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## **Families of Increasing Complexity: Helping Families Through Separation, Divorce, and the Beginnings of Stepfamily Integration**

- Introduction
- Part I: Divorce Therapy
- Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily
- Conclusion



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**Introduction: Families of Increasing Complexity**

-Therapists who work with nuclear families traditionally view families as stable, integrated, and self-contained systems, and take for granted models for how families should communicate and organize. They attempt to break up the “homeostasis” of a family’s system, to create better ways for the family to communicate and organize themselves. Within such better functioning families, individuals are seen as likely to experience secure attachment, a sense of belonging, reciprocal relationships, and autonomy.

-As a family breaks apart into a more complex system during separation and divorce, models for communication and organization become less certain; without information, direction, and new models, a family may fail to reorganize successfully. To assist divorced families, therapists need to provide them with guidance, information, and new models.

-When divorced families add stepfamily members, models for communication and organization become even less certain. There is less agreement about family member’s roles and obligations. “Insider-outsider” groups, loyalty conflicts, and triangulation may develop; family loyalty is often weak, and definitions of the family itself may diverge. The urgency is even greater to assist families in finding new models for communication and organization.

-Therapists **can** help these complex families generate order, security, and intimacy so that individuals can experience secure attachment, a sense of belonging, reciprocal relationships, and autonomy. To do so, therapists need to appreciate the complexity of their client’s family systems, know what tends to work for such families, and impart such knowledge to their clients in an effective manner.

# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

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## Topics for Part I:

- Why Divorce Therapy?
- What is Divorce Therapy?
- Paths to Divorce Therapy
- A Brief History of Divorce and Divorce Therapy
- The Impact of Divorce
- Impasses of Divorce
- Principles for Practicing Divorce Therapy
- Stage I: Managing Pre-Separation Crises
- Stage II: Planning for Disengagement
- Stage III: Coordinating the Physical Separation
- Stage IV: Assisting the Spouses with the Legal Process
- Stage V: Building a New Organization: the Sibling Relationship
- Stage VI: Building a New Organization :Towards Co-Parenting
- Stage VII: Building a New Organization: Strengthening Individual Households
- Special Problems: Arresting Disengagement by Parents
- Special Problems: Combating Parental Alienation
- Special Problems: Addressing the Abuse Issue
- Special Problems: Special Needs and Divorce
- One-Person Divorce Therapy: Work with Individual Adults
- One-Person Divorce Therapy: Work with Individual Children
- Towards the Future







# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

## Paths to Divorce Therapy

-The “cleanest way” is when a couple comes after having worked on their marriage, asking how to divorce in a way that works for everybody.

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-A common path to DT is when a couple comes to you asking for help with an individual child during a separation and divorce process.

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-DT also frequently comes out of child/family or couples work if a family starts to separate.

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-Couples therapy can sometimes be converted into divorce therapy.

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-“Co-Parenting” therapy can sometimes be converted into full-fledged divorce therapy which involves the whole family.

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# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

## Impasses Which Prevent Healthy Family Reorganization

**-Individual adults and children:** May get stuck in /cycle through hurt, fear, anger, shame, or elation. Depression, anxiety, acting out, and under-functioning may ensue. Those with mental health conditions are more vulnerable.

**-Interactional:** cross-generational alliances/triangulation, extreme enmeshment, dramatic, hurtful showdowns, abdication of familial responsibilities, acting out/defiance by children.

**-External/Social:** Focus on “justice” by friends, family, lawyers, broader society.

-The focus on justice often stems from desires to protect loved ones following real and perceived “wrongs” (i.e., infidelity, taking of assets, alienation of children); these efforts can lead to more chaos, and divert the family from the tasks of divorce.

*Divorce therapy is about helping individuals and families to contain the chaos, get unstuck on focus on the needs of the whole family system*

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(Emery, 2004; Margulies, 2007)

# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

## *Principles for Practicing Divorce Therapy*

**-Keep the focus on the whole family--** attend to individuals and families within a family context.

**-Focus on more than one affect and perspective—**especially if one seems prominent.

**-Make sure loss/hurts are acknowledged and addressed**

**-Assist family members in seeing their contributions—**point out “feedback loops”.

**-Prioritize parental communication—**look for a “business relationship” as an ideal.

**-Work for the success of both parents—**watch for the well-being of kids as a “red herring”.

**-Strengthen sibling and “new home” sub-systems—**this may involve different roles for certain kids.

**-Challenge fixed “roles” of family members** (“crazy”, “irresponsible”, victimizer, etc.)

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# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

## *Principles for Practicing Divorce Therapy (continued)*

**-Don't lose sight of kids' obligations to the family**—avoid seeing them only as victims.

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**-Limit influence of antagonistic groupings**

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**-Control potentially hostile encounters**—break up negative interactions.

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**-Support functioning**—find support, services, build skills.

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**-Avoid triangulation**—don't deliver messages.

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**-Keep clear about your role**

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**-Be aware of the effects of third parties (i.e., grandparents, lawyers, significant others)**-support constructive use of social supports.

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**-Make sure the legal process is as constructive as possible**

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**-Proceed in stages**

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(Appell, op. cit.; Textor, 1989; Isaacs, op. cit.; Emery, 2004)















# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

Essential Legal Knowledge for Practicing Divorce Therapy (Written in collaboration with Lori Rothfeld, family lawyer and mediator)

## A Primer of Legal Terms

-*Separation Agreement*: A contract containing a resolution of all or some issues (custody, support, property division, grounds).

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-*Limited Divorce*: Legal separation. It serves to legalize the physical separation of spouses and to provide support.

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-*Absolute Divorce*: Divorce is permanent, permits remarriage, and terminates property claims.

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-*Legal custody*: refers to the right and obligation to make decisions relating to a child's education, religious training, discipline, medical care, and general welfare. Legal custody can be joint (both parties making final decision) or sole (one party making final decision).

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-*Physical custody*: where the child is physically located. Can be shared or sole (defined in terms of child support).

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-*Grounds for divorce*—grounds can be based on fault (i.e., adultery, desertion, mental cruelty, insanity, separation for period of time) or no-fault, depending on laws of jurisdiction.

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# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

## Stage VII: Building a New Organization: Strengthening Individual Households

-Support the hierarchy: encourage limit setting, chores. Challenge children’s justifications for disobedience; challenge parent’s guilt/insecurity as reason not to set limits; discourage parent from using children for emotional support.

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-Support new rituals—ask about daily, weekly schedule and events

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-Balance need for each child to get needs met and for sibs to support each other with the utility of using kids as “deputies”.

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-Weaken divisive coalitions/strengthen weak alliances: Examples: support children identifying with “bad parent”; support parent in being firm with kids on “their side”; hold filial play sessions with parents and children on “other parent’s side”.

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- Work with each parent to support the other parent; carefully planned whole family meetings, wherein the parents present a united front, can improve the cohesion of each household (Isaacs, op. cit; Appell, op. cit.; Gaulier, op. cit.).

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## Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

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### Special Problems: Special Needs and Divorce

-Families who have children with special needs have much higher rates of divorce.

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-Typical family stressors include: differences among parents over diagnosis, treatment, and parenting approaches; time/resource demands; disruption of whole-family activities; difficulty attending to needs of relationships not involving child; difficulty meeting needs of other children.

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-Typical patterns of relating for families include: extremes of enmeshment and disengagement between parents and child, *detouring* of parental relationship towards child (Minuchin, 1974; Seligman and Darling, 1999).

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-Divorce and separation increases time and resource demands, and may exacerbate differences among parents. The presence of a special needs child can also be used to assist a divorcing family with several tasks.

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# Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

## Special Problems: Special Needs and Divorce

(continued)

-Frequent, clear parental communication is vital for families with special needs children, particularly if there is shared custody. Having one parent with primary physical custody and final decision-making for legal custody can limit conflict; effort needs to be made to include other parent.

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-A common behavior management system, common bedtimes, and common diets can be helpful for children with certain special needs. Need for coordination, constancy needs to be balanced with need for household boundaries.

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-The needs of the special needs child can be a tool to improve co-parenting communication. It is important to watch out for detouring, and to address other family needs.

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-Separation can be a vehicle for parents to modify parenting approaches and attitudes towards special needs children, and to ameliorate extremes of enmeshment and disengagement .

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## Part I: Divorce Therapy: Helping Families Separate and Reorganize

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- 3) **Dozier, Brenda: Two Home Families: A Family Systems Approach to Divorce Therapy iUniverse Inc., 2004**
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- 5) **Emery, Robert The Truth About Children and Divorce Viking Penguin: 2004**
- 6) **Gaulier, Et. Al. Defusing the High-Conflict Divorce Impact Publishers: 2007**
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- 11) Seligman and Darling: Ordinary Families, Special Children Routledge Press: 1999
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- 13) Trafford, Abigail Crazy Time: Surviving Divorce and Building a New Life Harper Collins: 1982
- 14) Wallerstein and Blakeslee Second Chances Houghton Mifflin: 1996



## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

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### Topics:

- The Drive Towards Re-Partnering
- Divorce and Remarriage
- Stepfamily Challenges/Differences with First-Marriage Families
- Individuals in the Stepfamily
- Stepfamily Relationships
- Stepfamilies and Mental Health/Stepfamilies and Special Needs
- Different Kinds of Stepfamilies
- Typical Stages of Stepfamily Integration
- Elements of Successful Stepfamilies
- Treating Stepfamilies: General Guidelines
- Treatment: Working with Ex-Spouses contemplating partnering
- Working with Ex-Spouses contemplating marriage
- The Assessment and Initial Sessions
- Launching Stepfamilies on the Path to Integration





## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### **Stepfamily Challenges/Differences with First-Marriage Families**

-The family begins in the wake of loss and may represent new losses: children may lose the fantasy of parental reunification, attention from the parent, and their roles/positions in the family hierarchy; the effect of the divorce may be magnified for the ex-spouse.

-Family members usually have incongruent individual, marital, and family life cycles.

-Parent-child and ex-spousal relationships predate the couple relationship. There are natural “insider-outsider” coalitions; jealousy, loyalty conflicts, triangulation, and cross-generational coalitions are common.

-There is less family loyalty, and differing family histories.

-Family members may have differing expectations from previous families.

-The quality of family relationships may depend on relationships with members of other households.

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## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### Stepfamily Relationships (continued)

#### 2) Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

-The **stepparent** may feel hurt and demeaned by stepchildren's behavior; may react by neglecting stepchildren, becoming authoritarian (typically stepfathers), pushing intimacy (often stepmothers), or competing with their stepchildren (often stepmothers).

-**Stepchildren** may feel intruded upon and jealous of the stepparent's relationship with their parent. They may act out their anger on the stepparent. The stepparents' ambiguous role may encourage them to push limits.

-In general, stepsons relate better than stepdaughters with stepparents, and stepfathers relate better than stepmothers with their stepchildren. The healthiest relationships are often between stepfathers and stepsons, and the most problematic relationships between stepmothers and stepdaughters.

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## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### Stepfamilies and Mental Health

-Members of stepfamilies are more prone to mental health and behavioral disturbances than the general population

-Children are at particular risk for behavioral problems, including drug use and law-breaking.

-Most stepfamily members do not suffer mental health problems; the stepfamily structure may help individuals grow in emotional and behavioral flexibility, and benefit from the added support of loved ones.

### Stepfamilies and Special Needs

-The chaos that often comes in the early stages of stepfamily formation can exacerbate the difficulties of children with special needs, causing more family stress.

-The formation of a stepfamily can bring economic and human resources into a family, helping it deal with the needs of special needs children (Ganong, 2004).

Horizontal lines for notes



## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### Typical Stages Leading to Stepfamily Integration

-*Fantasy*—adults expect instant love; children may hide anxieties. “Pseudo-mutuality”, or the appearance of intimacy, is commonplace.

-*“Immersed”* in rough waters. Unfamiliar, unanticipated situations. Loyalty conflicts/triangulation within stepfamily and within larger family system. Hierarchy/lines of authority may be unclear.

-*Awareness* that changes are needed. Stepparents may feel disempowered/disrespected, children may feel excluded, and remarried parents may feel caught in the middle.

-*Demands for change*: for the stepparent to feel accepted, respected, and appreciated; for the child to regain closeness with bio parent; for the remarried parent to regain a sense of control and order, and to develop less conflictive relationships with children and spouse.

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## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### Typical Stages Leading to Stepfamily Integration

-*Action/Resolution*—The couple develops an alliance and makes space for the relationship; the remarried parent supports the stepparent with children; the stepparent supports the relationship of kids and remarried parent; stepfamily members develop emotional bonds. The other home accepts the family and supports it. The family develops rituals, shared norms, and some cohesion.

(adapted from Papernow, 1993)

-Individuals in the family also cycle through these stages, often at non-congruent times. Children may not go through the fantasy stage; acting-out can be a vehicle for adults to move towards the awareness stage.

-Stepfamilies in the fantasy stage usually resist the idea of stages.

-Stepfamilies may cycle through stages as new problems and challenges develop, even as they gradually cohere.  
(Carter and McGoldrick, 1988)

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## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### Working with ex-spouses contemplating remarriage

-Counsel carefulness and deliberation. Inform of stepfamily challenges and tasks. Encourage accumulation of brief, positive experiences between prospective partners and children prior to union. Encourage parents to minimize other changes concomitant with the remarriage (“the approximation rule”).

-Generate a parent-child dialogue. Assure child that the marriage need not threaten the relationship with parent; address loyalty concerns. Encourage parent to consider child’s concerns, but emphasize that the remarriage is the parent’s decision, and that respect for stepfamily members is non-negotiable.

-Advise other ex-spouse to support the new step-family; work with remarrying parent to assure ex-spouse of primacy in children’s lives.

-Educate prospective stepparent about stepfamily dynamics (Gerlach, 2003).

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## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

### Launching Stepfamilies on the Path to Integration

*With adults:*

- Establish that the couple has a commitment to each other and that family is permanent; make sure couple has a boundary around the relationship. Define monetary obligations; encourage flexibility.

-Plan integration process; give children time to adjust. Make sure non-resident children have their own space and access to parents.

-Define parenting roles. Generally speaking, stepparents should take on a “friendly” role and engage in “affinity-seeking” behavior with stepchildren. Remarried parent needs to be firm with children and make sure that stepparent is respected.

-Address issues of touching, nakedness, and alone time between stepfamily members. Advise caution and awareness.

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## Part II: Anticipating the Stepfamily

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### Resources for Consumers:

- 1) Online National Stepfamily Resource Center [www.stepfamily.info](http://www.stepfamily.info) with local support
- 2) The Stepfamily Foundation [www.stepfamily.org](http://www.stepfamily.org) informational
- 3) Online support group [www.steptogether.org](http://www.steptogether.org)
- 4) Egroup at Yahoo!: Positive Step Parents

### Books for consumers:

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# Families of Increasing Complexity

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## Conclusion

-Functional families are environments with enough order, intimacy, and security for individuals to experience secure attachment, a sense of belonging, reciprocal relationships, and autonomy as they grow and develop.

-People in complex family systems tend to live in fragmented and insecure environments. Attachments between people may have been broken, or may not have yet been created. Families benefit when therapists recognize their clients' vulnerabilities and work to create a safe, empathic therapeutic system

-Separating and divorced families, and especially stepfamilies, are complex organizations, and the models for how family members can best communicate and organize themselves are unclear to many family members. To assist these families in generating environments that will meet the needs of their members, therapists need to assist these families in finding new models.

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