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Divorce

A Risk and Resilience Perspective

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The word *divorce* conjures up images of divided families, vulnerable children, failed marriages, forgotten commitments, long and expensive legal battles, resentment, hostility, bitterness, and economic hardship. It is understandable that people do not think positively about divorce. Few, if any, adults marry with the expectation, and certainly not the hope, that their marriages will one day be dissolved, nor do most children hope that their parents will divorce and live apart.

Nevertheless, large proportions of American families have experienced or are experiencing parental divorce, a phenomenon that cuts across racial and ethnic groups, albeit to varying degrees. Although a smaller proportion of African Americans marry than do European Americans, a much higher percentage of African American marriages end in divorce than is the case for European Americans (Orbuch & Brown, 2006). In the 1990s, approximately 47% of African American marriages resulted in separation within 10 to 15 years, compared with 28% of European American marriages (Cherlin, 1998). The divorce rate for Latinos is lower than that for both European Americans and African Americans (Umana-Taylor & Alfaro, 2006). Partly because of these ethnic differences in divorce rates, from 1970 to 1994, the percentage of white children living with two parents (including stepparents) fell from 90% to 80%; for African American children, the percentage declined from 60% to 33%; and for Hispanic children, the percentage decreased from 80% to 65% (Teachman, 2000). These figures have stabilized into this century. In 2004, 78% of white children, 87% of Asian American children, 68% of Hispanic children, and 38% of African American children lived with two

parents. A higher percentage of African American children lived with a single parent in 2004 than did white non-Hispanic or Hispanic children (54% compared with 20% and 28%, respectively).

In this chapter, we provide an overview of what we know about divorce, the consequences it has on family members, and interventions designed to help those who are experiencing this family stressor. To accomplish these goals, we first provide a brief review of family systems theory and how it helps to illuminate processes and outcomes relevant to divorce, with an emphasis on how a risk and resiliency perspective adds to the utility of family systems theory. Second, we describe historical trends and patterns. Third, we present information on factors that predict and may cause divorce. Fourth, we review the literature on the consequences of divorce for parents and children, emphasizing risk and resiliency factors that help predict how family members will adjust to this stressor. Finally, we describe and evaluate interventions that may facilitate divorce adjustment, focusing on parenting education for divorcing parents and divorce mediation and one of its variants—collaborative divorce.

Family Systems Theory With a Risk and Resiliency Extension

Family systems theory views the family as a system of interconnected individuals, with changes in one or more members or relationships having reverberating effects throughout the entire family (Klein & White, 2007). In addition, families, as systems, influence their environments and, in turn, are influenced by the circumstances and contexts around them.

With reference to divorce, family systems theory suggests that the family needs to be viewed in its entirety because it may be misleading to focus on only particular individuals or dyads within the family. For example, family systems theorists contend that one cannot understand how children are affected by divorce without understanding how children are affected by their parents and by extrafamilial institutions (e.g., the school), and how parents are affected by divorce (i.e., because children are ultimately influenced by the effects that divorce has on their parents). Therefore, in this chapter, we are sensitive to the systems view that the effects of divorce on children and parents need to be considered holistically and not in isolation from other processes and effects occurring within the family.

As useful as family systems theory has proven to be, it needs to be supplemented by other theories to delineate more precisely *how* divorce affects family members and the family system. A risk and resiliency perspective is helpful for achieving this purpose. Risk factors increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, whereas resilience refers to processes by which an individual (or group) overcomes difficult circumstances, "bounces back" from adversity, and becomes stronger in the face of a crisis (Walsh, 2002). The