; Berman. 1992; Block. 1996; Gergen. 1992; Gottlieb. 1995; Main. 1993; Marcia. 1994; Miller. 1994; Scarf. 1995; Schatman & Schinke. 1993). For example, in a study of 400 young men - most of whom were college graduates - those who had the most trouble relating to people and who were extremely angry people seldom had a close relationship with their father, but usually had an extremely close relationship with their mother- almost as if the two were married to one another emotionally (Ackerman. 1996). In short, when the mother and son are too involved with and dependent on each other, it is especially difficult, if not impossible, for the father and son to remain close (Guttman. 1993; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Kalter. 1990; Parke. 1996; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992). Sadly too, the son often seems to be the most negatively affected by the divorced mother’s bad moods, depression, and conflicts with the father (Capaldi, Forgatch, & Crosby. 1994; Colten, Gore, & Aseltine. 1991; Emery. 1994; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Wallerstein. 1991). And sons are the most likely to get dragged into the conflicts between their parents after a divorce (Capaldi, Forgatch, & Crosby. 1994; Colten, Gore, & Aseltine. 1991; Emery. 1994; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Robins & Rutter. 1990).

Finally sons have more psychological, emotional, and social problems than daughters even while their parents are still married. And many of these problems are related to the son and mother being too dependent on and involved with one another and the son and father being too uninvolved (Ebata, Petersen, & Conger. 1990; Robins & Rutter. 1990; Rolf & others. 1993; Seligman. 1991). In these families then the son’s problems often do get worse after his parents divorce, especially if his mother does not remarry (Biller. 1993; Corneau. 1991; Ebata, Petersen, & Conger. 1990; Pittman. 1993; Guttman. 1993; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Pittman. 1993; Parke. 1996). And in these families the mother is more likely than the father to tolerate, excuse, and cave in to the son’s disturbed, infantile, or aggressive behavior. So when these parents divorce the troubled son often withdraws even further from his father and seeks even greater refuge and unhealthy involvement with his mother (Berman. 1992; Corneau. 1991; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington. 1991; Pittman. 1993).

For all of these reasons then, you are more likely to find male than female students who have ongoing problems after their parents divorce in terms of social maturity, academic and vocational achievements, peer relationships, sexuality, dating, substance abuse, and mental health (Biller. 1993; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Booth & Dunn. 1994; Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Kalter. 1990; Lansdale, Cherlin,
Divorced mothers who have not remarried

On the other hand, both sons and daughters are usually at a disadvantage when their mother does not remarry within a few years of the divorce. These young people run a higher risk of developing emotional, psychological, social, and academic problems as the years pass after their parents divorce. Compared to the 80% whose mothers have remarried, these sons and daughters tend to have poorer grades, lower career aspirations, less self-confidence, less self-discipline, less social maturity, and more problems related to depression, anxiety disorders, and dependent personality disorders. They also tend to have more trouble becoming self-reliant, setting and achieving goals, and establishing intimate, ongoing relationships. For example, in a 10 year study of 12,500 British and Americans, at the age of 23 those whose mothers had not remarried were the worst off in terms of their mental health, past grades, and social development - with sons being far worse off than daughters (Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan. 1995). This is not to say that all children whose mothers have not remarried are going to have these kinds of problems - or that children whose mothers remarry never have such problems. But the odds of developing such problems are greater when their mother has not remarried (Ambert. 1996; Bassoff. 1994; Beer. 1992; Berman. 1992; Block. 1996; Brooks-Gunn. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Caplan. 1990; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Dreman & Aldor. 1994; Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Gutman. 1993; Hanson, Helms, Julian, & Sussman. 1994; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan. 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Studer. 1993; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992; Weiss. 1994; Zaslow. 1989; Zill. 1994).

But why? And what is special about those single mothers whose children do not develop these kinds of problems? While the answers clearly differ depending on each particular mother and child, these factors seem to be the most important: the mother’s standard of living, her parenting style, her mental and emotional well-being, and her self-reliance.

First, the mother and children are almost always better off financially after she remarries. In fact, the family’s standard of living usually jumps at least to where it would have been if the parents had never divorced (Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994). For example, among nearly 500 19 to 22 year-olds, most never asked their mother for any money if she had not remarried, but they did ask if she had remarried (Amato, Rezac, & Booth. 1995). Moreover, children not only benefit from seeing their mother happier in her personal life and less worried about financial matters, they also benefit from having such things as better housing, better neighborhoods, better education, and more adult supervision.

Second, compared to mothers who remarry, single mothers usually don’t do as well disciplining and supervising their children - especially teenagers and sons. Too many single mothers abdicate too much power and control to their children, allowing them to rule the roost and do pretty much as they please. As a consequence, these children often fail to develop as much self-control, self-motivation, self-reliance, and self-direction as people their age whose mothers have remarried. In school and at work these young people often have the most trouble yielding to and respecting people in authority, setting and reaching goals on their own, and accepting criticism from their teachers or employers. Having lived with a single parent who allowed the children to have too much power, these young people often end up less socially mature, less self-reliant, less self-disciplined, and less psychologically well-adjusted than those living with a married mother (Blau. 1994; Brooks-Gunn. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Depner & Bray. 1993; Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Loquist. 1994; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion. 1992; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992; Weiss. 1994).

This is not especially surprising, however, since it is often the father who is primarily responsible for setting the limits, developing self-discipline and self-reliance, and disciplining the children in married families (Andrews & Dishion. 1994; Caron. 1995a; Hauser, Powers, & Noam. 1991; Hosley & Montemayor. 1997; Lamb. 1997; Larson. 1993; Montemayor, McKenry, & Julian. 1993; Parke. 1996; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion. 1992; Shulman & Klein. 1993; Snarey. 1993; Welsh & Powers. 1991). It’s especially important to note that even very well-educated mothers are often too lax in supervising, disciplining, and setting limits as single parents (Beer. 1992; Huntley. 1995; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Depner & Bray. 1993; Hetherington. 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Loquist. 1994; Pipher. 1994; Todorski. 1995; Wallerstein. 1991). And regardless of her income or education, the woman who did not have a loving relationship with her own parents is the most likely to be too lax in setting

This certainly isn’t to say that every young person who lives with a single mother has been given too much power over her. In fact, whichever parent feels the guiltiest about the divorce is often the one who does the worst job when it comes to setting limits, saying “no” to, or disciplining the children (Ahrons. 1994; Berman. 1992; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Gottlieb. 1995; Warshak. 1992). And whichever parent is extremely guilt-ridden after divorce often refuses to set limits, to discipline, or to seek professional help for a deeply troubled, undisciplined child - perhaps because that parent does not want to admit that the divorce for which they feel so guilty did indeed make that child’s longstanding problems worse (Ambert. 1996; Brockner, Wiesenfeld, & Raskas. 1993; Dremen & Aldor. 1994; Harder. 1992; Lerner. 1993; Lengua, Wolchik, & Braver. 1995; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Warshak. 1992).

Mental Well-being Third, those mothers who have not remarried within several years of their divorce are the most likely to be clinically depressed or to be profoundly unhappy people who are chronically dissatisfied with their lives. Unfortunately a mother’s depression or chronic unhappiness often has a negative impact on her sons and daughters. Why?

To begin with, a depressed mother often relates to her children in ways that interfere with their social and psychological development. The depressed mother not only tends to be overly dependent on her children, but to be too lax in supervising, helping, and disciplining them. These children are thus more likely to become depressed themselves, to develop anxiety disorders, and to have ongoing problems in their own social, sexual, and emotional lives that stem from having invested too much of themselves worrying about and taking care of their unhappy mother (Ahrons. 1994; Ambert. 1996; Bassoff. 1994; Caplan. 1990; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Downey & Coyne. 1990; Emery. 1994; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell. 1993; Gottlieb. 1995; Hetherington. 1991; Parke & Ladd. 1992; Pittman. 1993; Wallerstein. 1991). Although a depressed mother usually relates to her children in these same ways whether she is married or not, having a father or stepfather living in the home often seems to lessen her negative impact on the children (Ainsworth & Eichberg. 1991; Bassoff. 1994; Caplan. 1990; Dadds. 1994; Downey & Coyne. 1990; Harrington. 1994; Karen. 1994; Miller. 1994; Parke. 1996; Seligman. 1991; Tannenbaum & Forehand. 1994). But after the parents divorce, these children often feel even more responsibility for protecting, taking care of, and creating happiness for their depressed mother. Not surprisingly then these young people often have the hardest time creating a life separate from their mother and maintaining a close relationship with their father after their parents divorce (Ahrons. 1994; Bassoff. 1994; Gottlieb. 1995; Harrington. 1994; Hetherington. 1991; Miller. 1994; Pittman. 1993; Scarf. 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989)

Young adults with depressed, unmarried mothers describe their situations in many ways. “My mother still says she could not possibly go on without me” (Ahrons, 1994, p. 157). “As soon as I come home to mother, I feel an enormous tiredness take me over. When I left for college I felt awful and guilty for abandoning her” (Bassoff, 1994, p. 34). “I had been my mother’s protector for so long that when the time came for me to go to college, I was afraid she wouldn’t be able to make it. I still feel guilty about that” (Caplan, 1990, p. 196). “My mom was very absorbed in her own emotional problems, so I was parentified at a young age - always feeling responsible for my mom and always worrying about her” (Mo-yee, 1995, p. 63). “I’d always been invested in listening to and sympathizing with my mom. It was almost as if I’d been her loving parent and dreaming of a time when she would be fully grown up, married, and living happily ever after” (Scarf, 1995, p. 299). “I felt guilty all the time - guilty because I was angry with mom for needing me so much - guilty for wanting more time with my dad” (Maine, 1993, p. 116). “She didn’t want me to grow up and leave her. I felt a special responsibility for her” (Pittman, 1993, p.150). “Finally before my 30th birthday I got up the courage to ask my mother to turn to someone else with her problems and to stop being married to me” (Berman, 1992, p.130).

Self-Reliance and Resilience But even if she is not depressed or chronically unhappy, the mother who has not remarried is often too dependent on and too involved with her children. Without meaning to do harm, the mother often turns her children into her counselors, best friends, or confidantes - unintentionally encouraging them to pity her, to shoulder too much responsibility for solving her problems, and to provide the emotional intimacy no adult is providing her. Sadly these children and their mother end up too involved in one another’s lives. This not only makes it difficult for the children and their father to maintain a close relationship, but for children to become self-reliant and to create intimate relationships with people their own age. Some of these young adults and their mothers have become so intertwined that they have fallen into the unhealthy condition referred to as enmeshment - reacting and reasoning almost as if they were one person in two separate bodies (Amato, Rezac, & Booth. 1995; Ambert.
Even though many young people who are overly involved or enmeshed with their mother are angry at her for reasons having to do with the divorce, they still tend to side with her against their father - sometimes rejecting him altogether. In other words, the children's relationship with their father often suffers when their mother is so emotionally needy and so dependent that the children feel that they have to protect, to pity, and to take care of her. (Ackerman. 1996; Ahrons.1994; Alexander. 1994; Bassoff. 1994; Berman. 1992; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Caron. 1995a; Caron. 1995b; Depner & Bray. 1993; Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Pittman. 1993; Scarf. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Todorski. 1995; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992; Weiss. 1994).

When young adults and their mothers are overly dependent or psychologically enmeshed with one another, factors other than the parents' divorce are usually responsible. For example, if the mother did not have a loving, secure relationship with her own parents, she tends to be too dependent on and overly involved with her own children. In other cases the mother is not able to be emotionally intimate with a man and relies instead on her children to meet the emotional needs that another adult should be providing. (Ainsworth & Eichberg. 1991; Caplan. 1990; Karen. 1994; Main. 1993; Miller. 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Smeroff & Emde. 1989; Scarf. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Todorski. 1995). Then too, when a child has had a chronic illness such as asthma or epilepsy throughout childhood, that child and the mother are apt to be enmeshed and entwined in each other's lives (Ambert. 1996; Cohen. 1990; Dadds. 1994; Garrison & McQuiston. 1990; Miller & Wood. 1991; Minuchin. 1995; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Sholevar & Perkel. 1990).

Of course not every young adult whose divorced mother has not remarried is enmeshed or overly involved with her. And many of their mothers are not depressed, chronically unhappy, overly dependent, or too lax in setting limits, disciplining, and supervising their children - not even their teenage sons. In turn, these young adults are not likely to have developed the kinds of problems linked to living with a divorced mother who has not remarried (Alexander. 1994; Bassoff. 1994; Caron. 1995b; Dremen & Aldor. 1994; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell. 1993; Hanson, Helms, Julian, & Sussman. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Pipher. 1994; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994).

**Emotional and Sexual Intimacy** Some mothers who do not remarry within a few years of their divorce also have problems in regard to sexuality and to emotional intimacy. In such cases her children may be more likely to develop similar types of problems themselves. When their mother is too uncomfortable with or too disinterested in her own sexuality or an intimate relationship of her own, she might inadvertently discourage her own children from enjoying and developing these aspects of their own lives. It is not so much that their mother says negative things about sex or intimacy, as it is the obvious absence of romance, intimacy, and sexuality in her own life. For example, if children seldom or never see their mother being physically affectionate with a man or opening enjoying some romance and intimacy in her own life, it may be hard to feel comfortable with the romantic, sexual dimensions of their own lives. Or if their mother acts as if she never has any sexual or romantic needs or as if these aspects of life are unimportant, shameful, or embarrassing, then her children may eventually adopt these same feelings and attitudes. Sadly, too many of these sons and daughters end up having trouble dating, establishing intimate relationships, or feeling comfortable with their own sexuality. In some cases, for example, these daughters continue to dress in very boyish or little girlish clothes, rather than dressing in more sexual, mature ways like other young women their age. And even as adults, too many of these sons are so ill prepared in terms of sex and emotional intimacy that they rarely date and cling to very childish fantasies about what love and relationships are supposed to be. As several adult children put it: “I wish my mom would get the feel of sexuality’s being a part of life. It’s not just sex. It’s how we feel and relate to other people on levels of physical and emotional intimacy” (Gottlieb,1995, p.116). “I can’t recall ever seeing my parents kiss or hug. So when my dad got married, I couldn’t help notice the way he and Peggy were around each other. Being around them was the best thing that could have happened to me” (Berman, 1992, p. 177). In short, without needing explicit details, children benefit when they know that sexual desire and an emotionally intimate relationship are vital parts of their mother’s life (Ambert. 1996; Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman. 1993; Bassoff. 1994; Caron. 1995a; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Flaake. 1993; Glickman. 1993; Gottlieb. 1995; Hirschmann & Munter. 1995; Mens-Verhulst, Schreurs, & Woertman. 1993; Steinberg & Steinberg. 1994; Tolman. 1991; Warshak. 1992).
Compared to 1970, more parents live with someone for a while after their divorce without being married. And roughly 15% of these couples do not end up marrying each other (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Furstenberg, 1994). As a result, a growing number of teenage and young adult children have a parent who is living with someone that they eventually will probably marry. Given that most college aged children have had sex themselves without being married, we might assume that they wouldn’t care much one way or the other if their divorced parents were living with someone without being married. Interestingly though, even young adults can feel uncomfortable, unsettled, or embarrassed when their mother has a boyfriend for many years without marrying him. And very few children consider their mother’s long-term boyfriend the equivalent of a stepfather. It also seems that teenagers disapprove more of their mother’s having a long-term or live-in boyfriend than of their father’s having this type of relationship (Ahrons. 1994; Blankenhorn. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994). Then too, when their mother still hasn’t married her long-term boyfriend, she may still be emotionally attached to their father or may be too enmeshed and dependent on her children (Beer. 1992; Blau. 1994; Dozier. 1993). On the other hand, if their mother and her boyfriend have an emotionally intimate, fulfilling, joyful relationship, then the children are usually spared the burden of “taking care of mom” - which, for reasons already noted, is good news (Ahrons. 1994; Blau. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Guttman. 1993).

Relationships with fathers

While the good news is that young people whose mothers remarry generally do not end up badly in terms of their grades, achievements, self-esteem, peer relationships, self-reliance, sexuality, or mental health, the bad news is that they usually do end up worse off in terms of their relationships with their fathers. After a divorce most children and their fathers are not able to maintain a close relationship as the years pass. By time most of these children are young adults, they often have little or no emotional intimacy left with their father. When they do talk, write, or get together - which is not often - too many of these fathers and their young adult children feel uncomfortable and emotionally distant. Their relationship has often dwindled into a fairly superficial one - more like a distant uncle who knows as little about the children’s present lives as they know about his. Usually there is not animosity or resentment as much as indifference, awkwardness, and an underlying anxiety about what to say or do around each other. But for other young adults and their fathers, the lingering animosity and pain related to the parents’ divorce continues to drive a wedge between them. Generally these young adults and their fathers have drifted apart due to reasons related to: their mother’s feelings and behavior after the divorce, money, beliefs about why the marriage ended, beliefs about which parents has suffered most emotionally, legal barriers, and differences in parenting styles (Ackerman. 1996; Ahrons. 1994; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Berman. 1992; Blankenhorn. 1994; Blau. 1994; Braver. 1993; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Cooney & Uhlenberg. 1990; Corneau. 1991; Depner & Bray. 1993; Dudley. 1991; Emery. 1994; Esposito. 1995; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Gonzalez. 1995; Greif. 1995; Greif & Kristall. 1993; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; Hoffman. 1995; Hoffman & Ledford. 1995; Kalter. 1990; Kruk. 1991; Lamb. 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; Mandell. 1995; Munsch, Woodward, & Darling. 1995; Nielsen. 1999 b; Parke. 1996; Pruitt. 1992; Schatman & Schinke. 1993; Secunda. 1992; Seltzer & Brandreth. 1994; Simons. 1996; Stephen, Freedman, & Hess. 1993; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992).

Mother’s Attitudes and Behavior Even as young adults, children can still be unaware of how much their mother has influenced the kind of relationship they have had with their father since the divorce. Many young adults might be surprised to learn that fathers and children usually remain close only if the mother actively encourages and facilitates their relationship. So for example, among 220 college students, the mother was usually the “gatekeeper” in that she ultimately determined the type of relationship they had with their father after the parents divorced (Hoffman & Ledford. 1995). This is not to say that mothers always recognize how much power they have in this regard or that most intentionally set out to harm anyone. And this is not to say that some fathers don’t abandon their children no matter how hard the mother works to keep these relationships alive. But the sad reality is that too many children end up with little or no relationship with their fathers in large part because their mother has not supported it. Sadly and ironically, the children may not actually see or always be able to recognize the ways in which this is happening. But the mother’s influence typically comes across in the messages she sends about: their father’s value and skills as a parent, the way their father treats her and them financially, and their father’s remarriage.

Some young people of course are fortunate enough to have mothers who have been very supportive of the father’s relationship. In general mothers who have always worked full time outside the home are the most willing to give the father credit for being a good parent (Gigy & Kelly. 1992; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; Pleck. 1997). And the mother who had loving, close relationship with her own father and mother tends to be the most positive about her
husband’s or ex husband’s skills as a parent (Caplan. 1990; Pleck. 1997; Sameroff & Emde. 1989; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Todorski. 1995). Likewise, women who have always believed that fathers and mothers are equally important and equally talented in raising children tend to be the least critical of their children’s father (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Blakely. 1994; Depner, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Glickman. 1993; Pleck. 1997; Reddy, Roth, & Sheldon. 1994). Even so, women are generally not as likely as men to give the other credit for what they actually do in raising the children - which then means that too many young adults have gotten too negative a picture of their father as a parent (Clingempeel, Colyar, & Hetherington. 1994; Cohen. 1994; Deutsch. 1993; Teachman. 1991).

By time they become young adults, however, some children are finally been able to see how much their relationship with their father has been influenced by their mother: "I wish my mother had allowed me to like my father without guilt and that she hadn't made so many negative comments about him" (Berman, 1992, p. 102). "Her tearing down of my father made me obsessed with finding him. When at 18 I did, I learned that there was a positive side to him that my mother had never told us about" (Einstein, 1994, p. 89). "I remember I hurt my dad over and over again because mom filled me with so many ideas that he was a bad person" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 193). “I was made to believe that my mom was the competent parent and my father was nothing but a buffoon” (Bassoff, 1994, p. 106). Others may also see how their father was made to look as if he was not sensitive, compassionate or fair-minded by repeatedly hearing such comments as: "Don't let your dad find out about this because he'll get mad." "It’s better that we don’t tell you dad because you know how he is." Over time, withholding information and portraying the father in these ways can lower the children’s opinion of their father or weaken their bonds with him (Black. 1993; Lerner. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Osherson. 1986; Scarf. 1995). As one commentator put it, many men who are accused of being “deadbeat dads” are in fact “beat-dead dads” whose former wives have dead-bolted the kids’ hearts against them (Sheehy. 1998).

Money Given all the media coverage of “deadbeat dads”, we might easily jump to the conclusion that most fathers relationships with their children are strained because the father has failed to pay child support. In fact, however, 75% of divorced fathers are fully meeting their financial obligations to their children. Four million fathers are paying 12 billion dollars a year in child support. Moreover, those divorced men with the highest incomes are usually paying for most, if not all, of their children’s expenses - especially when the mother did not work full time outside the home throughout their marriage (Arditi, Artlip, & Saltzman. 1993; Farrell. 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; Sheehy. 1998). And when the mother grants the father some voice in how his child support money is being spent, the father rarely fails to pay and often pays more than is legally required of him (Arditi. 1992; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Blau. 1994; Dudley. 1991; Kelley. 1995; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; Mandell. 1995; Nielsen. 1999 a&b. Parke. 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist. 1994; Seltzer & Brandreth. 1994; Teachman. 1991).

In other words, when you meet a child whose father did not pay child support, odds are that the father is a poorly educated man with very low or no income. And many of these fathers and mothers have never been married to each other (Arditi. 1992; Pettys. 1993). This isn’t to say that just because a man is poor or has never been married he should be forgiven for abandoning his children financially. On the other hand, we might wonder why poor fathers are legally required to pay child support while poor mothers are not required to pay anything when the children live full-time with the father (Meyer & Garasky. 1993). Then too, some young adults have fathers who eventually stopped sending child support to the mother because the children ended up living with him for at least a third of the year - during which time he paid all of their expenses (Mandell. 1995). In any case, official government statistics underestimate how much money most fathers actually provide because only court-ordered child support is documented and because the money that fathers give voluntarily above those amounts are not recorded at all (Arditi. 1992; Cohen. 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; Teachman. 1991). Many children may also not realize that their father ended up paying far more in child support than he would have spent on the family if he and their mother were still married (Bender & Brannon. 1994).

We might also assume that many young adults have rightfully grown to resent their father because he has been so well off financially compared to them and their mother since the divorce. Generally however this isn’t true. Most mothers lose about 20%-25% of the income they had access to before their divorce, while most fathers lose 10%-20% (Stroup & Pollock. 1994). Also 80% of women remarry within a few years and regain a standard of living at least equal to what they had before their divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994). In contrast, most divorced men who remarry do not regain their former standard of living and can not provide their new family with as much as they gave their former wife and children (Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman. 1993; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Ganong & Coleman. 1994) Yet despite these realities, too many children still seem to be harboring
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some resentment towards their father because they wrongly assume that he “got everything” while they and their mother “got nothing” after the divorce.

Moreover, even college aged children can continue to have selfish, childish ideas about what their father owes them financially. For example, they might measure their father’s love almost exclusively by how much he gives them financially. Or they may never have told their father how much they appreciate the financial sacrifices he has made for them. Indeed, many fathers who pay for things that legally are supposed to be purchased with his child support money seldom get any thanks for being so unselfish and generous - either from their children or their ex-wife (Cohen. 1994; Teachman. 1991). More distressing still, some young adults who have refused to have anything to do with their father since their parents divorce believe he is “mean” and “selfish” when he refuses to send money beyond the required child support for such things as college, cars, and weddings (Ambert. 1996; Beer. 1992; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Einstein. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; White. 1994). It’s also worth noting that after their parents divorce, young adults whose father has a good income tend to stay in touch with him more than those whose father does not have money to give them - a finding which could suggest that money might indeed play a role in some young adults’ interests in their father (Cooney & Uhlenberg. 1990). In short, even fathers with well-educated young adults children have said such things as: “My kids don't even call me dad. They don't want me to be any part of their life. They just want my money” (Mandell, 1995, p. 111). "I feel like I'm just a wallet, you know, help pay the bills but not good for much else with my kids” (Osherson, 1995, p. 253). And many divorced fathers end up sadly wondering: How much would my kids have to do with me if I wasn’t giving them this extra money? Why is it that no matter how much I do for them financially, they never feel it’s enough and they rarely thank me? Why do they ask so little from their mother financially when they expect so much from me?

Finally, even as young adults, some children still do not understand that how their mother feels about financial matters since the divorce affects their opinions of their father. Note that the important word is feels. What matters most is not how much money the father has actually sent or how much money the mother herself earns. What matters most is how their mother feels about her financial situation. Even in cases where the mother has been well treated financially and is a well educated woman with a good income of her own, children can still receive damaging messages such as: “I don’t know why your dad expects me to help pay for your college expenses when he makes more money than I do.” “If it weren’t for being married to your dad, I’d have a better job now.” “I just can’t afford to eat out or have vacations like your dad does”. This doesn’t mean that all mothers cast the father in a bad light in regard to money. It does mean, though, that many young adults have received the message that their father mistreated them or their mother financially in cases where this isn’t true (Ahrons. 1994; Aydintug. 1995a; Beer. 1992; Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Cohen. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Einstein. 1994; Guttman. 1993; Hoffman. 1995; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Martin & Martin. 1992; Nielsen a& b;Warshak. 1992).

Adultery Young people’s relationships with their fathers can also be hurt by making the wrong assumptions about why their parents got divorced - specifically, by assuming that their father caused the divorce by being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman. Even adult children might be surprised to learn that women in our country are just about as likely as men to commit adultery and are being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman. Even adult children might be surprised to learn that women in our country are just about as likely to commit adultery and are being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman. Even adult children might be surprised to learn that women in our country are just about as likely to commit adultery and are being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman. Even adult children might be surprised to learn that women in our country are just about as likely to commit adultery and are being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman. Even adult children might be surprised to learn that women in our country are just about as likely to commit adultery and are being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman. Even adult children might be surprised to learn that women in our country are just about as likely to commit adultery and are being unfaithful or by falling in love with another woman.

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Ironically, the way their parents behaved after their divorce might lead children to the wrong beliefs about who in fact was the unfaithful spouse. That is, children seldom realize that whichever parent was unfaithful or fell in love with someone else is the one who usually acts the saddest, wants to reconcile, and has the most trouble adjusting after the divorce. So, for example, if their mother left the marriage for another man, she is usually much more interested in getting back together again than their father is. Yet through the eyes of a child, it seems as though their father is the “mean” or “unloving” person because he isn’t interested in getting back together with their mother. And in these cases children can hold their father responsible for their mother’s ongoing sorrow and ambivalence after their divorce (Aydintug. 1995b; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Emery. 1994; Gigy & Kelly. 1992; Guttman. 1993; Kitson & Holmes. 1992; Pledge. 1992; Vaughan. 1990). Sadly, even as adults, many children are unwilling to accept the fact that it was their mother who was the unfaithful one and their father who was to be pitied (Ahrons. 1994; Berman. 1992; Black. 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson. 1993).
We might well ask then: why do so many children might assume that is was their father who was unfaithful or disloyal? In part this might happen because our society still commonly portrays mothers as being far more virtuous, more self-controlled, and more self-sacrificing than fathers when it comes to sexual matters. This, in turn, might make it easier for children to assume that fathers are generally the “bad guys” when it comes to sexual betrayal (Blankenhorn. 1994; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Mens-Verhulst, Schreurs, & Woertman. 1993; Thurer. 1994; Tolman. 1991). Many of us also seem to be the most forgiving and most understanding when it is the woman who commits adultery. That is, when a woman commits adultery, we are more likely to tell ourselves that she “couldn’t help it” because she was so lonely or so misunderstood by her husband. In contrast, when a man cheats, we tend to condemn him for being a selfish, insensitive cad - driven merely by physical lust, not by love or loneliness (Pittman. 1990; Ripps. 1994; Roiphe. 1997). And, as we’ll see shortly, after a divorce the mother usually has the most power to influence what the children remember about the past. So even when she did betray their father, she may often succeed in erasing the children’s suspicions about her past behavior with the “other man” and in portraying herself as a sexually virtuous person.

**Father’s versus Mother’s Emotional Suffering**   
Along the same lines, some young adults have assumed for years that their father did not suffer emotionally as their mother did after their divorce. Given that children almost always live with their mother after divorce, they are in a better position to witness her unhappiness and distress. Then too, our society generally portrays women as the ones who suffer the most emotionally when relationships end - hence, our stereotypes about divorced fathers as carefree “swinging bachelor”. Most men are also more reluctant to show their sadness and depression openly. Even among college students then, many would be surprised to learn that men are more likely than women to become depressed, commit suicide, and develop stress-related illnesses after divorce. And most divorced fathers are extremely lonely and overwrought - mainly because they have lost daily contact with their children (Beer. 1992; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Buehler & Ryan. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson. 1993; Kitson & Holmes. 1992; Kruk. 1991; Pledge. 1992; Pruett. 1992; Warshak. 1992).

**Legal Barriers for Fathers**  
Some of the anger that young adults feel towards their fathers might also stem from their ignorance of the legal barriers that men face after divorce. Jumping to the conclusion that their father did not love them enough to want joint custody or to spend more time with them, even college students may not understand that the legal system still makes it extremely difficult for most men to have equal time or equal power as parents. Most states still automatically grant full custody to the mother unless the father is willing to invest thousands of dollars and months in court trying to get joint custody or equal time with their children. Even older children may not be aware that many of their fathers did not fight for joint custody or joint residency because their lawyers advised them against it. Given the stress that such battles put on children and given that so many fathers still lose in the end, a loving father often decides not to engage in such battles. Not understanding his predicament, though, children may sometimes think their father didn’t care enough about them to fight for equal legal or residential rights as a parent. In short, many young people may not appreciate the complicated and disadvantaged legal positions their fathers were in after their divorce (Farrell. 1994; Friedman. 1994; Griswold. 1993; Parke. 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; Pruett. 1992; Warshak. 1992).

It may be that even as young adults, most children have given very little if any thought to these painful realities in their fathers’ lives: In part because the law gives most mothers the legal right to move wherever they want after divorce, 40% of divorced fathers and children do not live in the same state (Bender & Brannon. 1994). Consequently, many divorced fathers are heartbroken because they can no longer see their children regularly (Bender & Brannon. 1994; Blau. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Kruk. 1991; Parke. 1996; Stephen, Freedman, & Hess. 1993). Given such heartbreak, an ever growing number of fathers have been fighting for changes in divorce laws that would offer them a better chance of staying bonded to their children (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Cohen. 1994; Farrell. 1994; Kruk. 1991; Pleck. 1997).

**Parenting Styles**  
Young adults might also have given very little thought to the fact that their relationship with their father may have been influenced by how different his style of parenting was from their mother’s. When both parents set limits, supervise and discipline the children, then neither is likely to be seen as the “bad guy” relative to the other. But if the mother continually excuses and tolerates their infantile, aggressive, or undisciplined behavior, then some children pull away from their father partly because they see him as too controlling, too strict, and too demanding - a situation most likely to occur when the children are teenagers and when their mother has not remarried (Ambert. 1996; Beer. 1992; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Depner & Bray. 1993; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Pipher. 1994).

**The Father’s Remarriage**  
Finally, when their father remarries, the children’s relationship with him typically
bears more strain even when the children are well-educated young adults. In large part the impact depends on how their mother reacts. But unfortunately most young adults see that their mother is not happy about their father’s new marriage - in many cases, even when the mother was the one who ended the marriage. Sadly then, most children’s relationships with their father become weaker, more strained, and more complicated when he remarries - especially when their mother has not yet remarried (Ahrons. 1994; Beer. 1992; Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Buehler & Ryan. 1994; Cohen. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman. 1994; Scarf. 1995; Todorski. 1995; Visher & Visher. 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989).

From this research we also see that even well educated young adults may not realize how much impact their mother’s reactions have on their own feelings about their father’s marriage and about his life. In part children may not readily see how much power their mother has in this regard because many of her feelings and opinions may be conveyed nonverbally - her tone of voice, sighs, teary eyes, upraised eyebrows, pursed lips, and other kinds of body language. Powerful feelings are also conveyed through seemingly casual or “joking” remarks: “Your dad wasn’t as stingy before he met her.” “I don’t know what’s come over your father since they got married.” “It’s really odd that she doesn’t have kids of her own, isn’t it?” In many ways then, a mother can let the children know that she disapproves or that she feels sad, insecure, lonely, or jealous when they are with their father and his wife. Sadly, some mothers may even go so far as to suggest that the children should have the final say over when and who their father married by literally making comments such as: “I wouldn’t get married again unless you kids said it was ok.” “I don’t know why your dad didn’t ask you kids beforehand about marrying her.” Some young people might also consider their father “mean” or “inconsiderate” just because he is no longer willing to treat their mother as if they were still married. For example, they might not like his telling their mother to stop coming into his home when she comes to pick the kids up when neither he nor his wife are home. It might also take some children well into their adult years to realize that their mother’s continued unhappiness or anger stems primarily from her not having created a satisfying life for herself since the divorce - not from their father’s remarriage.

This research also shows that part of the increased stress for fathers and children occurs because he is usually the one who gets remarried first (Cherlin & Furstenberg. 1994; Cherlin. 1992). Whichever parent remarries first is the one who puts an end to any fantasies that children might still have for their parents to get back together. And the new marriage often rekindles anger and sadness that some children or ex-spouses still have about the divorce. Remarriage also means that children have to learn for the first time since their parents divorce to share that parent’s attention with someone else - and often with that person’s children as well. Then too, children typically feel sorry for and overly protective towards whichever parent is still single - which, in most cases, is their mother. And just because children are in their 20s and 30s does not mean that they don’t have these reactions when a parent remarries. So even though 80% of all parents remarry within four or five years of their divorce, the father is usually the one who “goes first” and - unluckily - has to bare the brunt of the children’s jealousy, resentment, or grief.

Exclusion by educators and therapists Given that children and their fathers so often have these kinds of difficulties after divorce, surely most educators and therapists are sensitive to and aware of their special circumstances. Right? Wrong. To begin with, compared to divorced mothers, very little research focuses on the needs and feelings of divorced fathers (Bender & Brannon. 1994; Blankenhorn. 1994; Cohen. 1995; Depner & Bray. 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson. 1993; Lamb. 1997; Mandell. 1995; Pruett. 1992; Warshak. 1992). More seriously, counselors, teachers, and doctors typically exclude and ignore the father after the parents divorce, acting as if there is only one parent - the mother (Blau. 1994; Butler. 1995; Caplan. 1990; Feldman. 1990; Frieman. 1994; Lazar, Sagi, & Fraser. 1991; Phares. 1997; Tillitski. 1992). Some therapists, especially younger people who have recently graduated and who have less sexist views about the father’s importance as a parent, are making an effort to include the father when his child is in therapy (Lazar, Sagi, & Fraser. 1991). Still, as one expert puts it: “It is time that clinical researchers and clinical therapists stop serving as gatekeepers who prevent the father’s involvement in research and therapy” (Phares, 1997, p. 283).

Stepmothers and Stepfathers In addition to the weakened relationship with their fathers, most young people have to deal with unique situations and a certain amount of stress associated with having stepparents. To begin with, almost all children and stepparents agree that the first few years together are stressful for everyone, even when the children are already young adults. Interestingly too, even though only 3-5% of all children ever actually live with their stepmother, their relationship with her is usually more complicated than with their stepfather - especially if their mother has not remarried. Among the many reasons for this, the most important seems to be that mothers are generally more jealous
and disapproving of stepmothers than fathers - which then makes it harder for children to accept or to interact with their stepmother. In any event, among the many feelings that most young people have during the first few years with their stepparents are: jealousy, disloyalty, guilt, anger, embarrassment, resentment, suspicion, and confusion. And then there are step-siblings or half siblings to get used to as well. Eventually, however, most young people and their stepparents agree that they end up liking each other and getting along (Ahrons, 1994; Beer, 1992; Berman, 1992; Bloomfield & Kory, 1994; Booth & Dunn, 1994; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1994; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Fine & Schwebel, 1992 Kelley. 1995; Nielsen, 1999a; Papernow. 1993; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1994; Vischer & Visher. 1996).

Sadly though, more than half of those young people with stepparents will see these marriages end in divorce, as did their parents’ marriage (Coontz. 1997; Furstenberg. 1994).

**Mother’s Education and Income**

But isn’t everything we’ve discussed so far affected by how well-educated and how well off financially the mother is after divorce? And since college students are the most likely to have well educated parents and to come from families with higher than average incomes, won’t they then be spared the complications that come from having a mother who doesn’t remarry, or having stepparents, or relating well to their father after the divorce? Unfortunately, usually not (Ahrons. 1994; Colten, Gore, & Aseltine. 1991; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Karen. 1994; Maine. 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Wagner. 1993; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989).

But why? First, white women from middle and upper class backgrounds have often been encouraged to develop possessive, jealous, and restrictive attitudes about sharing “their” children. Compared to women from lower income backgrounds or from other racial groups, these white women are often less likely to believe that “it takes a whole village to raise one child.” In other words, these mothers tend to be more possessive and more threatened when it comes to their children’s having a close relationship with another adult - including their own father. So for example, many of our most well known therapists remind us that it is the middle or upper middle class mother who is the most likely to become overly close to and dependent on her children when she is not happily married (Minuchin & Nichols. 1994). Of course a woman’s attitudes about motherhood are influenced by factors other than her race and income. And of course there are overly possessive mothers in every race and income group. But the fact remains that many white mothers from upper and middle class backgrounds are more possessive and more uncooperative than other mothers when it comes to “sharing” their children - especially after a divorce when they become single parents (Ahrons. 1994; Bell-Scott. 1991; Blankenhorn. 1994; Brown & Gilligan. 1992; Collins. 1991; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis. 1993; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Hays. 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997).

Second, a well-educated mother is often angrier and more resentful than a less educated woman after her divorce. Not only has her standard of living generally taken a greater plunge, she is also more likely to be forced into working full-time outside the home. Her anger and resentment, in turn, can make her less likely to cooperate with the children’s father. Indeed, a recent analysis of the research shows that “regardless of what the family’s income was to begin with, it is the decline in income after divorce that account for at least half of the negative impact on children in regard to dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, not having good jobs after high school or college (McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994). So not only do most children’s relationships with their father still suffer even though their mother is well educated and well off, the negative impact of living with an unmarried mother remains (Cohen. 1994; Folberg. 1991; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Hetherington. 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Wagner. 1993).

Third, women who do not work full time outside the home during their marriage tend to be more overly dependent on their children and to be less supportive of the father’s relationship with them after a divorce. And a well-educated woman is the most likely to have been at home full time before her divorce because she is the most likely to have married a well-educated man whose income was high enough for the family to live on it alone. In contrast, less well-educated women and men both generally have to work outside the home before and after divorce because the family cannot get by on just the man’s income. After a divorce then, the most well educated women who were at home mothers often have the most overly dependent, most possessive relationships with their children (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Harder. 1992; Karen. 1994; Maine. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Nielsen, 1999a; Scarf. 1995). As a result, the well-educated mother can often be hostile, jealous, and uncooperative when it comes to “sharing” the children or cooperating with the father after their divorce (Bell-Scott. 1991; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Scarf. 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989; Warshak. 1992).

Fourth, regardless of how well-educated or how financially well-off she is, the mother who was not close to
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her own parents tends to have a harder time “sharing” the children with their father to be enmeshed or overly involved with the children even during the marriage. In trying to give what she did not get from her own parents emotionally, this mother too often binds herself to her children and binds them to her in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, for other adults to get close - even their own father. Both before and after divorce then, these mothers do not make the fathers relationship with the children easier (Ainsworth & Eichberg. 1991; Caplan. 1990; Main. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin. 1995; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Sameroff & Emde. 1989; Scarf. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Todorski. 1995).

Finally, just because a mother is well-educated and has at least a middle class lifestyle does not mean that she won’t have the kinds of problems that usually have a negative impact on her children: not getting remarried or not having emotional and sexual intimacy in her own life, being depressed or chronically unhappy, being too dependent on her children, having a poor relationship with her parents, or being too lax and indulgent with her own children. So for example, major studies involving thousands of families find that even white children in their early 20s with college-educated, upper middle class mothers who did not remarry are worse off in terms of finding and holding down a secure professional job, self-discipline, self-motivation, and future plans for their careers or graduate school. Moreover, these losses were mainly accounted for by their well-educated, but single, mother’s difficulties when it came to enforcing rules, supervising, disciplining, and “pushing” them to do their best during their teenage years (McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994).

Faulty memories and family myths

Finally, in relating to young people whose parents are divorced, we should be aware that what they tell us about each parent and about the divorce might bare little or no resemblance to reality. In other words, we can’t necessarily trust that what a young adult tells us about their father and mother, about the divorce, or about life since the divorce is true. But why?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that human memory is not very reliable - especially not when it comes to highly emotional matters like our parents’ divorce (Gilovich. 1991; Grimm. 1995; Loftus & Ketcham. 1995; Nisbett & Ross. 1991; Ofshe & Watters. 1995; Schacter. 1996). And other answers involve our need to create consistent stories about our lives, even when we have to distort the truth and invent memories about things that never happened (Gergen. 1992; Howard. 1991; Miller. 1990; Schacter. 1996).

To begin with, our memories - especially memories about what happened in childhood - are largely shaped by what other people tell us, not by what we ourselves actually saw or heard. In fact, what other people tell us about our childhood can literally make us “remember” things that never happened. Making things even more complicated, we seldom remember how or when a particular memory came about. That is, we seldom remember who told us the stories that shape our memories - or under what circumstances they told us these things. For example, the negative things that you “remember” about your father might actually have come from what your mother told you during or after their divorce. Likewise, we construct memories bit by bit in erratic ways. Our memories sometimes take great leaps across time, omitting certain crucial events along the way. And events which actually had no relationship to one another or which actually occurred far apart end up being remembered in ways that bare very little resemblance to what really happened. Even our memories of recent events can be distorted in such ways. We also patch scraps of information from the past together and force them to fit the stories that we have been told by people we love and trust. As a result, a family can bury itself in its own fairy dust by creating false memories about people or events that threaten what the family wants to believe.

More troubling still, we tend to forget and to distort those memories that create the most pain or most shame - especially when those memories involve a parent. And we often forget and distort the memories about whichever parent did the most damage to us or to our family. Especially as young children, we do not want to acknowledge that our parents do such things as commit adultery, abuse drugs, lie, cheat, or physically abuse us. Moreover, we have an especially difficult time remembering or accepting painful truths about our mothers. Soafter our parents divorce, we too often end up wedded to inaccurate, negative memories about our fathers (Ackerman. 1996; Berman. 1992; Block. 1996; Bowlby. 1988; Karen. 1994; Main. 1993; Miller. 1994; Miller. 1990; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994).

Our memories can also fool us because we have the tendency to create a consistent, logical “story” about our lives - a story that supposedly explains the past and the present in an organized, predictable way. The story around which we organize our memories also tends to be one that makes us feel good about ourselves and that castes the people we happen to like in the most favorable light. That is, we have a hard time remembering those situations in which someone we dislike actually said and did “good” things. We often develop memories that confirm only what we want to believe, rather than what actually happened. In short, when it comes to our memories and our beliefs, we tend
Finally, what we remember about the past is heavily influenced by how we are feeling about our present lives. That is, people with serious social, emotional or psychological problems tend to remember and interpret the past in the most negative, most inaccurate ways (Gergen. 1992; Halverson. 1988; McCrae & Costa. 1988). Young people who are clinically depressed or who have personality disorders rarely recall what was good about their parents or their childhood - and they rarely let go of their angry, negative memories even when confronted with proof that those memories are untrue (Kramer. 1993; McCrae & Costa. 1988; Ofshe & Watters. 1995; Weiner. 1992). In short, you should trust what a happy, well-adjusted young person tells you about the past more than what a miserable, angry, or depressed one tells you. This isn’t to say that everything people tell us about their own past is untrue. Still, we should not believe that everything someone tells us reflects reality, especially not about emotionally charged topics like their parents’ divorce or their stepparents.

Remember too that 90% of all children live with their mother afterwards which means that she has more power than their father to influence what gets remembered and what gets forgotten. And, like the rest of us, when parents have done things that make them feel especially guilty - for example, committing adultery - they tend to distort the truth and to “create” memories that cast themselves in the best possible light in the eyes of their children and other people (Ahrons. 1994; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Gottlieb. 1995; Hudson & Hudson. 1993; Lerner. 1993; Vaughan. 1990). Sadly though, the myths and inaccurate memories created within a family wield tremendous power over children’s feelings and behavior towards their parents and stepparents (Black. 1993; Bloomfield & Kory. 1994; Block. 1996; Gergen. 1992; Howard. 1991; Lerner. 1993). Sadly, there are young people who literally need the help of a therapist just to remember anything at all loving or good about their father (Berman. 1992; Black. 1993; Block. 1996; Bowby. 1988; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994).

Conclusion

Although their parents’ divorces clearly do not affect all young people in exactly the same ways, we should still be aware of what the most often repeated findings from the most current research are telling us. In this light, we have seen that most young people have not suffered long term consequences in terms of their grades, vocational achievements, mental health, or social development. But when they do, it is more likely to be the son than the daughter and more likely to be children whose divorced mothers have not remarried. Then too, even when their mother has remarried, both sons and daughters usually end up worse off in terms of their relationships with their father than those whose parents are still married to each other. And regardless of their age, children usually have stressful adjustments to make in the first few years with stepparents and step-siblings. Then too, just because both parents are well-educated and have been able to maintain at least an upper middle class standard of living since their divorce does not mean that their children will be spared any of these kinds of problems. In general then, we have the least to worry about in terms of the impact of their parents’ divorce when both parents have remarried, when the first few years of adjusting to stepparents and step-siblings are over, and when both parents provided adequate supervision and discipline as single parents. Put differently, we should be on the lookout for problems that young people might be having mainly when their parents are recently divorced or recently remarried, when one parent has remarried but the other has not, and when a parent seems to be continually unhappy, depressed, or overly dependent on the children. In these ways, we can offer help to those young people most in need without making negative assumptions about those who have already adjusted well to their parents’ divorce.

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