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Divorce in Perspective

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The Four Questions

1. *What is the problem that Coontz identifies?*
2. *Is it* social*? Who is hurt? Is society hurt? Is the problem caused by society? Is there widespread concern about this problem?*
3. *What is the cause?*
4. *What are Coontz's suggestions for dealing with this problem?*

Topics Covered:

Divorce
Family
Marriage
Socialization
Children of divorce
Conflict

We have already accepted the fact that aging Americans are increasingly unlikely to live out their lives in "traditional" nuclear families, where they can be supported and cared for entirely by a spouse or a child. We can no longer assume that a high enough proportion of kids grow up with both biological parents that society can continue to ignore the "exceptions" that were there all along. Nor can our school schedules, work policies, and even emotional expectations of family life continue to presume that every household has a husband to earn the income and a wife to take care of family needs.

The social and personal readjustments required by these changes can seem awfully daunting. Here's what a spokesman for the Institute for American Values told me during a tape-recorded debate over whether it was possible to revive male breadwinning and restore permanent marriage to its former monopoly over personal life: "The strongest point in your argument is that the toothpaste is out of the tube. There's no longer the subordinate status of women to the extent there was in earlier eras—there is simply too much freedom and money sloshing around. We may be heading into what some sociologists call a 'postmarriage society,' where women will raise the children and men will not be there in any stable, institutional way. If so, we'd better build more prisons, even faster than we're building 'em now."[1]

I don't think the consequences of facing reality are quite so bleak. As my grandmother used to say, sometimes problems are opportunities in work clothes. Changes in gender roles, for example, may be hard to adjust to, yet they hold out the possibility of constructing far more honest and satisfying relationships between men and women, parents and children, than in the past. But this doesn't mean that every change is for the better, or that we don't pay a price for some of the new freedoms that have opened up. Divorce is a case in point. While divorce has rescued some adults and children from destructive marriages, it has thrown others into economic and psychological turmoil.

For the family values crusaders, this is where the discussion of how to help families begins and ends. "Let's face it," one "new consensus" proponent told me privately, "the interests of adults and children are often different, and there are too many options today for parents to pursue personal fulfillment at the expense of their children's needs. Sure there are other issues. But unless we keep the heat on about the dangers of divorce, parents will be tempted to put their own selfish concerns above the needs of their children." Fighting the "divorce culture" has to be the top priority, he argued, because "it's the one thing we can affect" by making parents realize what disastrous consequences divorce has for the future of their kids.

I have met only a tiny handful of divorced parents who didn't worry long and hard about the effects of divorce on their children (almost a third of divorced women, for example, attempted a reconciliation between the time of initial separation and the final divorce, according to data from 1987–1988).[2] And while it's true that a few pop psychologists have made irresponsible claims that divorce is just a "growth

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experience," I don't believe we are really a culture that "celebrates" divorce, even if well-meaning people sometimes issue overly rosy reassurances to those who have undergone this trauma.

But for the record, let me be clear. Ending a marriage is an agonizing process that can seriously wound everyone involved, especially the children. Divorce can interfere with effective parenting and deprive children of parental resources. Remarriage solves some of the economic problems associated with divorce but introduces a new set of tensions that sometimes, at least temporarily, make things even more difficult.

Surely, however, it's permissible to put the risks in perspective without being accused of glorifying single parenthood or attempting, in Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's words, "to discredit the two-parent family." And the truth is that there has been a lot of irresponsible doom-saying about "disrupted" families. In a widely distributed article in the *Atlantic Monthly,* for example, Whitehead spends eight pages explaining why kids from divorced families face almost insurmountable deficits. Then, when she's convinced the average single mom to run out immediately to find a father for her child, she lowers the boom: Children in stepfamilies turn out even worse.[3]

While it is true that children in divorced and remarried families are more likely to drop out of school, exhibit emotional distress, get in trouble with the law, and abuse drugs or alcohol than children who grow up with both biological parents, most kids, from *every* kind of family, avoid these perils. And to understand what the increased risk entails for individual families, we need to be clear about what sociologists mean when they talk about such children having more behavior problems or lower academic achievement. What they really mean to say is *not* that children in divorced families have more problems but that *more* children of divorced parents have problems.

It's an important distinction, especially if you are a divorced or divorcing parent. It doesn't mean that all kids from divorced families will have more problems. There will be outstanding kids and kids with severe problems in both groups, but there will be a slightly higher proportion of kids from never-disrupted families in the outstanding group and a slightly lower proportion of them in the group with severe problems.

As family researcher Paul Amato notes, in measures of both achievement and adjustment, "a large proportion of children in the divorced group score *higher* than the average score of children in the nondivorced group. Similarly, a large proportion of children in the nondivorced group score *lower* than the average score of children in the divorced group." Comparing the average outcomes of children in various types of families obscures the fact that there is "more variability in the adjustment of children in divorced and remarried families than in nondivorced families." So knowing there are more divorced kids who do poorly is not really helpful. The question is how many more children from divorced and never-married parents are doing poorly, and what accounts for this, since some divorced children do exceptionally well and most are within normal range.[4]

Researchers who use clinical samples, drawn from people already in therapy because their problems are severe enough that they have sought outside help, tend to come up with the highest estimates of how many children are damaged by divorce. In 1989, for example, Judith Wallerstein published a long-term study of middle-class children from divorced families, arguing that almost half experienced long-term pain, worry, and insecurity that adversely affected their love and work relationships. Her work was the basis for Whitehead's claim in the *Atlantic Monthly* that "the evidence is in: Dan Quayle was right." But this supposedly definitive study, based on a self-selected sample of only sixty couples, did not compare the children of divorced couples with those of nondivorced ones to determine whether some of their problems might have stemmed from other factors, such as work pressures, general social insecurities, or community fragmentation. Moreover, the sample was drawn from families already experiencing difficulty and referred to the clinic for therapy. Only a third of the families were judged to be functioning adequately *prior* to the divorce.[5]

Research based on more representative samples yields much lower estimates of the risks. Paul Amato and Bruce Keith recently reviewed nearly every single quantitative study that has been done on divorce. Although they found clear associations with lower levels of child well-being, these were, on average, "not large." And the more carefully controlled the studies were, the smaller were the differences reported. The "large majority" of children of divorce, wrote eleven family researchers in response to Whitehead's misuse of their data, do not experience severe or long-term problems: *Most* do not drop out of school, get arrested, abuse drugs, or suffer long-term emotional distress. "Examining a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents living in four diverse family struc-

tures," write researchers Alan Acock and David Demo, "we find few statistically significant differences across family types on measures of socioemotional adjustment and well-being."[6]

Sara McLanahan, often cited by family values crusaders for her research on the risks of divorce, points out that divorce does not account for the majority of such social problems as high school dropout rates and unwed teen motherhood. "Outlawing divorce would raise the national high school graduation rate from about 86 percent to 88 percent. . . . It would reduce the risk of a premarital birth among young black women from about 45 percent to 39 percent."[7]

To be sure I'm not minimizing the risks, let's take a comparatively high estimate of divorce-related problems, based on the research of Mavis Hetherington, one of the most respected authorities in the field. She argues that "20 to 25 percent of kids from divorced families have behavior problems—about twice as many as the 10 percent from nondivorced families. You can say, 'Wow, that's terrible,'" she remarks, "but it means that 75 to 80 percent of kids from divorced families *aren't* having problems, that the vast majority are doing perfectly well."[8]

The fact that twice as many children of divorce have problems as children in continuously married families should certainly be of concern to parents. But it's important to remember that the doubling of risk is not evenly distributed among all families who divorce. Some of the families who contribute to these averages have had several divorces and remarriages. A study of boys who had been involved in divorce and remarriage found that those who had experienced many transitions, such as two or more divorces and remarriages, "showed the poorest adjustment." But even here the causal relationship involved more than divorce alone. It was "antisocial mothers" who were most likely *both* to experience many marital transitions and to engage in unskilled parenting practices that in turn placed their sons at risk for maladjustment.[9]

Many of the problems seen in children of divorced parents are caused not by divorce alone but by other frequently coexisting yet analytically separate factors such as poverty, financial loss, school relocation, or a prior history of severe marital conflict. When Rand Institute researchers investigated the relation between children's test scores and residence in a female-headed family, for example, the gross scores they obtained showed a significant deficit, but the disadvantage of children in mother-headed families was reduced to "essentially zero" when they controlled for other factors. "Apparently," they concluded, "a lot of the gross difference is . . . due to income, low maternal education, and other factors that frequently characterize single-parent families, rather than family structure itself."[10]

Income differences account for almost 50 percent of the disadvantage faced by children in single-parent homes. The tendency of less-educated women to have higher rates of divorce and unwed motherhood also skews the statistics. In fact, a mother's educational background has more impact on her child's welfare than her marital status. Other research suggests that the amount of television kids watch affects aggressive behavior whether or not their parents are divorced; one survey found that eating meals together was associated with a bigger advantage in school performance than was having two parents.[11]

Researchers who managed to disentangle the effects of divorce itself from the effects of a change in residence found that relocation and loss of peer support were more likely to interfere with school completion than parental separation. McLanahan's research with Gary Sandefur suggests that up to 40 percent of the increased risk of dropping out of school for children in single-parent families is attributable to moving after the divorce. A 1996 study found that the impact of family structure on schooling is "reduced substantially" when the number of school changes is controlled.[12]

Obviously, divorce often triggers financial loss, withdrawal of parental attention, and change of residence or schools. In this sense it is fair to say that divorce causes many childhood problems by creating these other conditions. But it makes more sense to adopt policies to minimize income loss or school and residence changes than to prohibit divorce across the board, for there are no hard and fast links between family structure, parental behaviors, and children's outcomes. One pair of leading researchers in the field conclude that there is "*no* clear, consistent, or convincing evidence that alterations in family structure per se are detrimental to children's development."[13]

The worst problems for children stem from parental conflict, before, during, and after divorce—*or within marriage*. In fact, children in "intact" families that are marked by high levels of conflict tend to do worse than children in divorced and never-married families. Two researchers who compared family types and child outcomes over a period of five years found that children who remained in highly conflicted marriages had

more severe behavior problems than children in any other kind of family. They "were more depressed, impulsive, and hyperactive" than children from either low-conflict marriages or divorced families.[14]

In the first two years after a divorce, says Hetherington, children of divorce "look worse off than kids from intact families, even bad intact families." But after two or three years, "the kids who lived in one-parent households, with a competent mother, were doing better—with half as many behavioral problems—than the kids in the conflict-ridden homes."[15]

Furthermore, the problems found in children of divorced parents were often there months, or even years, *prior* to the parental separation. Eight to twelve years before a family breakup, researchers have found, parents who would eventually divorce were already reporting significantly more problems with their children than parents who ended up staying together. This finding suggests that "the association between divorce and poor parent–child relationships may be spurious; the low quality of the parents' marriage may be a cause of both." Alternatively, severely troubled children may help to precipitate a divorce, further distorting the averages.[16]

Some behaviors that make kids look worse off in the first few years after divorce may actually be the first steps toward recovery from damaging family patterns. For example, psychologist Richard Weissbourd cites the case of Ann, a 10-year-old girl who had become the family caretaker to cope with her father's alcoholism and her mother's long work hours. This role gave her many satisfactions and a strong sense of importance within the family, but it cut her off from friends and schoolmates. After the divorce, Ann's mother recovered from her own stress, spent more time at home, and resumed her parental role. Ann resented her "demotion" in the family and began to throw temper tantrums that landed her in a therapist's office. Yet her turmoil, far from being evidence of the destructive effects of divorce, was probably a necessary stage in the move to healthier relations with both parents and peers.[17]

One long-term study found that divorce produced extremes of *either* negative or positive behavior in children. At one end of the spectrum were children who were aggressive and insecure. These children were likely to have been exposed to a disengaged or inconsistently harsh parenting style. A significant number of these children were boys who had been temperamentally difficult early in life and whose behavior problems were made worse by family conflict or divorce.

At the other extreme were caring, competent children who were exceptionally popular, self-confident, well behaved, and academically adept. These children had the most stable peer friendships and solid relations with adults. And a high proportion—more than half—of the girls in this group came from divorced, female-headed families. Their mothers were typically warm, but not always available, and most of these girls had had to assume some caretaking responsibility for siblings, grandparents, or even their mothers at a young age. "Experiences in a one-parent, mother-headed family seemed to have a positive effect for these girls."[18]

As Mavis Hetherington sums up the research, most family members go through a period of difficulty after a divorce but recover within two to three years. Some exhibit immediate and long-term problems, while others adapt well in the early stages but have problems that emerge later. "Finally, a substantial minority of adults and children . . . emerge as psychologically enhanced and exceptionally competent and fulfilled individuals."[19] It should be reassuring for divorced parents to realize that such enhancement is possible, and that we also know a lot about how to avoid the *worst* outcomes for children.

WHEN DIVORCE HAS LONG-TERM EFFECTS, AND HOW TO MINIMIZE THEM

I don't want to trivialize the consequences of divorce. Transitions of any kind are stressful for kids, mostly because they are stressful for parents and therefore disrupt parental functioning. But it is important to point out the variability in the outcomes of divorce. Divorce is only one part of a much larger group of factors affecting parental functioning and child well-being. In many cases, the conditions imperiling children existed in the family prior to the divorce and would not be solved by convincing the parents to get back together. In other cases, divorce does create new problems but parents can minimize the disruptions if they set their minds to it. For these reasons, researchers have begun to emphasize that divorce is an ongoing process beginning long before physical separation and continuing long after the divorce is finalized. It is the *process,* not the divorce itself, that "is most significant in shaping subsequent family dynamics and individual adjustment."[20]

A critical factor in children's adjustment to divorce is how effectively the custodial parent functions. Usually this means the mother. The main problem for chil-

dren of divorce is when depression, anger, or economic pressures distract their mother's attention. A recent study of 200 single-parent families in Iowa found that somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of mothers became preoccupied in the aftermath of divorce, paying less attention to what their children were doing or focusing too much on negative behavior and responding to it harshly. A large part of their reactions stemmed from economic stress. But many of these distracted mothers had always been more self-centered, impatient, disorganized, and insensitive than the other mothers, traits that may have triggered their divorces in the first place. Only a small amount of dysfunctional parenting seemed to be associated with family structure alone, yet there were enough incidences for researchers to conclude that divorce does make it harder for many mothers to parent well, even when they are stable individuals who are not overwhelmed by economic stress.[21]

The main danger for children is conflict between parents during and after divorce. Few marriages disintegrate overnight; the last few months or years are often marked by severe strife. More than half of divorced couples in one national survey reported frequent fighting prior to separation. More than a third of those who fought said that the fights sometimes became physical. And children were often present during these incidents.[22]

Divorce may allow parents to back off, but sometimes it produces continuing or even escalating conflict over finances and custody. And post-divorce marital conflict, especially around issues connected with the children, is the largest single factor associated with poor adjustment in youngsters whose parents have divorced. A study of more than 1,000 divorcing families in California found that children in disputed custody cases (about 10 percent of the sample) seemed the most disturbed. They were two to four times more likely than the national average to develop emotional and behavioral problems, with boys generally displaying more symptoms than girls.[23]

Parents certainly should be educated about the potential problems associated with divorce and with raising children alone. But outlawing divorce or making it harder to get would not prevent parents from fighting or separating, and could easily prolong the kinds of conflict and disrupted parenting that raise the risks for children. While people who are simply discontented or bored with their relationship should be encouraged to try and work things out, campaigns to scare parents into staying married for the sake of the kids are simply out of touch with the real complexities and variability in people's lives. As psychologist Weissbourd writes, "divorce typically has complex costs and benefits" for children. They may be more vulnerable in some ways after the divorce and more protected in other ways.[24]

Studies show that fathers in unhappy marriages tend to treat their daughters negatively, especially when the daughters are young. These girls may benefit by getting away from this negative spillover, even if their brothers go through a hard period. Women who are dissatisfied with their marriage are at high risk of developing a drinking problem. Divorce or separation lowers such women's stress and tends to reduce their alcohol dependence. Getting sober may improve their parenting enough to counteract the negative effects of divorce on their children.[25]

As such examples reveal, open conflict is not the only process that harms children in a bad marriage. One recent study of adolescent self-image found the *lowest* self-esteem in teens of two-parent families where fathers showed little interest in their children. Such youngsters, lacking even the excuse of the father's absence to explain his lack of interest, were more likely than kids in divorced families to internalize the problem in self-blame.[26]

Given these kinds of trade-offs, it is not enough to just reiterate the risks of divorce. We also need to tell people what they can do to minimize these risks. The most important thing is to contain conflict with the former spouse and to refrain from "bad mouthing" the other parent to the children. Divorcing parents must not involve their children in the hostilities between them or demand that the child choose sides. They should not ask children to report on the other's activities, or to keep secrets about what's going on in one household.[27]

Leaders of the "new consensus" crusade are fond of saying that trying to teach people how to divorce with less trauma is like offering low-tar cigarettes to people instead of helping them quit smoking. But this is a sound bite, not a sound argument. Yes, there are clearly people who could save their marriages, or at least postpone their divorces, and should be encouraged to do so by friends, colleagues, or professionals who know their situation. But there are others whose marriages are in the long run more damaging to themselves and their children than any problems associated with divorce. In between there are many more people for whom it's a close call. Yet since "most divorced mothers are as effective as their married counterparts once the parenting boundaries are renegotiated," and since

most families recover from divorce within a few years, it is neither accurate nor helpful to compare divorce to a carcinogenic substance.[28]

Is it possible for divorced parents to behave civilly? A national sample of parents who divorced in 1978 and were interviewed one, three, and five years later found that half of the couples were able to coparent effectively. The other half, unfortunately, were unable "to confine their anger to their marital differences; it infused all the relationships in the family" and made cooperative or even civil coparenting extremely rare. A more recent California study found that three to four years after separation, only a quarter of divorced parents were engaged in such "conflicted coparenting," marked by high discord and low communication. Twenty-nine percent were engaging in cooperative coparenting, characterized by high communication and low dissension, while 41 percent were engaging in a kind of parallel parenting, where there was low communication between parents but also low conflict.[29]

Time helps. In one study of couples splitting up, "strong negative feelings among women dropped from 43 to 19 percent in the two years following separation, while for men they declined from 22 to 10 percent." There are encouraging signs that more immediate results can be obtained when parents are shown how their behavior affects their children. A recent study found that simply having children fill out a questionnaire and then sending that information to their divorced parents was enough to effect "significant change in the behavior of the parents." Specialists in divorce research recommend early intervention strategies to encourage parents to think of themselves as a "binuclear" family and separate their ongoing parenting commitments from any leftover marital disagreements.[30]

We know that people can learn to manage anger, and this seems to be the key to successful coparenting. It is not necessary for parents to like each other or even to "make up." The difference between divorced parents who were and were not able to coparent effectively, writes researcher Constance Ahrons, "was that the more cooperative group *managed* their anger better. They accepted it and diverted it, and it diminished over time." Establishing boundaries between the parents' relationship with each other and their relationships with their children is critical. For instance, it helps if parents have a friend to whom they can vent about all the crazy or terrible things they think their former partner has done. This is not something that should be discussed with the children. Most parents know this in the abstract, but they often need a friend, colleague, or professional to help them prevent their feelings about the partner from spilling over into interactions with their children.[31]

What about the problem of father absence? Surveys at the beginning of the 1980s found that more than 50 percent of children living with divorced mothers had not seen their fathers within the preceding year, while only 17 percent reported visiting their fathers weekly. But more recent studies show higher levels of paternal contact. A 1988 sample found that 25 percent of previously married fathers saw their children at least once a week, and only 18 percent had not visited their children during the past year. This may mean that as divorce has become more common, fathers have begun to realize that they must work out better ways of remaining in touch with their children, while mothers may be more willing to encourage such involvement.[32]

One of the puzzling findings of much divorce research is how little impact frequent visitation with fathers has on children's adjustment after divorce. But one recent study found evidence that while divorce weakened the significance of fathers for children's overall psychological well-being, a close relationship to a father, even when contact was minimal, seemed to have a strong association with a child's happiness. Other research shows that nonresidential fathers help their children best when they continue to behave as parents, "monitoring academic progress, emphasizing moral principles, discussing problems, providing advice, and supporting the parenting decisions of the custodial mother," rather than behaving as a friendly uncle who shows up to have fun with the children for a day.[33]

People need to know this kind of information, and a truly pro-family social movement would spend much more time publicizing such findings than making sweeping pronouncements about what's good and bad for children in the abstract. Again, it's a matter of coming to terms with reality. Historically speaking, the rise of alternatives to marriage is a done deal. Right here, right now, 50 percent of children are growing up in a home with someone other than two married, biological parents. It is not a pro-child act to deny divorced parents the information they need to help them function better or to try so hard to prevent divorce that we suppress research allowing parents to weigh their options, both pro and con.

Of course we should help parents stay together where possible, but the evidence suggests that we will

save more marriages by developing new family values and support systems than by exhorting people to revive traditional commitments. And the fact remains that we will never again live in a world where people are compelled to stay married "until death do us part." Some couples will not be willing to go through the hard work of renegotiating traditional gender roles and expectations. Some individuals will choose personal autonomy over family commitments. Some marriages will fail for other reasons, such as abuse, personal betrayals, or chronic conflict—and often it is in no one's interest that such marriages be saved.

That is why, shocking though it may sound to the family values think tanks, we need, as researcher William Goode suggests, to "institutionalize" divorce in the same way that marriage remains institutionalized—to surround it with clear obligations and rights, supported by law, customs, and social expectations. To institutionalize divorce is not the same as advocating it. It simply means society recognizes that divorce will continue to occur, whether we like it or not. Reducing the ambiguity, closing the loopholes, and getting rid of the idea that every divorce case is a new contest in which there are no accepted ground rules will *minimize* the temptation for individuals to use divorce to escape obligations to children. Setting up clear expectations about what is civilized behavior will cut back on the adversarial battles that bankrupt adults and escalate the bitterness to which children are exposed.[34]

As one divorce lawyer writes, "I see couples every day who never lay a hand on one another but are experts in using children as instruments of psychological torture." Such children are not served well, she argues, by a high-minded refusal to sanction divorce or a rear-guard battle to slow it down. As the president of the Family and Divorce Mediation Council of Greater New York puts it: "Blaming children's problems on a megalith called 'Divorce' is a bit like stating that cancer is caused by chemotherapy. Neither divorce nor chemotherapy is a step people hope to have to take in their lives, but each may be the healthiest option in a given situation." He suggests that mediation "can restore parents' and children's sense of well-being" better than attempts to keep people locked in unhappy marriages where pent-up frustrations eventually make postdivorce cooperation even harder to obtain.[35]

Similarly, we need to institutionalize remarriage. Experts on stepfamilies argue that clearer norms and expectations for stepparents would facilitate easier adjustments and more enduring relationships. At the legal level, we must recognize and support the commitments that stepparents make, rather than excluding them from rights and obligations to their stepchildren. In one court case, for example, a boy named Danny was raised by his stepfather from the age of one, after his mother died. The biological father did not ask for custody until Danny was seven. Although a lower court ruled that Danny should be allowed to stay with his stepparent, who had been the primary parent for six of Danny's seven years, a higher court overruled this decision, calling the stepfather "a third party" whose claims should not be allowed to interfere with the rights of the biological parent.[36]

While we must adjust our laws to validate ties between stepparents and stepchildren, we also need to develop flexible models of various ways to achieve a "good" relationship. The worst problems facing stepfamilies, experts on remarriage now believe, are produced by unrealistic fantasies about re-creating an exclusive nuclear family unit in a situation where this is impossible because the child has at least one parent who lives outside the home. The best way to succeed, researchers in the field agree, is to reject the nuclear family model and to develop a new set of expectations and behaviors.[37]

What it all comes down to is this. Today's diversity in family forms, parenting arrangements, and sex roles constitutes a tremendous sea change in family relations. We will not reverse the tide by planting our chair in the sand like King Canute and crying, "Go back! Go back!" There are things we can do to prevent the global tide of changing work situations and gender roles from eroding as many marriages as it presently does, but our primary task is to find new and firmer ground on which to relocate family life.

NOTES

1. David Blankenhorn, "Can We Talk? The Marriage Strategy," *Mirabella*, March 1995, p. 91.
2. Howard Wineberg and James McCarthy, "Separation and Reconciliation in American Marriages," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 20 (1993).
3. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993, p. 55.
4. Paul R. Amato, "Life-Span Adjustment of Children to Their Parents' Divorce," *The Future of Children* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1994), p. 147; E. Mavis Hetherington, "An Overview of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and